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Babi Yar is a site of Jewish death. With a new synagogue, this architect vows to 'bring back Jewish life'

By Irene Katz Connelly

On the haunted ground of Babi Yar, the walls of a synagogue are opening and closing like the pages of a pop-up book.

Over the course of two nights in 1941, SS officers and their local Ukrainian allies murdered almost 34,000 Jews at this ancient ravine, perpetrating one of the largest and most infamous massacres of the Holocaust. Before the end of World War II, Nazi forces killed up to 100,000 people there, including Roma, Ukrainians and the mentally ill.

It's almost impossible to adequately memorialize the atrocities that occurred here, but that's what the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center is trying to do. [The Forward styles this site "Babi Yar," but when referring to this organization will use its chosen spelling.] An international nonprofit whose board includes heavyweights of the Jewish philanthropic world like Ronald Lauder and former Sen. Joe Lieberman, as well as many Ukrainian representatives, the foundation is planning a many-pronged memorial that will include research institutes, a library and a museum.

But the first building to appear on the site is a house of prayer.

"When we start commemorating Babyn Yar, let's start with a synagogue, which brings back Jewish life to the site," said Manuel Herz, the architect in charge.

Based in Switzerland, Herz has an impressively varied body of work: He's known for a synagogue he designed in Mainz, Germany, and his recent projects include a hospital in Senegal and a public housing complex in France. He came to this commission determined to avoid the bleak and somber style that has come to characterize the architecture of Holocaust monuments. "We know these memorials," he said. "They work through authority, and I think we should not impose ourselves onto the site."



When closed, the synagogue looks like a tall, narrow book. Image by Manuel Herz Architects

The structure he designed is modeled after the colorful wooden synagogues that once dotted the Pale of Settlement, except for one distinctly modern feature: the entire building can be manually opened and closed, transforming from a tall wooden rectangle to an open-air sanctuary adorned with intricate carvings and paintings.

I spoke with Herz about this very unusual synagogue and the difficult task of paying tribute to events too horrendous to fully comprehend.

The initial challenge: I asked myself, how can you build on this site that has seen so much death, that is soaked in blood? Not only metaphorically: The plants and trees that are growing in this area are growing out of corpses. The intuitive thought would be to say, "Should we build at all? And if we build, shouldn't it be so minimalist, sober, monolithic?"

To the first question I answer very clearly: Yes. And then even if it's seductive to do a very somber intervention, I think it's not the right approach. The crime is so monumental. You can never match the monumentality of the crime through monumental architecture. I wanted to do something that is much more suggestive in its architectural response.

The Jewish texts behind the building: The writing of the Talmud started when the Temple was destroyed and Jerusalem became inaccessible. To an extent, the Talmud has replaced Jerusalem as a national unifier, so it has a spatial dimension. But beyond that, what we do when we go to a synagogue is read a book together, either a *siddur* or the Torah. This book opens up a new universe of stories: stories of morality, history, love, righteousness, law and so on.

In a way, pop-up books are a wonderfully similar analogy to that. They're thin volumes, and we're always seduced when we see them in bookshops. We open them and wander through the spaces; we want to explore them like little kids. This fascination, and the cabinet of wonders opened up by these pop-up books, is almost like what happens when we come together in synagogue.

The synagogues he studied: There's a wonderful history of wooden synagogues that existed in western Ukraine and southern Poland – the Pale of Settlement. They're stunningly beautiful, but they've all been destroyed. I wanted to reference them, the iconography painted on the walls, and I sent this particular photo [shown above] to the client. At some point I was thinking, "What was actually written here?" I thought maybe it was the *kaddish* or the *shema*, but I asked a family friend to translate and he said it's not a typical blessing. It is a relatively obscure blessing about turning a nightmare into a good dream. This is such a beautiful coincidence, because that's exactly what we're trying to do. It's the leitmotif of the Babi Yar synagogue.

The ceiling's significance: I used the flowers and the iconography of the old wooden synagogues to recreate the star constellation that was visible over the skies of Kyiv on September 29, 1941 – the night the massacres started. So on the one hand it's a beautiful ceiling, but it's also linked to the terrible massacre that anchors this building in history.

The Holocaust monument that *did* inspire him: The architect John Hejduk, who used to be the head of Cooper Union, came up with a proposal in the early 90s for the commemoration of the Gestapo headquarters in Berlin. Instead of a big building, he

proposed a series of interventions that have something quite ritualistic about them. "Interactive" is a terrible word, because it suggests buttons to be pressed, but something that brings in the visitors and makes them part of a ritual. It was never built. But I remember as a student, looking very vividly at this proposal.



One of the blessings inscribed on the synagogue's walls is a prayer to turn nightmares into good dreams. Image by Manuel Herz Architects

How he wants visitors to feel: I don't want to have a single reaction. Some people will be awed, will think it's beautiful. Some people will think, "Is beauty the right way?" I could imagine someone going there and saying it's a sacrilege to say something beautiful to this place. I would prefer that people are not numbed by the memorial but step into a more discursive relationship with it.

A new ritual: When we close the synagogue, it becomes a narrow, tall volume that takes up very little space. The process of opening is a collective one: The *minyan* comes together to open the synagogue. I like the idea of introducing a new ritual to the site. I think that's a good step.

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Culture

Have social media giants been censoring posts about Israel and Gaza?

By Mira Fox

Almost as fast as social media posts about Israel and Gaza began multiplying, so too did complaints of censorship from both sides. Posts were identified as hate speech and taken down; influencers insisted that they had been shadow-banned – a term for when a user's posts are left up but the algorithm does not show them to users – noting lower than usual views on posts about Israel, East Jerusalem or Gaza. There have been allegations of censorship on both sides of the political spectrum, but the issue appears to be more systemic and well-documented among those posting pro-Palestinian content.

This is not just a conspiracy theory.

Last week, Instagram posted an apology to Twitter explaining that a glitch had led to Instagram stories not posting or archived stories disappearing, resulting in reports of silencing from those advocating around events in both East Jerusalem and Colombia, where anti-government protests have resulted in bloody clashes with the police.

"This is a widespread global technical issue not related to any particular topic," Instagram's communications team said in a statement on Twitter. Another, longer statement posted the next day specifically named East Jerusalem in its apology, reasserting that Instagram had no intention of suppressing voices reporting from there.

Meanwhile, Instagram was also automatically hiding or removing posts tagged with al-Aqsa, in both English and Arabic. The tag refers to the Aqsa mosque compound, Islam's third-holiest site, in the Old City of Jerusalem, which is known to Jews as the Temple Mount, and was the site of intense conflict between the Israeli police and Muslim worshippers at the onset of the current escalation.

Instagram had flagged "alaqsa" as associated with "violence or a terrorist association." The tag was being used during the end of Ramadan as violence erupted

between Israeli police and Palestinians at the holy site, and many trying to draw attention to the violence found their posts blocked [right as Israeli police stormed the grounds](#) with rubber bullets and stun grenades, injuring 220 Palestinians.

The tagging issue has since been resolved, thanks to employees flagging it internally, and Facebook has apologized; an internal post [obtained by BuzzFeed News](#) said that the posts were flagged because al-Aqsa "is also the name of an organization sanctioned by the United States government." Both issues disproportionately impacted Palestinian posts, blocking posts in the tens of thousands.

Israeli voices have also complained of censorship, though to date there are no reports of a systemic rule with as broad an impact as the al-Aqsa issue. The writer Hen Mazzig had an infographic defending Israel removed, though it was later reinstated; Mazzig's post had been in response to a viral anti-Israel infographic that was not censored.

Another account, @the.israel.files has also posted complaints about censorship and removed posts, while several lifestyle influencers who posted pro-Israel content [saw a dropoff in views](#), suggesting that they had been shadowbanned for posting pro-Israel content.

This week, the Israeli Defense Forces complained that one of its tweets warning of a rocket alert was not allowed to post. But as its own screenshot suggested, the tweet was likely blocked because Twitter does not allow identical posts within a short period of time.

Users across other social media platforms, including Twitter and TikTok, voiced similar complaints. [Rest of World](#), a global nonprofit news outlet, reported that Venmo was flagging and delaying payments listed to "Palestinian emergency relief fund," but payments listed with similar pro-Palestinian phrases such as "Free Palestine" or "Palestinian Fund" were processed

without delay.

A Venmo spokesperson said the issues were “OFAC related,” referring to regulations from the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control, which has a list of groups and organizations under U.S. sanctions, including any groups suspected of being controlled by Hamas.

Posts rarely fall into simple categories

Moderation during rapidly unfolding events is a nightmare for tech platforms, which find themselves the arbiters of complex questions about what counts as misinformation, hate speech or incitement during a situation in which the truth is often unclear and events are quickly changing.

News outlets across the world reported that Israeli troops had invaded Gaza late Thursday, for example, based on an inaccurate statement an IDF spokesman made to international journalists. Some analysts believe the mistake, which took more than two hours for the IDF to correct, [was intentional](#), part of a ploy to lure Hamas fighters into underground tunnels that Israel was targeting with airstrikes and artillery.

Posts showing violence are limited, unless they are deemed to be educational or to raise awareness about a world event. Yet Palestinians report that their posts have been taken down for being too violent, and further they have [complained](#) of Western standards being applied to other regions and language norms where they do not make sense. reciprocated,” Jacobs said. “But that’s OK.

Also tricky is the question of what counts as hate speech.

Whether anti-Zionism is equivalent to antisemitism has been hotly debated throughout the Jewish community; those who believe anti-Zionism is inherently antisemitic have demanded that anti-Zionist posts be removed for hate speech, while those who believe criticism of the state of Israel is not inherently antisemitic criticize platforms’ discrimination if anti-Zionist posts are removed. The fact that anti-Zionism is sometimes, though not always, paired with overt antisemitism, such as using

the terms Zionists and Jews interchangeably, does not help clarify the situation.

Facebook’s definition of hate speech states: “We define hate speech as a direct attack against people on the basis of what we call protected characteristics: race, ethnicity, national origin, disability, religious affiliation, caste, sexual orientation, sex, gender identity and serious disease. We define attacks as violent or dehumanising speech, harmful stereotypes, statements of inferiority, expressions of contempt, disgust or dismissal, cursing and calls for exclusion or segregation.”

The definition also includes “some protections for characteristics such as occupation, when they’re referenced along with a protected characteristic” such as ethnicity or religion.

While the definition goes [into detailed examples](#), it is nearly impossible to identify and list every potential form of hate.

In a global event in which many protected characteristics, such as ethnicity, national origin and religion, are all the subject of discourse, it is difficult to fairly moderate conversation from users, many of whom are deeply upset and prone to vitriolic statements.

Other forbidden statements include voicing a desire to segregate or exclude a group, which also crops up in discussions about the situation in Israel and the West Bank, which often includes opinions on where borders should be drawn that would limit the movements of Palestinians or Israeli Jews.

In all of these cases, the line between controversial opinion and misinformation or hate speech is hard to determine. In a situation as loaded as that in Israel, Gaza and Jerusalem, many feel the other side’s opinion is objectively misleading or hateful, flagging posts and accounts they disagree with – an issue the Forward’s own comments section struggles with.

How platforms adapt and enforce

Most platforms, including Facebook, Instagram and TikTok, increasingly use technology and algorithms to moderate hate speech and incitement.

Facebook, which shares a moderation team with Instagram, updated their technology to help identify “new forms of inflammatory speech,” according to [a report from May 2020](#). The company told the Forward that improving and increasing the use of algorithms in the moderation process helps ensure that reviewers will spend more of their time reviewing truly borderline cases.

Facebook also partners with local experts and organizations to help contextualize issues, and told the Forward that the company has over 35,000 people working on safety and security, including 15,000 content reviewers.

The company said that the team consists of native language speakers who “understand local cultural context and nuances”; they also said their policies are “extremely prescriptive” to help ensure objectivity.

When breaking news events change a situation, content is often “escalated” to a Risk and Response team that is better qualified to make tough calls, according to a report from [Vice](#). In this case, Facebook said it has established a “Special Operations Center,” staffed by experts from across the company, including native Arabic and Hebrew speakers.

Yet any reliance on algorithms to flag and remove posts means human nuance can get lost. Even human moderators reviewing individual posts often need to be deeply embedded in a particular community’s language and discourse to have a hope of effectively understanding the weight of different terms or accusations.

These questions are relevant for any outlet platforming or taking part in any public discussion of world events, including news outlets. But while such outlets have journalists focused on the details of a breaking story, social media content moderators are often from [third party firms sitting in call centers trying to follow bullet-point guidelines issued to them](#). While experts may make the guidelines, it is an army of individuals adjudicating individual instances. They are seeing revenge porn and animal cruelty alongside posts about Israel or Gaza, and they often “lack cultural or political context” to apply during the 30 seconds they spend on each post, according to [an](#)

[investigation by The Verge](#).

Given the volume of posts on social media each day, it is hard to imagine a better system for moderation. But it’s just as clear that this one is flawed.

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Opinion

INTERVIEW: ‘The wound is much deeper than before’ – Mohammad Darawshe on Arab–Jewish violence

By Jodi Rudoren

While far too much in the latest escalation between Israel and Gaza militants is tragically familiar, the new and in many ways most frightening aspect is the internal Arab-Jewish violence plaguing Israel’s so-called mixed cities that many have worried could spiral into a civil war.

Arab rioters have torched synagogues and Jewish-owned businesses. Mobs of extremist Jews have beaten Arab citizens nearly to death and vandalized their homes, shops and cars. On Monday, Yigal Yehoshua, a 56-year-old Jewish resident of Lod, [died from injuries](#) he sustained when Arabs tried to avenge the fatal shooting of Moussa Hassouna, also from Lod.

The locus of the horrific clashes has been Lod, the working-class town near Ben Gurion International Airport that has Biblical roots and its own awful modern history: virtually all of its Arab residents were expelled by Israeli forces during the 1948 war, hundreds killed in the process. But the racist riots have spread also to Acre, Jaffa, Ramle and even Haifa, long heralded as a model of coexistence. It is by far the worst internal violence since the events of October 2000, when a series of demonstrations led to the deaths of a dozen Arab and one Jewish Israeli citizen.

This outbreak disrupted what had smelled like progress. Negotiations were underway that, for the first time, might have led to an Israeli governing coalition including Arab lawmakers. The coronavirus pandemic, while exposing inequalities between Jewish and Arab areas, had also showcased Arab leadership in health-care.

Just over a month ago, the *Forward* partnered with my synagogue, Temple Ner Tamid of Bloomfield, N.J., to host a [Zoom conversation](#) with Mohammad Darawshe, a leader of the coexistence group Givat Haviva who ran a failed campaign for the Knesset this spring for a new party called Ma’an, Arabic for “together.” Darawshe has four children, ages 18, 19, 25 and 26,

who comprise the 28th generation of his family to grow up in Iksal, a Muslim village of about 15,000 – half Darawshe kin – outside of Nazareth.

During that April 11 conversation, Darawshe was both optimistic and realistic. One thing that stuck with me a Givat Haviva project that has put hundreds of Arab teachers into Jewish schools, giving students there alternate images of Palestinians from the ones they too often see on the news.

I have wondered all week what the internal violence had done to Darawshe’s sober hope, so I called him on Monday morning. When I asked how he was holding up, he said: “Barely.”

Excerpts of our conversation are below, edited for clarity and length.

Inside Iksal, Darawshe said, things had been mostly calm, though about 10 kids were arrested for throwing stones at the police station the other night, But in his household of six, three had had “interactions with mobs, Jewish mobs,” Darawshe told me, “that luckily ended without being injured.”

The first came on Wednesday, when he was driving to Afula, about 15 minutes away, to visit a friend in the hospital with heart problems.

I was personally stopped, they were asking if I’m Jewish or Arab. It’s gangsters with kippah on their heads, They stop cars in areas that they know Arabs’ cars would be passing. So if you’re an Arab, you can get beaten. They ask you, ‘Jewish? Arab? Arab, Arab, Arab.’

I said ‘Jewish.’ I want to escape – that’s the only way to escape. If I would say ‘Arab,’ I would get punched in the face through the window. You would get pulled out of the car, you would be in the middle of hundreds of fists on the ground, and God knows what would happen to you. If you put on gas and move on, you

would probably get a stone in the window.

I haven't been to Afula since. And I wouldn't let my kids go or my wife go. I wouldn't volunteer myself as a victim in Afula or in any Jewish town. I'm changing routes, I'm not going to the same roads. I delay things, hoping things will calm down, maybe a couple weeks. You don't need to go and meet danger in the face."

Darawshe's eldest is the manager of a pharmacy in a town he asked me not to name for his son's safety. He said that on Thursday, about five young men came and asked the guard if there were any Arab employees of the pharmacy. "The guard said no," he told me. "Luckily there was an armed guard, Jewish guy, that prevented them from going into the pharmacy."

That same day, he said, his daughter, who studies genetics at the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology in Tel Aviv, was stopped by a security guard, who said if it was up to him he would not let her onto campus. "She ignored him, showed him her card, went to her lab and finished her day.

This is the tip of the ice. Between my village and Afula there is a six-mile gap. In mixed cities, it could be only six yards. So you can't have that kind of choice, to avoid passing through people's neighborhoods. Sometimes it's even the same apartment building.

Most of the events are not between Jewish and Arab residents of the same neighborhoods. Mostly they are between mobs that are imported from Jewish settlements in the West Bank to come and ignite the fire. The Arab mobs are from the towns themselves. The Jewish residents are ignited by mostly outside Jews.

The burning of the synagogues: this is stupid and this is wrong and this is a crime, and this is a mistake. There's not enough words to describe how wrong this is.

I spoke to some people in Lod, many of them were trying to justify it by saying it was the Jews who shot on the worshippers in the mosque, and trying to justify it by who did what first, as if that could be used as a justification.

I tell them we need to have red lines. There is a red line of not harming innocent civilians. If you want to go out and demonstrate against the police, OK, but innocent individuals, humans, neighbors, residents, civilians – it's not acceptable and it's a red line that you cannot do it.

Once you talk to people they tend to agree, but in the heat of the moment, you're not there to talk to them. Once you talk to them for 10 minutes, they say, 'You're right, you're right, you're right,' but the day before they might have done it.

There is plenty of blame to go around, but Darawshe puts it squarely on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose push a couple of years ago for the nation-state law, which firmly prioritized Israel's Jewishness over its democratic nature, he sees as one of the worst things to happen to Arab citizens.

He noted that amid the escalation between the Israeli military and Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip, and the accompanying internal Arab-Jewish violence, the right-wing religious Zionist leader Naftali Bennett and Mansour Abbas, an Arab lawmaker, have both pulled out of talks to form an anti-Netanyahu coalition.

All of what is going on is orchestrated, maybe not to the detail, but it's orchestrated by Benjamin Netanyahu to try to prevent an alternative coalition that could send him home and oust him from government.

Mansour Abbas, his last move – yesterday, going to Lod and meeting with the mayor and going to visit one of the burnt synagogues – is trying to get some kind of empathy to go into a right-wing coalition.

For Benjamin Netanyahu, if the price is starting a war with Gaza, so be it. If the price is starting a war with East Jerusalemites, so be it. If the price is starting a war with the people of Lod, so be it. He is willing to pay any price.

Darawshe was worried about Arab leadership's call for a general strike of Arab-Israeli workers on Tuesday. But he was comforted by the publication over the weekend of several statements in support of

calm and cooperation signed by Jewish and Arab business and civil-society leaders.

It's a scene I haven't seen before. Hundreds of the biggest Jewish corporations. They asked me to put my name on it last Thursday and I did.

It reflects the mood of 10 days ago, the mood of integration and partnership, of moving on. That spirit is not gone, that spirit is reviving itself again. That means the healing process may be faster than the healing process we needed after the October 2000 clashes.

This time, the wound is much much deeper than before.

Luckily, we have a short memory, and maybe the memory of people in Israel, Jews and Arabs, is shorter than the memory of other nations around the world. That's the blessing we have in the holy land.

It's not enough, those petitions are not enough. There's a lot of work cut out for us, for the day after. The work of Givat Haviva and other civil-society organizations need to double 20 times more over the next 10 years. The damage that is done is severe. We were at the edge of a civil war,

Before we hung up, I asked again about his kids. Two of them were not alive in October 2000, the other two were too young to understand. How were they processing all this?

First of all they are afraid, afraid of going out. They are concerned and worried about what will happen next week, what's going to be the atmosphere in the university.

All of them felt the need to go and demonstrate, all of them participated in demonstrations more than once. They're angry about what the government is doing. They feel and see a double standard in the police treatment of demonstrators.

They hug Jewish demonstrators even though they may have weapons pointed at Arabs, and the police are very harsh with Arab demonstrators. They're treated as terrorists, as the prime minister said, and not as citizens who have the right to, one, worship, and two, to express their disappointment in the government.

I tell them we've seen this before, and time will heal, and they don't need to give up and they don't need to surrender. Yes for demonstrations and not for riots. That's the line for their dignity and humanity at the same time.

They should continue to go and express their voice. And at the same time, they should be careful.

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Jodi Rudoren became Editor-in-Chief of The Forward, the nation's oldest independent Jewish news organization, in September 2019 after more than two decades as a reporter and editor at The New York Times. She is helping lead a transformation of the storied 123-year-old institution, a nonprofit that went digital-only in early 2019.

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



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News

'This was no coverup': Inside the investigation of Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman

By Molly Boigon

When Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman was suspended by the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 2000 and simultaneously stepped down as president of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, even many insiders at the Reform movement's flagship institutions had no idea of the severity or even the real nature of his offense.

The official word from the ethics committee was inappropriate "personal relationships." But very few people knew that one involved a congregant at Manhattan's Central Synagogue who he started seducing when she was a teenager.

"I didn't know, and I never put things together that it involved a sexual encounter of any kind," Rabbi Rifat Sonsino, who was the editor of the rabbinic group's quarterly journal, recalled in a recent interview. "That was never revealed to us at that time."

Now, after a [new Central Synagogue investigation found](#) that Zimmerman engaged in "sexually predatory behavior," there is something of a reckoning afoot not just for the rabbi but for the Reform movement. The CCAR, HUC, the [Union for Reform Judaism](#) and a [Dallas synagogue](#) where Zimmerman worked after Central are all conducting their own probes into his behavior or their policies around reporting sexual misconduct.

Many are questioning whether the CCAR covered up serious misdeeds of a major leader, allowing him to continue to serve in Jewish leadership roles for two decades. While Zimmerman's rabbinic privileges were suspended for two years, he quickly became vice president of Birthright Israel – an organization focused on young people – and later returned to synagogue leadership.

But interviews with those who weighed the evidence at the time or with knowledge of the 2000 investigation deny that there was any concerted effort to treat Zimmerman gingerly. Instead, they describe a

combination of stringent privacy rules surrounding ethics investigations; ignorance of the young age of the victim; and pre-#MeToo mindsets to explain what now seems to critics like a relative slap on the wrist. Terms like "grooming" were not common parlance in discussions about an adult's predations on a girl.

"I don't believe we saw ourselves as in any way sweeping anything under the rug or hiding anything," said one person who was a part of CCAR's leadership at the time, and who was present at the board meeting where the suspension vote happened. "This was no cover up."

After a woman made a formal complaint to the ethics committee in the summer of 2000, an investigatory panel of two rabbis and a federal judge reviewed the details of the complaint, interviewed the woman and possibly Zimmerman, and put together a report for the ethics committee. That ethics committee of seven people then reviewed the report and came up with a recommendation: to suspend Zimmerman from membership at the CCAR for two years.

CCAR's 10-member board then voted nearly unanimously that winter to accept the recommendation. For the period of his suspension, Zimmerman could not work at institutions associated with the Reform movement, so he had to resign as the president of Hebrew Union College.

Three people with knowledge of the probe, the board vote or both spoke to the Forward on the condition of anonymity because the proceedings were private. A spokesperson for the CCAR, Tamar Anitai, declined to provide the names of the members of the ethics committee that considered Zimmerman's transgressions or the report that was presented to the board, or to confirm or deny details that others provided to the Forward.

Two members of the panel appointed by the ethics committee to investigate Zimmerman's behavior,

Rabbi Elka Abrahamson and Rabbi Bernard Mehlman, did not respond to multiple requests for comment. The third member, Judge Geraldine Mund, could not be reached for comment. Charles A. Kroloff, then-president of the CCAR, and Norman Cohen, then-provost at Hebrew Union College who served as acting president after Zimmerman's suspension there, both declined to comment. Zimmerman also could not be reached for comment.

Rabbi Hara Person, the current chief executive of the CCAR, did not respond to requests for comment, nor did Rabbi Eric Yoffie, who was then president of the Union for Reform Judaism. Several other recent past members of the CCAR ethics committee or the board either did not respond to requests for comment or declined to comment.

The hand-wringing and soul-searching within the Reform movement at this moment in some ways echoes the reverberations of the sexual-abuse scandal in the Catholic Church two decades ago. It's one thing to discover that rabbinic leaders engaged in serious misconduct, but quite another to consider whether trusted institutions mishandled the situation.

"This is the moment for our movement and its institutions to take responsibility," Rabbi Mary Zamore, head of the Women's Rabbinic Network, a Reform group, said in a statement, "beginning by recognizing the painful truth that the institutions that have been charged with shaping, organizing, and modeling justice and ethical behavior for the clergy of our movement have instead enabled and perpetrated deep harm."

A reformed process

The investigation into Zimmerman began during the summer of 2000, when a woman met with Rabbi Sanford Ragins, then head of the CCAR's ethics committee, to share information about a sexual relationship she had had with Zimmerman when he was working at Central Synagogue in the 1970s and 1980s.

This woman is one of at least three whose stories of abuse were found credible by the independent investigation recently conducted by a law firm hired by Central; she was 16 when the relationship began in

1970 and 17 when the rabbi first began to fondle and kiss her, according to the new investigation.

At the time of the original complaint in 2000, Zimmerman was president of HUC-JIR and past president of the CCAR. The accusations were serious, and the accused was one of the Reform movement's most respected leaders.

In some ways, the woman's timing was fortuitous. The seven-member ethics committee had just revised its procedures to ensure that what many saw as an old boys' club that protected problematic rabbis would protect them no more.

She brought forth a formal complaint, said one person with direct knowledge of the probe, and most members of the committee were shocked and pained to hear of the allegations. But one female rabbi on the ethics committee at the time had heard of another allegation of sexual misconduct by Zimmerman. That second allegation, said the person with knowledge of the probe, ultimately informed the punishment.

The ethics committee contacted Zimmerman. After he acknowledged at least one of the relationships, the committee put together an investigatory panel.

A person with knowledge of the situation said that the members of this panel were Abrahamson, who is now president of the Wexner Foundation; Mehlman, now a senior scholar at Temple Israel of Boston; and Mund.

Exactly what this panel did is unclear, though several sources said the members definitely interviewed Zimmerman and perhaps the complainant. The panel brought a report to the ethics committee, which decided to recommend that the CCAR board suspend Zimmerman for two years.

One person familiar with the board's discussions regarding the suspension said Zimmerman was invited to appear in front of the board and declined.

The board of [10 people](#) voted nearly unanimously in favor of the suspension in December; a person close to the situation said there was one abstention.

"If not totally unanimous, it was certainly the consensus," said one person who was present at the meeting.

Age is more than a number

People present at the board meeting and those close to the probe had conflicting memories of the extent to which the victim's age was discussed.

One person said they remembered a member of the board asking about how the victim's age would factor into the punishment, at which point a lawyer advising the committee said that the statute of limitations on the case had expired and that it was therefore not relevant to the CCAR's process.

Another person said they did not remember clearly whether or not the victim's age was mentioned at the meeting where the vote took place.

"I don't remember that he was accused of having a physical relationship with a 17-year-old," said the person. "He may have been, but I don't remember that."

The CCAR has recently hired a firm to do its own investigation into the 2000 probe, which will likely yield more details about what information the ethics committee presented to the board. It is possible that members of the board either did not know or did not fully understand that Zimmerman, at that point in his 40s, had a sexual relationship with a minor.

"It was clear that it was crossing serious boundaries," said a person who was present for the vote. "A 45-year-old rabbi having an affair with a 42-year-old congregant is serious and would have gotten sanctioned and could have gotten at least a censure, if not a suspension. But this was more than that."

Word (sometimes) travels

Despite the vagueness of the stated reason, the suspension shocked the Jewish world at the time, and the committee and the board thought they had done a good job holding an immensely powerful leader to account.

One person with knowledge of the situation said the complainant sent a letter of thanks to the ethics committee regarding the decision.

Some people in the Reform movement were angry at the time, deeming the suspension too harsh – perhaps

because there was no public acknowledgment of the extent of Zimmerman's transgressions.

The CCAR's policy, then and [now](#), is to keep the identities of victims, witnesses and complainants confidential. The CCAR started keeping a public [list](#) of rabbis expelled from the conference – along with the clause of the ethics code they violated – in 2017. Before that, the list was [only](#) distributed to members of the CCAR and "to the Reform Jewish community." The list now shows a list of rabbis whose authority is currently suspended as well as those expelled, but it's not clear whether that also began in 2017 or at a later point.

The CCAR's [Code of Ethics](#) was amended in March of this year to say that "any violation" of the section regarding sexual relationships "or any section of this Code of Ethics that involves minors is considered to be especially egregious." Now, the list indicates whether ethics violations included sexual relations with minors by noting if the rabbis breached that new portion of the code.

People close to the probe also told the Forward that at the time of the complaint, they were informed that closed-door meetings about ethics concerns were the policy and that they were not supposed to comment on individual cases. Zimmerman's case, they said, did not receive any special treatment.

Much of the Reform world assumed that Zimmerman's suspension was due to a consensual extramarital affair. One person close to the process said those involved did not feel they could "correct the record" to share the true extent to which he had abused his power and violated boundaries. The rabbi could have revealed the truth, this person said, but "chose not to and allowed that narrative to take place."

Before he could be reinstated after his suspension, Zimmerman underwent a psychological evaluation, said people close to the probe.

The CCAR currently uses a provider called Kenwood Psychological Services to perform such evaluations. It's not clear if Zimmerman went to the same provider, though the CCAR was using Kenwood as early as 2004, according to the earliest available capture of the

list of clients on the provider's website. Kenwood did not respond to a request for comment.

Hindsight is 20/20

The statement issued by the Women's Rabbinic Network after the Forward reported on Central Synagogue's findings of "sexually predatory behavior" was scathing, and went far beyond Zimmerman's case to accuse the Reform movement's institutions of perpetuating and enabling harm.

"We have used every internal avenue available to us to push our Reform Movement to live up to its stated values, address these issues directly, and create safe, respectful Jewish communities for all," said the statement. "In return, we have received unfulfilled promises and repeated attempts to sideline us, our demands for accountability and justice, and most importantly, the needs of survivors."

People close to the probe conveyed appreciation that Central Synagogue, the CCAR, the Union for Reform Judaism, Hebrew Union College, and Temple Emanu-El in Dallas – where Zimmerman had until very recently been teaching a kabbalah class as a scholar in residence – are all now reexamining Zimmerman's behavior and reviewing their own sexual misconduct policies.

Two people close to the probe said they did not have regrets about how it was handled, and expressed some resignation to the fact that their work would be scrutinized under new sets of expectations in a world that is much more cognizant of power imbalances and issues of consent.

Perhaps both things can be true: that the process was rigorous and fair under the standards of the time but also that those standards were inadequate.

"The idea of suspending from membership the president of the Hebrew Union College was seen as an extraordinarily severe punishment," said a person present for the vote. "In hindsight, was it severe enough? That's an open question."

–
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News

Zoom fatigue is real for Jews, but even harder for Jewish women

By Esther D. Kustanowitz

Technology usually has a slow adoption rate. But during the last year, one tech tool has dominated, enabled, connected and overwhelmed us, depending on the person and the day: Zoom. After a few weeks of confusion, even tech-averse older adults found themselves embracing the platform because they couldn't physically embrace their loved ones. But as the use of the platform spread, so did Zoom fatigue, [finds a new study](#) from Stanford University.

According to the study, one in seven women – 13.8 percent – compared with one in 20 men – 5.5 percent – reported feeling "very" to "extremely" fatigued after Zoom calls. The culprit, the study indicates, is what social psychologists describe as "self-focused attention," triggered by the self-view in video conferencing. Age and race were also factors, with younger people and people of color reporting increased Zoom fatigue.

Being "on camera," whether it's daily or weekly, is exhausting.

"It's just like I'm there in the room with you," we told ourselves during virtual office visits and meetings. "We're so blessed to be here together as a community," our rabbis and spiritual leaders repeated.

Some of us have invested a year of time in online communities, meeting weekly or monthly to support one another. We've got jokes about what we're wearing or not wearing when we're Zooming; sometimes it's not a joke ([see also Jeffrey Toobin](#)). We've got funny backgrounds and Zoom filters that apply makeup or facial hair for you; fun as a joke, until you realize your "lipstick mark" is floating around the lower half of your face, or you don't know how to turn it off ([see also "cat lawyer"](#)).

Living far from family has taught me the benefits of

video calling: I get to track my nieces and nephews as they grow, see the smiles that break out on their faces when I join the call, and I also see when they've had enough and they're just too distracted to keep talking. (I don't take it personally.) In May of 2020, my brothers and I organized a family Zoom call to mark my mother's yahrzeit. And I've attended virtual shivas across the country and around the world without leaving L.A., which would have been impossible without video calling.

As I'm brushing my hair off my face for the 20th time, I try to stay in the moment, to be present and not distracted by my own reflection like some sort of narcissist. But it's actually the opposite of narcissism, decades of being self-critical that has now reached its pinnacle in the Zoom era.

We stare at ourselves, distracted by flaws. Did I know that my nose wrinkles weirdly when I'm saying my name? Is that skin blemish on my forehead as noticeable to other people as it is to me? What about the "maskne" I got from my diligent face-covering? What does my coffee mug say about me to my colleagues? Should I grab some cover-up before my next meeting or hide my self-view?

Being aware that I am "on camera" can prevent embarrassing nose-rubbing, teeth-picking or unconscious facial expressions that show people what I'm really feeling. I have always wondered if men feel the same pressure. The study indicates that if they do, it's significantly less.

Zoom can prevent us from doing real work, say some professional Jewish women

While face-to-face can be more intimate, it can also put up a boundary that an audio-only call can break down. Sara Shapiro-Plevan, Lead Consultant at Rimonim Consulting and founder of the Gender Equity in Hiring Project, took a simultaneous virtual walk with an L.A.-based friend, talking on the phone for a deep, flowing conversation that was "one of the best I've had in a long time."

Jamie Allen Black, Chief Executive Officer of the Jewish Women's Foundation of New York, said that more than "fatigue," wrangling with back-to-back Zoom meetings

from morning to night each day doesn't leave her time "to get my real work done." Her workaround is to ensure that at least one of these meetings is phone-only, so she can grab some food or take a break from being on camera.

Chava Shervington, a board member and past president of the Jewish Multiracial Network based in L.A., said that her experience was less about Zoom fatigue and more about "a general level of fatigue with the system."

"It's the fatigue of people of color, exacerbated that they're expected to be on screen pretending that everything is OK in the world...while all the chaos is happening outside in the world," Shervington said. "A lot of people [of color] are being called to voice opinions and publicly process trauma which is exhausting. [We're] exhausted in general, by continued cycles that don't seem to be changing, where communities are falling. When you're on Zoom there's necessity to be on, not just present, but to be physically on and have cues that you're ok, and it's just another day at work. But there's all this other stuff going on."

As with any tool, the personal impact of Zoom depends on the people in the call and how careful they are about creating space to nurture their relationships.

Shapiro-Plevan and I, who met in New York decades ago, recently had dinner "together" over Zoom. It was decidedly not work. It was after both of our work days were over. We were uninterrupted.

"It didn't feel like Zoom, but like us spending time together," she said.

We cleared the space, making our connection our central purpose. We heard each others' voices, saw each others' smiles, and understood that just because a connection is digital, doesn't mean it isn't real.

—
[Esther D. Kustanowitz](#) is a Los Angeles-based writer, editor and consultant. She co-hosts [The Bagel Report](#), a podcast about Jews and popular culture, and speaks about #TVGoneJewy, a term she invented to describe the increase of Jewish content on television. Follow her on Twitter [@EstherK](#).

Scribe

Why can't my progressive friends understand what Israelis are going through?

By Roxana Honowitz

I am grieving. I am grieving the small seeds of hope for change I have witnessed over my time living in Israel. I am grieving as I sit with my Palestinian housemates, both of us afraid to leave the house for fear of rockets and rioting blazing through our community.

I have enmeshed myself in this Jaffa community. I have lived with Palestinian Muslims, Christians, and Israeli Arabs, Druze, and Jews. I have worked with an Indian Jewish family in their Indian restaurant, cutting vegetables for hours alongside an Israeli Bedouin, Palestinians, and a Colombian Jew.

I have heard the experiences of injustice against the Sudanese refugee community, as well as discovered many Israeli organizations that seek to help these, as well as other refugee populations, find a home and better life here.

Likewise I have I heard of the frustrating experiences of discrimination carried out against my Palestinian friends, all of whom have agreed that work is necessary on both sides to build bridges and improve lives.

The first night of the rockets from Hamas, all I could think about were the people in Gaza who I knew were having a far worse night than me. I knew that Israel was going to shoot down most of these rockets, and I still felt fear, I still felt unsafe.

They, on the other hand, had no protection, no government that was going to shoot down Israeli counter-attacks. They had Hamas, a terrorist group launching rockets in densely populated areas to push its civilians to the center of the fight.

As videos came out of the devastation in Gaza, I, and the housemates I was with, felt so saddened by what we were seeing. We talked about how our situation, like that of our Gazan counterparts, felt like chess pieces being thrown around as the big guys, Hamas, the super-Orthodox settler movements, Palestinian



Mourners surround the body of Lea Yom Tov, an Israeli woman killed by a rocket attack from the Gaza strip. Image by Gil Cohen-Magen/AFP via Getty

Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu played with our lives.

But that night was only just beginning.

The Israeli response on Gaza began trending and blowing up social media, and to the rest of the world there was no correlation between the Israeli and Gazan citizens sheltering from the turmoil. There was only Israel, the mighty oppressor, the colonialist apartheid state.

Why do some people refuse to understand what it's like to sit in a bomb shelter as rockets are shot down literally above your building. To try to fall asleep only to be woken an hour later to another siren. To have your heart skip a beat when you hear any noise that sounds like rocket fire. There is a complete lack of empathy for the Israelis on the ground, whose casualties, though smaller in number because of Israel's Iron Dome defense technology, nonetheless shake every citizen fleeing rocket fire.

I am watching posts about the evils of Israel explode on social media. I am reading CNN's "What You Need to Know" about the conflict without any mention of

Hamas or its rocket launches on Israel. I am running to my bomb shelter as close friends post about the inequity of casualties between Israelis and Palestinians, before they have thought to check in with me or my safety.

It is this lack of empathy, this complete disregard for the experience of the Israeli citizen that makes me ask if it is just ignorance, or if it is, in fact, antisemitism. Because the more the one-sided narrative is promoted, the more antisemitic attacks are carried out around the world.

This year has challenged me to fight for my leftist ideals as time and time again, conservative-leaning Israelis told me, "The Arabs are trying to kill us, and the antisemitic world will let them do it!" – knowing their trauma was blinding them from actually seeing and relating to Palestinian suffering.

I am at a loss for words as so many public figures on the left, mainstream news, and friends who share my beliefs blatantly ignore or overlook the real feelings of fear and danger Israelis exist in.

How the people that I also saw as righteous can weigh the trauma of one side over another simply on the

basis of casualty numbers terrifies me. How many Israelis, then, should be murdered for the world to not see this in terms of sides and division? In their ignorance, they only confirm the fears of conservative Jews, dragging the entire country into a tribal mentality, and stepping on all efforts made by leftist Jews to move the country, and its treatment of Palestinians, out of this coffin.

We are all suffering in this conflict. So many Israelis feel for our Palestinian brothers and sisters living beside us, and hope to one-day have peace with a Palestinian state. But peace will come only when both sides are willing to see the other as belonging to this land. This is not to say that there isn't work to do, far from that. But if all you can see in this conflict are two opposing sides, then you're already compromising whatever chance there is.

We as Israelis cannot fight for Palestinian legitimization amongst our community while our own pain and trauma is delegitimized in turn.

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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