Welcome to Tablet LA

The magazine relocates for a week to the dream capital of American Jewry

BY THE EDITORS

And now for something at least a little bit different. Instead of cowering in our shoe-box apartments in the middle of yet another COVID winter, we have decided to renew our occasional tradition of running away from home for a week and putting out our beloved magazine from someplace new. And instead of choosing another gloomy Eastern European capital where the ghosts of the past lie heavily upon the present, we have decided to give ourselves—and you—a break, and go somewhere sunny and American, where we will meet new people, visit new places, and return with fresh ideas about what it means to be Jewish in a moment of often-wrenching national and communal redefinition.

Specifically, as so many distinguished New York Jews have done before us (see: Steely Dan, Annie Hall, et al.), Tablet has decided to flee west, to the land of beaches and palm trees, where bagels and lox are exotic fare, and any idiot can have a house with a swimming pool. It was here that a bunch of Jewish garment cutters fled the long reach of U.S. trademark law and established the glittering dream palace of Hollywood, which is arguably the most influential Jewish cultural creation since the Bible. It was here that Clive Davis threw his glittering Grammy parties, and a pair of talent agents named David Geffen and Elliot Roberts helped create the echt-LA sound of canyon rock. Last time we checked, there was still a Jewish old age home on the boardwalk in Venice Beach. So what’s not to like?

Well, for one thing, there’s the fact that all of the stereotypes invoked in the preceding paragraph are wildly out of date. Movie studios are owned by banks now. Elliot Roberts is dead, ahlav ha’shalom. LA Jews these days are more likely to have fled Tehran or Moscow than Brooklyn. The truth is that most of us know very little about 21st-century Jewish Angelenos, only that there are more than half a million of them. Whoever they turn out to be, we look forward to helping you get to know them better.

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Los Angeles as the Center of American Jewish Life

More open and less delusional than their New York counterparts, LA Jews have made themselves future-proof

BY MARK HOROWITZ

If Hertz hadn’t screwed up my car rental reservation, I never would have seen how much my old hometown, Los Angeles, had changed. There were no cars at all at LAX, so I had to Uber to my hotel in mid-Wilshire.

I lived in LA for nearly two decades. I go back when I can. But I’ve never not had a car there. The architecture critic Reyner Banham said you have to learn Italian to understand Dante and you have to learn to drive to understand LA. But this time I walked, which is how I came to notice the differences I might otherwise have missed.

I walked up Fairfax to the Farmers Market for coffee. I walked along Beverly to La Brea. I’d traveled these same streets a thousand times before, but never this slowly.

Everything seemed more Jewish. Around La Brea and Beverly, where there had been a few Jewish institutions when I lived there—a yeshiva here, a senior center there—there were shtiebels, shuls, and yeshivas intermingled with the hip design stores. Jews were out walking, the men in kippahs with danging tzitzit, the women in long skirts, some with sheitels.

Friends explained it to me later. Since I moved to New York, Jews in Los Angeles had moved eastward. There were more Jews than ever in the Wilshire district, in Pico-Robertson, in Hollywood and Los Feliz. And it wasn’t just an Orthodox revival. The old Temple Israel of Hollywood, just a few blocks off La Brea, a reform synagogue that I remembered as sleepy, to say the least, was bustling with activity. The monumental Wilshire Boulevard Temple, which was a decaying relic 25 years ago, had been fully renovated with a gleaming new building designed by Rem Koolhaas’ architectural firm adjoining it. I later learned that Wilshire Boulevard Temple had added an annex on the westside, and absorbed the University Synagogue in Westwood. It had become a Reform empire.

In my lifetime, New York Jews came to believe their own hype, identifying themselves with power—in the media, on Wall Street, in philanthropy, and in politics. They created the illusion that New York City was a Jewish town. Los Angeles Jews never bought those illusions. Even Hollywood, created by Jews, was built on the knowledge that the world was a hostile place. Hollywood’s founders were all excluded from LA’s old-money neighborhoods, the country clubs, and the downtown corridors of power. Which is why I can see a way that Los Angeles ends up becoming the next capital of the Jewish diaspora, the way New York used to be.

When people speak of LA, they mean LA County, which includes the City of LA, along with 87 other cities, including Beverly Hills, Santa Monica, and Compton. As of 2020, there were 530,000 Jews living there. Orthodox Jews make up around 10%.


I started checking in with old friends and some new ones. A modern Orthodox mom who lives in Mid-Wilshire, not far from where I was staying, told me that LA has become a great place to be Orthodox. Besides her neighborhood, there are modern Orthodox enclaves in Beverlywood, North Beverly Hills, and Sherman Oaks. There are “tons” of kosher restaurants, she says, and a variety of yeshiva day schools to choose from. There’s even a progressive modern Orthodox high school, Shalhevet, on Fairfax.

Meanwhile, the majority of Los Angeles is still Reform or unaffiliated, and resolutely liberal. Judging from what friends tell me, after years of struggle, Reform synagogues are thriving. There are now Reform day schools throughout LA, something that didn’t exist to the same extent when I lived there. That’s a huge change. In turn, the advent of liberal day schools means that their affiliated synagogues have become more central to daily life. “Twenty-five years ago, being a Reform Jew in LA meant buying tickets to the High Holidays and being Jewish a few days a year,” said an old friend who grew up in Beverly Hills and is a member of Temple Israel. “Now it’s much more. Because of the day schools, a family’s schedule is more attuned to the Jewish calendar.”

Oddly enough, as Jewish life is experiencing a rebirth in parts of LA, Jewish political power is in decline. I talked to Jim Newton, who has written biographies of Jerry Brown and Earl Warren, and now teaches at UCLA, where he also edits Blueprint, a magazine about California politics and culture. He knows California politics as well as anybody.
When I lived in Hollywood, back when Jim worked as a reporter for the LA Times, Jews were part of the coalition that ruled the city. Tom Bradley upended the downtown establishment in 1973 by forging an alliance between westside liberals (mostly Jewish) and LA’s African American community. “That was the coalition,” Newton explained, “that kept Bradley in power for five terms.” It unraveled in the ’90s, after the riots and O.J. Today, he said, the kind of political power westside Jews once had is a thing of the past.

The numbers now favor the Latino vote. Latinos make up 40% of the city’s population. The likely frontrunners in this year’s mayoral election, city Councilman Kevin de León and U.S. Rep. Karen Bass, Newton pointed out, don’t need westside Jews to form a winning coalition.

The Orthodox community, a minority within a minority, is conservative. But unlike the Orthodox community in New York City, Orthodox votes in LA are still too few to move the dial citywide. The Persian Jewish community, concentrated in Westwood and Beverly Hills, is even more conservative politically, though less conservative religiously. Beverly Hills had the highest turnout for Trump in an otherwise blue Los Angeles.

Jewish money still matters, of course. But locally, not so much. Newton points out that big Democratic donors like Steven Spielberg and Jeffrey Katzenberg “have always directed their energies toward national politics. They give some local money, but Jewish fundraisers are not the kingmakers they once were.”

The other big change is Hollywood. The entertainment industry is the 800-pound gorilla that looms over any discussion of Jews and Los Angeles. Yet in Hollywood, Jews are also starting to take a backseat.

“It’s no longer necessary to be one of the chosen people to run a major studio,” said one friend, a former Hollywood insider. He was trying to be provocative. Hollywood was never as monolithically Jewish as popular mythology wished it to be. But whatever the reality was, it is far less Jewish than it used to be. The original movie studios like Paramount and Warner Bros. can’t stand up to the gentile colonizers from Seattle and Silicon Valley. Apple, Amazon, and Netflix are the new movie moguls. The imposing new Amazon campus in Culver City and the grandiose Netflix HQ on Sunset testify to that.

Pressure to promote greater diversity throughout the industry is also a factor. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which administers the Oscars, was targeted by an #OscarsSoWhite uprising and has been revamping its membership rolls as fast as it can. A sure sign of change is the brand-new Academy Museum of Motion Pictures that opened last September. It was easy walking distance from my hotel, and it’s been a popular success, despite controversy over its erasure of Hollywood’s roots. There’s a big exhibit about Spike Lee, but the industry’s founding Jews have been written out of their own story.

Haim Saban, the Israeli American businessman who donated $50 million to the museum, has apparently protested, and updated exhibits will be forthcoming. But Jews can read the writing on the wall. Aside from a few éminences grises like Spielberg and Larry David, who have been grandfathered in, the times are changing.

I talked to another friend I knew from the ’90s, Howard Rodman, a screenwriter and former president of the Writers Guild. Howard’s now a professor at USC. He doesn’t see the change as a loss. “It’s the assimilation of secular Jewish culture into the larger society,” he said. “We won!”

Jews may have created Hollywood, Howard said, but now it belongs to the world. He reminded me of another aspect of Jewish culture when we were younger. Back when only Jews ate bagels, the only place Rodman could buy good lox was a storefront called Dave’s Cut Rite on Fairfax. Dave sold salmon out of a cooler that was flown in each week from Brooklyn. The transaction felt more like a drug deal than shopping for Sunday brunch.

But now everyone in LA eats bagels. And you can get smoked salmon anywhere. That was Howard’s point.

Has less power and influence translated into fewer Jews or Jews being less Jewish? Just the opposite. LA today feels more Jewish, not less. And it’s not just the bagels. Growing Orthodox communities have their new shuls and yeshivas, while liberal and reform neighbors have been revitalizing old institutions and exploring progressive alternatives to traditional synagogues with organizations like IKAR, led by Rabbi Sharon Brous, and the Pico-Union Project founded by Craig Taubman.

Rising antisemitism is a factor too. The original deed to the first house I bought in the Hollywood Hills, built in the 1940s, still had a restrictive covenant prohibiting renting or selling to nonwhites or Jews, a reminder of an earlier era. Courts had long ago rendered those covenants void and unenforceable. But antisemitism and anti-Zionism are on the rise again, in LA as elsewhere. There were recent attacks on diners at a kosher sushi restaurant on Beverly Blvd. and threats at local shuls. “People are arming,” my Orthodox friend told me. “A lot of people carry guns now.”

A more hostile environment also strengthens the impulse to develop communal resources. “Things are not going in the right direction, so we need to get more insular,” my friend said. “You can see it with the younger shuls cropping up that are going even more religious.”
Liberal Jews wrestle with antisemitism clothed in BDS and anti-Zionist rhetoric within their shared progressive circles. Leaders like IKAR’s Brous and Rabbi Kenneth Chasen at Leo Baeck Temple in the Sepulveda Pass are defending liberal Zionism, but the space is narrowing just as much in LA as it is in New York and elsewhere.

New Yorkers have seen their illusions breached by events yet seem unsure of how to adjust or even to acknowledge a new reality. Maybe it’s just something about earthquake faults, wild fires, urban riots and mudslides, but Los Angeles Jews just seem better prepared for adversity. Like London Jews, Paris Jews, Argentine Jews, and Miami Jews, Jewish Angelenos are still capable of saying to themselves, “So what else is new?” They don’t have a chip on their shoulders, because no one’s illusions have been shattered. LA’s Jewish community, in all its diversity and tension, looks more like the rest of the Jewish world than ever before. Just get out of your car and look around.

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Go West, Young Jew

A few reasons why LA is better for Jewish life than NYC

BY LIEL LEBOVITZ

As I sat in the courtyard of congregation Adat Shalom—revived by a fiery speech by Rabbi Nolan Lebovitz, and the sight of a packed house on a Saturday morning—a thought that had long simmered in the recesses of my mind bubbled happily to the surface: It is a truth universally acknowledged that a Jew in want of rich Jewish life must leave New York and head to LA.

Let me start by admitting the obvious: LA is not without blight or blemish, all the more so these days. I’d hardly been in town an hour and already my friends here were telling me all about the homelessness in the streets, the swelling violence, the police calls made but not answered, the insurance they can no longer even fending liberal Zionism, but the space is narrowing just as much in LA as it is in New York and elsewhere.

In New York that once was.

Our town in the 1970s was a case study in collapse, and yet it remained vibrant and thriving, with flowers blooming and cross-pollinating in the rubble. Why? Because, as the Lubavitcher Rebbe, the late great Menachem Mendel Schneerson, understood better than most, the spiraling chaos wasn’t just a driver of anxiety; it was also an invitation to many Jews to reject much of what had failed them—excess materialism, toxic politics, revolutionary aspirations—and instead recommit themselves to their traditions and their spiritual and emotional and physical well-being. All you needed to do to dispel the darkness of 1970s New York was light them Shabbos candles.

That’s much harder to do, if not altogether impossible, in New York circa 2022. The Jewish revolution already happened there, with its successes—Chabad, the Soviet Jewry movement, some corners of modern Orthodoxy—and its failures. To stay in New York now is to dull your brain by pledging allegiance to the orthodoxies of the progressive cult that runs this town while also trying to preserve the core of your parents’ Judaism and realizing you’re not doing much justice to either worldview. Today’s New York is largely a factory for the manufacturing of midwits who know just enough to be taken seriously by the mutually accrediting mediocrities running the formerly meaningful institutions too many smart American Jews still think of as their natural home.

Los Angeles is different. It has the raw material of hundreds of thousands of Jews (suburbanites, Russians, Persians) who are ripe for a fresh encounter with Judaism, in part because the local religions (growth, tech, Hollywood) have catastrophically failed, as they did in 1970s New York, and in part because LA lacks the unifying progressive glue that geography and the big unions provide. It’s diffuse. To live and thrive in LA, now more than ever, you need a tribe. If the Rebbe were alive and young today, I don’t think he’d move to Miami, which is a great and promising city for Jews who seek America, but not so much for Americans seeking Judaism. If the Rebbe was alive and young today, he would move to Los Angeles.

So spare me, please, the gripes about LA being insufficiently intellectual, a stale and austere avocado toast to New York’s elegant and sophisticated mille-feuille, a sun-stricken studio backlot that can’t hold a candle to the glittering brilliance that is Manhattan. If you’re Jewish, Los Angeles is ascendant, for a few simple reasons.

First of all, as you might have noticed, everything is broken these days—our political system, our media, our universities, our health care system, our ability to be decent to one another—and California is the cradle of American brokenness. It’s always been beautifully

NEWSLETTER

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tabletmag.com/newsletter
cracked. The crack is its essence. Where-as in New York, once upon a time not so long ago, you could wake up on a Saturday morning with the expectation that your basic needs would be met—a good sermon, a great bagel, fine coffee, a decent newspaper, some lovely gallery show to behold—LA is where the earth quakes, the forests burn, the traffic snarls. It works not in spite of these challenges but because of them, because the people who live there resolved, like the million or so Nicaraguans huddled near the mouth of Mount Masaya and its active lava lake, to root themselves in this fertile but demanding soil.

As New York comes tumbling down, you can almost feel our brothers and sisters out west nodding sympathetically. Gavin Newsom? George Gascón? Bring out your worst, your weakest, your most preposterous politicians touting their failed and dangerous ideas. It doesn’t matter. California was shattered and unovernable from the start.

This same brokenness, in turn, delivers the next reason why LA reigns supreme: It’s real. Accused for a century, more or less, of being Tinseltown—a fake, a fabrication, a trompe l’oeil—it turns out that Los Angeles was the realist all along, precisely because it refused to be moved by ideas. Back home, in frigid and flaccid Manhattan, our politicians all along, precisely because it refused to be moved by ideas. Back home, in frigid and flaccid Manhattan, our politicians refused to be moved by ideas. Back home, in frigid and flaccid Manhattan, our politicians refused to be moved by ideas. Back home, in frigid and flaccid Manhattan, our politicians refused to be moved by ideas.

Emhoff must now be considered the paragon of beauty and featured on the covers of magazines. LA isn’t impressed by such twaddle. It knows that beauty is greater than genius because it requires no explanation, and that beauty isn’t defined in underheated gender studies seminar rooms but by the very instinctive reactions people have before they think, when they merely look at someone or something and know right away whether they’re turned on or repelled. LA asks if that avocado is ripe and delicious, not if it represents a new trend you should study and adopt if you want the Brahmins who control the institutions that give you credentials and meaning to approve of your choices. LA is basic like that.

It’s also big, to boot—big enough, in fact, to give everyone the space they need to be together apart. Forget the exhausting drive to homogenize everything and everyone, which the priests of progressivism hilariously refer to as “diversity.” LA, like New York way back when but not in a very long while, understands that the body politic is healthiest when it allows its divergent tribes to live side by side, interacting whenever they need to but never feeling compelled to cross cultural or geographic or emotional lines that make them feel uncomfortable. Persian Jews can live across town from gay hipsters, and Orthodox parents can walk the streets with their kids and, whenever the spirit moves them, hop in their minivans and drive over to visit their coked-out producer friends on the Westside. It’s not so much a melting pot as a melting shabu-shabu, inviting you to dip judiciously and as frequently or infrequently as you’d like.

These reasons, arguably, make Los Angeles an all-around better, more human-friendly and livable town than its haughty East Coast sis. Together, they seem to be doing something particularly great to Jewish life. Which shouldn’t be surprising: Reread the last several paragraphs, and you’ll find a cure for nearly every ailment plaguing the struggling communities back in the cold. When you have space and a tradition of living with hardship, when you respect not just diversity but also difference and disabuse yourself of the notion that your ideas, clever as they may be, can somehow replace observable reality—you’re likely to end up with folks who approach Jewish life with pride and verve.

At Adat Shalom, I saw young and old cats, graying conservatives and pierced millennials, all worshipping together with what was unmistakable and very real joy. I heard Rabbi Lebovitz tell his approving congregants to stop raging over the latest antisemitic scandal—Whoopi Goldberg, Amnesty International, etc.—and worry instead about deepening their own knowledge and practice of Judaism. It’s such a simple, powerful, and altogether too rare message these days, the sort you’d hear in precisely one non-Orthodox shul in New York (yasher koach to you, Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch). In LA, you can learn this vital Torah from Rabbi Lebovitz, or Rabbi David Wolpe, or Rabbi Sherre Hirsch, or Rabbi Mordecai Finley, or Rabbi Sari Laufer—the fact that I can name so many off the top of my head should be enough to tell you that Jewish spiritual life is much healthier out west than you’d imagine.

So if you are alive today, Go West, Young Jew, if you can at all. Los Angeles is good for your Jewish soul.
The scale of Israeli police spying on civilians using secretly installed spyware is even larger than previously known. In January, the Israeli business newspaper Calcalist reported that Israel’s special operations cyber unit had been using Pegasus spyware to monitor Israeli civilians without court approval and in direct violation of the law. A new Calcalist report adds several prominent members of the political and business community to the growing list of illegally targeted civilians, as well as many activists and protest leaders. Created by NSO, an Israeli company, the Pegasus spyware was sold to governments around the world.

On Wednesday afternoon, married couple Ilya Lichenstein and Heather Morgan appeared in Manhattan federal court after being arrested by the Department of Justice for the theft and trafficking of hacked Bitcoin worth about $4.5 billion—$3.6 billion of which the DOJ recovered, making it the largest-ever financial seizure by a law enforcement agency. Questions remain about how the Bitcoin was obtained; the couple was not charged with the actual 2016 hack of Bitfinex, a crypto exchange, from which their stolen coins originate, leaving the possibility of other conspirators.

A new analysis from the medical journal The Lancet looks at the relationship between social conditions in a given country and COVID-19 infection rates. Pulling data from more than 177 countries and comparing the infection rates with social and political factors in each, the study found that “higher levels of trust [in government and between citizens] had large statistical associations with fewer infections.”

Journalists continue to come under attack in Mexico, where at least three have been killed and another wounded in recent weeks by gangs hostile toward the media. At the end of last month in Tijuana, Margarito Martínez was shot and killed outside his home and Lourdes Maldonado López was assassinated in her car, just as the unsolved murder rate for journalists in Mexico hovers around 95%, according to the New York Committee to Protect Journalists.

Hardly anyone was watching when the Winter Olympics began last week in China. Television viewership is down 43% compared to the 2018 winter games, and fewer Americans are tuning in than at any point in decades. The United States is engaged in a “diplomatic boycott” of the games in protest of the host country’s treatment of Uyghur Muslims.

The drop in the U.S. birth rate wasn’t as severe as forecasters feared it would be because of pandemic-related disruptions to family planning, but the approximate 7,000 fewer births during the first nine months of last year as compared to the previous year means the birth rate is still at its lowest since the 1980s.

Stronger than steel and lighter than plastic! A new material developed by MIT chemical engineers using a novel, two-dimensional polymerization process that “self-assembles into sheets, unlike all other polymers, which form one-dimensional, spaghetti-like chains.” The material, which is currently in the process of being patented, could be used in everything from structural engineering to mobile phones.
Godzilla’s Jewish Hollywood Friend

The iconic monster owes much of his American success to the savvy, cigar-smoking producer Henry G. Saperstein

BY ANDREW FOX

I became a devoted fan of Henry G. Saperstein at the impressionable age of 6, though I had no idea who he was. I wouldn’t learn his name for another couple of decades, at least, and I wouldn’t truly appreciate his accomplishments until much later. But I was old enough to know that Godzilla and other giant monsters were my passion, and I was already enough of a kaiju eiga (giant monster) connoisseur to recognize that two films in that genre, Monster Zero and War of the Gargantuas, towered above most of their lot, filled with verve, strangeness, and pathos that made their details stand out and linger in my young mind when the repetitious monster battles and dubbed dialogue of other kaiju eiga films blurred together into cinematic tonjiru.

My appreciation for Saperstein emerged not only from my delight with his co-produced kaiju eiga films. Photographs of him, spiffily dressed in a dark suit, typically with cigar in mouth, evoked memories of my maternal grandfather, theatrical manager Frank Lashinsky. Frank, his two brothers Harry and Louis, and their sister Ethel had a scrapyard business that did very well during World War II. The three brothers invested a portion of their scrapyard profits into a second venture, National Attractions, that began by promoting and managing touring concert artists and legitimate plays and soon began specializing in show-running roadshow versions of Broadway musicals in theaters throughout the South, beginning with Oklahoma! in the late 1940s and continuing with classic runs of South Pacific, My Fair Lady, Hello, Dolly!, and Fiddler on the Roof.

When I visited the high-rise apartment in Sunny Isles, Florida, where Frank and my grandmother Irene retired, he’d take me along as he held court in the building’s social hall. I remember the big room filling with noxious clouds of cigar smoke from waist height to the ceiling and how I hid underneath the table where he and his cronies played cards so I could breathe. In their apartment, I often stared at a mysterious and enticing photo portrait of my grandfather, cigar in hand, smiling bashfully while receiving a hug from a tall blond woman with a dazzling smile and tremendous eyes, dressed in a lavish white gown and a hat crowned with footlong feathers. Years later, I learned this lady was Carol Channing, dressed in one of her Hello, Dolly! costumes.

My grandfather was my first best friend, the center of my young world. He died of heart disease when I was 5 years old, on a Saturday morning. I got the news from my parents while I was watching The Bugs Bunny/Road Runner Hour on my little black-and-white TV; I remembered turning off the cartoons, feeling it wasn’t appropriate any longer to watch anvils fall on Wile E. Coyote’s head. Frank was still in his 50s, only a year or two older than I am now; all that cigar smoking played its part, I’m sure. Over the following year, I escaped more deeply into fantasy and horror movies, seeking something to fill the huge hole my grandfather’s passing left in my life. I found Henry G. Saperstein’s kaiju eiga films.

Henry G. Saperstein (the “G” stands for Gahagen, the maiden name of noted actress Helen Gahagan Douglas, not Godzilla, although that flamboyant showman would perhaps have been pleased to have you believe otherwise), also known as Hank, was born on June 2, 1918, in Chicago, the son of Aaron and Beatrice Saperstein. Aaron owned five movie theaters in Chicago, four of them independents, and one of them jointly owned with Warner Bros.’ theatrical division. When Aaron would travel to Los Angeles to attend industry conventions, he’d often take Hank along, and the young boy would play with members of the Our Gang/Little Rascals casts. Pat Saperstein, Hank’s daughter, now a senior editor for Variety, recalls that Hank grew up in a kosher home, but like many American Jews of his generation, particularly those who became involved in Hollywood, he shrugged off what he saw as the shackles of a stifling faith. Pat remembers the primary form of Jewish identification in her childhood home being food, particularly Sunday bagel brunches her father would bring home from Nate and Al’s delicatessen.

Hank, a self-described “playboy” while at college, attended the University of Chicago, where he studied mathematics and aeronautical engineering while also helping out his father by serving as a part-time projectionist. When Aaron passed away in 1938, he left 20-year-old Hank ownership of his five movie theaters. Hank dropped out of college in order to keep the family’s business alive. After the U.S. entered World War II, Hank realized that, as an aeronautical engineer and licensed pilot (his daughter Pat isn’t sure of the latter, saying her father loved to spin tales about himself), he would soon be drafted, so he sold the theaters. In the Army Air Force, he was put to work making training films; he made approximately 900 of them, learning as he went.

Following his mustering out from the Army, Hank became interested in a new visual storytelling medium—television.
Realizing that the new medium, whose stations sometimes broadcast 24 hours per day, seven days a week, would have a voracious appetite for programming, he began purchasing low-budget Western films in 1948 and distributing them to stations. Perhaps more significantly, he realized that television viewing could arouse a boundless enthusiasm for branded merchandise. He established a new business, Television Personalities, Inc., to focus specifically on merchandising opportunities. Soon he was licensing merchandise based on the likenesses of stars such as Debbie Reynolds and Rosemary Clooney and fictional characters including the Lone Ranger, Lassie, and Dick Tracy. Following Elvis Presley’s explosive arrival on the music scene in 1954, Hank worked a merchandising deal with Elvis’ manager, Colonel Tom Parker, which resulted in Elvis Presley-branded shoes, shirts, wallets, belts, and watches.

Photographs of Hank Saperstein taken during his 40s and 50s show a handsome, nattily dressed man, a bit on the stocky side, dark hair slicked back, with heavy-lidded eyes that resemble those of actor Victor Mature. He saw himself as a businessman and deal-maker first, primarily, rather than a creative type. In a 1963 interview with Variety, he proudly stated, “I am known in this business for my nose. I am known to smell when the time is ripe for a deal, for a trend in entertainment, for a development with dollar potentials.” He moved his family to Hollywood in 1955, and not long afterwards he branched out into producing television shows including Championship Bowling from 1958-60 and All-Star Golf from 1958-62, as well as a pioneering children’s TV show called Ding Dong School. During this period he became one of the founding members of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences.

One of his favorite personal anecdotes involved fellow Hollywood mogul Jack Warner. Following the death of his father, Hank had found himself an uneasy partner with Warner Brothers, who co-owned one of Hank’s Chicago theaters. The Warners’ district manager assigned to Hank’s theater stiffed Hank on the costs of several loads of coal required to heat the theater during Chicago’s brutal winters. Hank never forgot this. Decades later, in 1963, when Jack Warner approached Hank to make a deal for Warner Bros. to distribute Hank’s animated musical Gay Purr-ee, Hank stated the price for the rights was $947,000. When Warner asked why the asking price wasn’t a nice, round figure, either $900,000 or $1 million, Hank replied that he’d kept careful records of the costs of the coal Warner’s employee had gyped him out of more than 20 years earlier, and the costs totaled $47,000. Jack Warner blew his top, exclaiming, “Get outta my office! I never heard such a cockamamie thing in all my life!” But Hank ended up getting his long-deferred coal money. He had chutzpah to spare.

And that was a good thing, because it takes a great deal of chutzpah to take the jump from merchandising Roy Rogers toys to owning a Hollywood film studio, even a minor one. Always on the lookout for fresh entertainment properties to license and exploit, Hank’s keen “nose for business” sniffed out the near-sighted but endeavoring Mr. Magoo, the star property of United Productions of America (UPA), an animation studio formed in the early 1940s by former Disney animators who had gone on strike. Rather than follow Disney’s example of highly detailed animated drawings that attempted to mimic real life, UPA’s artist-animators pioneered the use of limited animation of highly stylized characters and settings, inspired by postwar modern art. Two of their Mr. Magoo cartoons made for theatrical release won Academy Awards, When Magoo Flew (1954) and Magoo’s Puddle Jumper (1956). But great artists are rarely great businessmen, and by the end of the 1950s, UPA, following the disappointing reception of their 1959 animated feature 1001 Arabian Nights (which featured Mr. Magoo), was facing collapse. From UPA’s financial standpoint, Hank’s interest in the Mr. Magoo character couldn’t have come at a more propitious time. The famed Saperstein nose had sniffed out his biggest deal yet.

On New Year’s Eve of 1959, Hank’s Television Personalities Inc. inked a deal with UPA to produce 130 Mr. Magoo made-for-TV cartoons.

Hank and Bosustow met often for lunch meetings at The Smokehouse, a restaurant situated next door to UPA, and during one meeting Bosustow, suffering under the pressures of running an ailing studio and hoping to return to more creative work at UPA, mentioned that he was working on a deal to sell his controlling share of UPA’s stock to Seymour Weintraub & Associates. Never one to pass up a lucrative deal, Hank learned that the offer on the table was for $40 per share for 1,471 shares; he trumped that offer by telling Bosustow he would pay $50 per share. Hank turned to his longtime partner Peter DeMet, La Salle National Bank of Chicago, and Kellogg Company, for which Hank’s marketing companies had been producing cereal premiums, to finance the deal. Kellogg ended up backing out, but Hank ended up with a choice deal: For $15,000 up front and an additional $58,550 promised, he obtained UPA’s production facility and the rights to the Mr. Magoo and Gerald McBoing Boing characters. On June 27, 1960, Hank became president of UPA, with Bosustow staying on as a salaried employee.

Hank quickly imposed business discipline on the formerly freewheeling UPA staff, instituting a punch clock and standardized work hours and enormously accelerating the studio’s production schedule. When UPA had been in the business of producing theatrical shorts, its artists had typically spent five weeks lovingly crafting a single six-minute-long cartoon. Now, with the arrival of Hank Saperstein and his television deals, UPA’s workers found themselves pumping out a five-minute-long cartoon every five days. During his initial meeting with UPA’s creative staff, Hank brusquely announced, “We’re not going to do any more of this fine-art crap,” and he ordered his animators to halve the number of animation cells from 16 per foot to eight. Purists bemoaned the loss of UPA’s former high artistic standards, but Hank’s purchase of the studio gave it an additional lease on life. And it certainly cannot be said that every film UPA produced after Hank gained control of the studio was a hastily...
cranked-out product that embarrassed the studio's glory days; still to come were *Gay Purr-ee* (1962), a charming, Paris-set animated musical that featured the voices of Judy Garland and Robert Goulet, and *Mister Magoo's Christmas Carol* (1962), the first animated Christmas special produced for television, and still considered one of the best.

Beyond overseeing UPA's hastened production schedule, Hank remained busy with his earlier business pursuits, setting up merchandising and distribution deals through his other companies. In the early 1960s, his television programs distribution salesmen reported that their customers, owners of local TV stations, were clamoring for action films, preferably science fiction or horror. Saperstein went to the research library of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, located in Beverly Hills, and asked the head librarian, Margaret Herrick, who made the best science fiction and horror films. She told him that Hammer Studios in England and Toho Co. Ltd in Japan did. Hank already knew one of the top men at Hammer, Jimmy Sanger, and thought he was “impossible to deal with,” so he decided to try his luck with Toho.

Saperstein went to see a revival of the original Japanese language *Gojira* at the Toho La Brea Theater in Los Angeles, and came away hugely impressed by the audience's response to the titular monster; although Gojira was portrayed as a demon of destruction, the audience cheered for the big, radioactive dinosaur. Hank figured this was so because Gojira “was chasing down guys who were stupid enough to set off atom bombs!” Hank reportedly also enrolled in a night course at UCLA in Japanese culture and traditions (his daughter Pat Saperstein suspects this may be a bit of self-embellishment on her father's part, but we'll let it slide).

Despite his efforts to not come across as an ugly American, Saperstein still encountered the famed Japanese cultural reserve and suspicion of foreigners. In a 1995 interview, he recalled:

“[Toho executives] were wary of any *gaijin*, it doesn't mean foreigner, it means outsider. You're outside of their 'kingdom of the sun,' they're wary of anyone coming in who wants to be involved, in any meaningful way. But I came in, and I offered up some ideas that made the pictures more viable in the international marketplace, and I was willing to put money on the line, this appealed to them, and I guess that's how I broke through.”

Saperstein offered Toho an arrangement they had never been involved in before: co-producing their films with an American studio to better slant those films toward the expectations of Western (particularly American) audiences. In a 1994 interview, he reminisced about his big new idea he presented in initial talks with Toho: “I told them they could have a worldwide marketplace, particularly a North American one, if they would just slightly change their point-of-view in these Godzilla films. They would shoot the film in Japanese, we would put some Caucasian actors in it (who would say their lines in English), and they would dub the Caucasian actors into Japanese, and we would dub the Japanese actors into English. They thought the idea was so far-fetched they agreed to do it.”

The first project that Hank and his team would co-produce with Toho would be the 1966 giant monster epic *Frankenstein Conquers the World* (originally titled *Frankenstein vs. the Subterranean Monster* for its initial release in Japan in 1965). The journey of Frankenstein's monster from an early-19th-century English Gothic novel to the strangely mutated centerpiece of Toho's and UPA's first co-production is a strange and convoluted one, itself as much a paradigmatic example of cross-cultural pollination as is Hank's partnership with Toho.

The concept that would eventually become *Frankenstein Conquers the World* was dreamed up by the special effects genius behind the original 1933 *King Kong*, the animator Willis O'Brien. In the late 1950s, his career having declined greatly since the making of his classic fantasy film a quarter-century before, O'Brien conceived of a second sequel to *King Kong*, which he titled *King Kong vs. Frankenstein*. In O'Brien's treatment, showman Carl Denham, who had rescued Kong following the beast's surviving his plunge from the top of the Empire State Building, meets Dr. Frankenstein's grandson, who has been experimenting with body parts of large African animals and has created a living creature as large as Kong. Denham and Frankenstein decide to display their two giants together in San Francisco. Frankenstein's creature escapes, Kong is sent to battle him, and the two giants perish together after plunging off the Golden Gate Bridge.

O'Brien's treatment was referred to independent producer John Beck, who hired screenwriter George Yates to write a full script based on O'Brien's treatment that could be shown to investors. Beck failed to arouse any interest with U.S. studio heads, so, without informing O'Brien, he traveled to Japan to discuss the project with Toho. While executives at Toho expressed interest, they ultimately decided that instead of making a film based on Yates' script, they would license the Kong character and have him face off against their own monster, Godzilla.

O'Brien wasn't aware of the deal that led to the making of *King Kong vs. Godzilla* until after the picture's release in the U.S., and his impotent fury over
having been defrauded by Beck, who retained U.S. distribution rights to Toho's film, contributed to the animator's premature death later that year from a heart attack. (Ironically, the head of Toho's special effects department, Eiji Tsuburaya, had been inspired to begin his career in Japan's film industry by his admiration for the effects of King Kong.)

The heads of Toho remained interested in doing something with the public domain Frankenstein's monster character, however. They decided to make the Frankenstein monster a giant again, as he had been in O'Brien's original concept, and pit him against Godzilla. They had a script prepared for a film to be called Frankenstein vs. Godzilla that would explain the presence of a giant Frankenstein monster in Japan thusly: Nazi German scientists had extracted the apparently immortal heart of the monster, but with Germany on the verge of defeat by the Allies, they secretly shipped the heart to supposed safety in Japan aboard a U-boat. The heart arrives at a laboratory in Hiroshima shortly before the city is pulverized by an American atom bomb. Years later, scientists studying the effects of radiation on Hiroshima's survivors discover a strange-looking boy who is growing at a fantastic rate. He turns out to be a mutant who has grown from the irradiated heart of Frankenstein's monster. When the Japan Defense Forces fear the giant will begin eating people, they decide to free Godzilla from his frozen prison in an iceberg and lure him to Japan to battle the giant.

However, Toho's bosses feared Japanese audiences would fail to accept Godzilla as a national savior; the big radioactive dinosaur had been depicted as a villain in every appearance thus far. So they decided to pit Godzilla against Mothra next, instead, and rework the Frankenstein script to feature a brand new monster opponent, the tunneling monster Baragon. At this point, Hank Saperstein made his proposal to co-produce a series of films with Toho. Frankenstein vs. the Subterranean Monster, to be called Frankenstein Conquers the World when shown in the U.S., was chosen to be their initial project. Hank's most significant contribution to the film was his proposal to have American actor Nick Adams play the protagonist, the American medical researcher who discovers the mutant Frankenstein child.

In the midst of a difficult separation from his wife, Adams fell in love with co-star Kumi Mizuno and asked her to marry him; she was already engaged and so had to turn aside his advances, but his passion for her and her fondness for him is vividly on display in both Frankenstein Conquers the World and the subsequent Monster Zero. Adams also became close friends with Yoshio Tsuchiya, who portrayed the deliciously duplicitous Controller of Planet X in Monster Zero. Tsuchiya recalled the practical jokes the two friends would play on one another on the set; Adams was constantly dieting while in Japan, so when he asked Tsuchiya how to say "good morning" in Japanese, Tsuchiya instead taught him the Japanese phrase for "I'm hungry!" Tsuchiya also teased Adams about his Actors Studio Method acting, and in return, Adams learned the Japanese words for "You're overacting!" and yelled them at his co-star during Tsuchiya's kubuki-inspired performance as the alien overlord.

When asked what sorts of changes he requested Toho make to the scripts of their co-productions, Hank responded:

"Every Japanese monster film starts with a conference. Either of the press or government officials or scientists, and they lay the foundation for the story ... This goes on for five minutes, by which time every American viewer tunes it out, particularly on television ... We edited almost every film we distributed here so it would play better. This is a monster movie. (The audience is asking) 'Where's the monster?'

Hank's next co-production with Toho, known in Japan as Great Monster War (1965) and released in the U.S. as Monster Zero (1970), may have been the film he considered to be his greatest achievement during his partnership with Toho. He claimed that with Monster Zero (an improbable boast, given the box office success of earlier Godzilla films in the U.S. such as King Kong vs. Godzilla), "We turned Godzilla from being an art house film that only played in four theaters in the United States into an icon." He took at least partial and better-deserved credit for the transformation of the Godzilla character from a mindless engine of destruction to a heroic defender of Japan and of Earth. Monster Zero is one of a handful of Godzilla pictures that continues to enchant me even as an adult, far removed from the undiscerning monster worshipper I was as a child.

Hank was full of praise for his collaborators at Toho, including producer Tomoyuki Tanaka and director Ishirō Honda. But he reserved his greatest admiration for special effects director Eiji Tsuburaya: "The master of special effects... I worshiped the man. I used to love to just sit and listen to him and look at what he was doing... Felt like Paul Bunyan! He had a stage that was a block and a half long. And when you walked in there were—in miniature—cities, mountains, and highways; the traffic lights worked, the cars moved, water flowed in the river. Fascinating to see!"

One collaborator Hank could not spare a good word for was Russ Tamblyn, the American star of UPA's third co-production with Toho, The War of the Gargantuas, the sequel to Frankenstein Conquers the World. For reasons he never explained in an interview, Hank decided not to stick with Nick Adams for the third co-production, a decision he came to regret.

Fortunately, Tamblyn's performance is not the main attraction in The War of the Gargantuas. The giant twin monster Gargantuas are unusually anthropomorphic for a Toho kaiju eiga, and a well-written script granted greater pathos and drama to the monster action. The main stars of the film were the monster costumes that allowed the suit-actors' eyes and mouths to be seen, which allows for more expressive
“Gaira, the Green Gargantua, grew from a bit of flesh that ended up in the ocean and develops a taste for human flesh.”

headache. He also felt that the Godzilla films that followed *Monster Zero*, most directed by replacements for Ishirō Honda, failed to measure up to the quality of the original *Gojira* and the earlier sequels, and he declined to co-produce or co-finance them. Instead, he focused on distribution deals and merchandising. Eventually, he would come to acquire television and home video distribution rights for a dozen Godzilla and other Toho *kaiju eiga* films. He would handle U.S. merchandising for Godzilla and associated monsters for a quarter-century.

Hank’s television syndication efforts on behalf of Toho arguably meant more to Godzilla’s enduring and ever-growing popularity in America than the original theatrical releases of the *kaiju eiga* films. No new Godzilla movies were aired in U.S. theaters between *The Terror of Mechagodzilla* in 1978 and the first in the Heisei series, *Godzilla 1985* (released in 1984 in Japan as *The Return of Godzilla*), seven years later. During that period of absence from theaters, Godzilla garnered millions of new young fans in the U.S., who watched the Showa series Godzilla movies over and over again on the syndicated TV program *Creature Double Feature*, which typically aired on Saturday afternoons. Hank also distributed his Toho properties as packages to independent TV stations’ late-night horror and science fiction movie programs (my local show in Miami was called *Creature Features*; I watched every Saturday night beginning at 11 p.m.).

Hank would occasionally reign the itch to work on a film project with Toho, and keeping Godzilla in the public eye was never far from his mind. In the early 1970s, Hank and UPA writer Reuben Bercovitch pitched a script treatment for a film called *Godzilla vs. Gargantua* to Toho, but the studio did not greenlight the project. In 1988, Hank announced to *Variety* that he planned to reassemble much of UPA’s old team of veteran animators to work on a new animated Godzilla film with Toho, explaining that this would be a cost-effective alternative to live-action, since filming a live-action Godzilla film with all its special effects would cost around $25 million. The project never got underway.
In the twilight of his career, with the UPA offices housing only a small fraction of the number of employees they had at the company’s zenith, Hank continued to evince a zest and passion for deal-making. In the 1990s he approached superstar filmmaker Stephen Spielberg to produce a live-action version of Mr. Magoo. When that effort went nowhere, Hank decided to hire a screenwriter to come up with a script that might entice investors or a studio. Rather than discreetly reaching out to acquaintances within the industry, he decided to place a full-page recruitment ad in a Hollywood newspaper, and it was a doozy. Oozing with the aging mogul’s outsized personality, the ad read, in part: “I don’t care if you are white, black, yellow or green; or if you are hetero, homo or neuter; or if you are suffering from Alzheimer’s, AIDS, Emphysema, Diabetes, Gastritis or Flatulence ... or if you use a word processor, IBM, L. C. Smith or write with a quill. ... Don’t worry if you are a pain-in-the-ass; I am the worst curmudgeon you ever met.” Ironically, the studio that took the bait and produced Mr. Magoo in 1997, a year before Hank’s death, was UPA’s old nemesis, Walt Disney Pictures.

In a 1994 interview with film scholar Stuart Galbraith IV, Hank sounded a bit regretful about the limitations of his relationship with Toho and wistful that he had never been fully accepted as a member of the tightly knit Toho family. “We’ve had a 30-year love-hate relationship. No matter how much money I deliver for them, I’m still an outsider, and that’ll never change. Kipling was right: East is east and West is west, and the ‘twain ain’t never gonna meet.”

His ambivalent feelings toward Toho did not extend to Godzilla, a property he genuinely loved, and he remained determined to see that an American version of Godzilla be made. He finally secured his cherished goal by setting up negotiations between Toho and American studio TriStar.

When asked about Godzilla’s enduring appeal, Hank offered a simple explanation, one directly connected to the character’s shift to heroic defender of Earth, as seen in Monster Zero and subsequent films. “It’s a morality play. It’s the classic story of good vs. evil, white hat vs. black hat. Godzilla is knocked all around until the tenth round, then comes out swinging.”

Pat Saperstein related that one of the last activities she shared with her 80-year-old father prior to his death in June 1998 was watching a private screening of the TriStar Godzilla at his home. I myself remember being very disappointed in the film when I saw it on its theatrical release; TriStar had turned Godzilla into a computer-generated giant iguana that demolished New York City while lacking any personality apart from mindless fury.

I asked Pat what her father had thought of the film. She said he was seriously ailing when they’d watched the movie together, and she couldn’t recall his having said anything. Perhaps it was just as well. Had he been in decent health, Hank might’ve raged over how badly TriStar had regressed his beloved Godzilla. On the other hand, he always considered himself more a businessman than a creative auteur. Maybe his more likely reaction would’ve been to frown a bit, shrug his shoulders, and then get Sony/TriStar heads on the phone to negotiate a piece of the marketing deals for this new Godzilla character — what red-blooded American boy could do without his Godzilla toothbrush, pajamas, and breakfast cereal?

The author wishes to express his thanks to Pat Saperstein for kindly responding to questions regarding her father.

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Why LA Is Like Seltzer for Crypto

The founder of Finance Blocks on the city's fertile blockchain soil

BY ARMIN ROSEN

‘T’his is the farthest point you can run to in order to get away from everywhere else,” Jake Seltzer says of the boulevards and mountain ranges stretching into the afternoon haze. If you gaze hard enough from the rooftop of the Waldorf Astoria in Beverly Hills, you can maybe tell that there are two O’s in the near-distant Hollywood sign; you might even be able to tell the O’s apart from the adjoining D. But most famous things in eyeshot are among the most boring. The guitar player from Weezer was apparently at a table behind us, but he’s not that interesting to stare at either, at least not compared to the palmy vastness of the LA imperium. Snowy mountain domes humble the downtown skyline; in the opposite direction the Pacific Ocean radiates like a second sun. The freeways are nowhere to be seen.

Seltzer is a hoodied and slightly burly 26-year-old crypto currency entrepreneur. He had suggested we meet at the Waldorf, which is a frequent haunt of LA’s leading citizens, Seltzer decided college would only slow him down. Though not in any classroom. Like many of LA’s leading citizens, Seltzer decided college would only slow him down. Instead, he came west in search of freelance tech work.

During a monthlong trip to India in 2019, Seltzer and his techie friend and eventual co-founder noticed that the country’s rural banks had no real digital infrastructure for their customers, even though many poor Indians owned smartphones capable of running a basic banking app. The lack of digitized banking meant that loans had to be collected in cash—a system rife for exploitation and petty corruption. Account balances could only be checked by walking often for hours to a bank branch and standing in line.

Finance Blocks responded to these issues by creating a mobile banking platform, which it’s currently giving to Indian financial institutions for free: The company plans to make money by issuing a cryptocurrency later this month on a South Korean exchange called ProBit, which is run by about 20 people based in Estonia. Creators of new tokens also have the option of paying some not-insignificant listing fee to enable the coin to be traded on a larger platform like FTX, which has hosted over $2.5 billion in trading volume during the past 24 hours, from which it takes a 2% transaction fee—and which explains why FTX can afford the naming rights on the arena where the Miami Heat play. A similar business model explains why Crypto.com now owns the naming rights to LA’s former Staples Center.

Right now, the company’s market makers are in Switzerland; some of its analytics staff is in Brazil. Finance Blocks itself might eventually go public in Singapore, where the company is based for legal purposes, Singapore being the only stable developed economy where a coin-issuing company can be publicly traded. “Singapore is the most advanced monetary system in the world,” Seltzer said, noting that it wouldn’t be too difficult for him to get citizenship there.

During the pandemic summer of 2020, the Indian and American Finance Blocks teams got to know each other through marathon trans-Pacific Call of Duty sessions, gaming in the LA morning and then coding at night. Crucial early investors are based in LA, including a couple of younger guys—who are also Jewish, like a lot of people in the LA crypto orbit, Seltzer noted. He knew those investors because they’d put money in a delivery app for legal weed companies, which Seltzer had helped build.

LA is friendly territory for crypto, in part because of the success of the weed business—another recent and idealistic industry that attracted anti-establishment entrepreneurial types and exists in a legal gray area. As a new arrival in LA in the mid-2010s, Seltzer made a living building out online platforms and back-ends for pot dispensaries, businesses in an industry that was still considered too criminal-adjacent to access many existing web services. But in quick order, weed stores became their own kind of unstoppable reality, with an inevitability that overrode all legal and moral frameworks—a shift that happened in LA before it happened nearly anywhere else in America.

The city’s openness to the crazy new thing that might eventually become an accepted part of the architecture of daily life is why self-taught, tech-founder
The Native American Judaism of LA

Rabbi Ed Feinstein sees the continuity of a new kind of Jewish life in the San Fernando Valley

BY JEREMY STERN

The Valley is New Jersey,” says Rabbi Ed Feinstein of Valley Beth Shalom (VBS). “It’s Fort Lee, Teaneck, Englewood. So, if you’re young and cute, you live in Venice. If you’re an aspiring artist, you live in Silver Lake or downtown in a loft. If you’re in the industry, you’re in Beverly Hills. But in the Valley, we’re not hip, we’re into our families and our friends, and our identity is wrapped up with inner things.”

Three hundred square miles and home to some 2 million people, the San Fernando Valley is a bedroom community cut off from the Los Angeles basin by a mountain range; residents of the Valley are duly patronized by city dwellers. The way New Yorkers think of LA, that’s how Angelenos talk about the Valley: provincial, lowbrow, oblivious. Studio City, Sherman Oaks, and other Valley neighborhoods are seamlessly connected to the city by a network of highways and thoroughfares blasted through the Santa Monica Mountains, but there’s no denying the cultural canyons. City bars have grammable bathrooms and names like Tenants of the Trees; Valley haunts have sticky floors and are called Tony’s Darts Away. On Valley sidewalks, it’s still more common to see lemonade stands and bake sales than meth dens or Greenpeace canvassers—the ultimate mark of cultural inferiority.

In our 30s, I’ve noticed my childhood friends from the Valley seem a bit happier, or at least a click less psychotic, than those from the city. The former are homeowners, married, raising kids, and running small businesses; the latter are still rewriting their pilot from grad school. The city kids are hip and therefore stuck; the Valley kids are unhip and girded for the future.

A Valley boy born and raised, Rabbi Feinstein, who succeeded the great Harold Schulweis as senior rabbi at VBS in Encino in 2005, is one of the most widely revered rabbis in LA County. From his second-floor office, you can see the Sepulveda Dam, which along with the Hansen Dam turned the Valley from flood-prone farmland into Black Caucus to bring his products to farmers in the Mississippi Delta—he’d been up at 7 a.m. local time that morning to watch a House Finance Committee hearing. Oklahoma was almost last in the country for rural financial access. Maybe he could help out there, too. There’d been contact with officials in the Israeli government about assisting in development projects in Africa. Crypto would triumph over everything that threatened to stop its momentum—brainless government regulation, greedy legacy institutions, scammers that made the industry seem seedy—because, as Seltzer put it, “There are too many people like me across the world that want to see change, that you can’t just stop it.”

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a settlement area after 1940. (Hence Chinatown, the landmark Valley film, at least until Boogie Nights). “There are approximately 180,000 Jews living in this area,” Feinstein says. “We estimate there are 50,000 Israelis living here in the Valley. A large Persian contingent lives here, too. North Hollywood has a burgeoning Orthodox community. As Tuvy says about Anatevka, we have every type here.”

“But we all live in separate houses with big walls between them and yards. Now, Jewishly, what that does is it imposes upon us an imperative to build community, to break out of the loneliness of isolated, suburban life and find others to share life with. And that’s one of the functions of a synagogue.”

When American Jews fret about cultural and demographic decline, they worry about places like the Valley, which is an assimilation machine. After escaping Vienna via England and the Dominican Republic, my grandparents arrived in LA with two daughters in the early 1950s. My grandfather was a war hero, a chess grandmaster, and a mensch when we lived here. And that’s one of the functions of a synagogue.

American dream, with the usual consequences: My mom and her siblings went to mixed public schools and spoke no Yiddish or German, only English; most of my cousins and I married outside the tribe. We’re following Hansen’s law and raising our kids—the great grandchildren—with strong Jewish identities, but who knows what kinds of lives they’ll choose.

Feinstein scoffs at declinist panic about acculturation factories like the Valley. When I ask about the 50,000 Israelis here, he explains, “What you’re seeing now is the development of the next stage. The old line was ‘We’re going back. We’re going back tomorrow.’ For 30 years the bags have been packed by the door, but they started to realize: We’re not going back. This is where we live. Our children are Israeli Jewish Americans.… So the question is, can we create an Israeli Jewish American culture and share that with each other?”

Judging by the rapid development of civic associations, he says, the answer is yes. Feinstein points to Merkaz Tarbut Israel, the Israeli Cultural Center in Tarzana, and the Israeli American Council, which started as a local social and cultural organization and has now gone national. There’s also Tzofim (Israeli Scouts) in the west Valley, which runs a once-a-week program called the Ami School. “It’s basically Hebrew school for Israelis who speak Hebrew,” he says.

What about the Valley’s Russian Jews, who are often hard to tell apart from the Russian Christians? “The fact that they’re Jewish at all is a miracle,” says Feinstein. “I mean, first the pogroms and the brutal last years of the czars. Then Soviet atheism. Then the invasion of the Nazis and the Holocaust. And then until 1990 under the Soviets. So the fact that these people remember anything Jewish at all, or have any kind of Jewish connection, to me is a miracle.”

“Look, the prevailing narrative is ‘Oh my god, we’re disappearing,’” Feinstein says. “And yet a dying people doesn’t produce a genius like David Wolpe or Sharon Brous or Craig Taubman and Danny Maseng. There’s a thing here called The Braid. It used to be called the Jewish Women’s Theater, it’s a wonderfully creative group of people. A dying people doesn’t do that.”

“Here’s what’s really happening,” he explains, warming to his theme. “We have now outgrown the legacy of the Eastern European immigration experience and its Judaism. The first saplings in the Valley after the dams were built, those are all trees now. Which means we have become a multigenerational Jewish community here. And what we’re doing is we’re creating a native American Judaism.” He says the last three words slowly, and savors them. “A native American Judaism. And that’s what you see in all the corners of the Valley and LA—the remarkable sparks, new kindling. That’s what I love about it here.”

Rabbi Feinstein looks out his office window, at what exactly it’s hard to say—the American and Israeli flags flying in the parking lot, or at the synagogue’s security perimeter, which is guarded like an embassy, or at the Sepulveda Dam in the distance, or at the sky, which is a typical Valley blue. “I may be the last optimist in all the Jewish world, but I will die being an optimist,” says the man who for many of us is the Valley incarnate. “I will die and on my tombstone they’ll say, ‘He really believed in the future.”
The Road to Munchies
In search of Pico-Robertson's teen nightlife scene

BY SUZY WEISS

George Washington’s promise to the Jews of Newport, Rhode Island, that “the children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants,” is kept alive at Schnitzly, a late-night chicken joint where the religiously observant Jewish youth of Los Angeles gather on Saturday night.

Schnitzly is located on the main drag of the Pico-Robertson section of town, where the European Jewish refugees settled after World War II, followed by the Iranian Jews, shifting the center of Jewish life in Los Angeles from Boyle Heights, on the east side, to the west. The city’s main Jewish commercial zone stretches along West Pico from La Cienega Boulevard to Beverwil Drive, about a mile and a half of bakeries, kosher markets, watch shops, Judaica stores, event halls, and restaurants with names that get more and more spectacular as you walk east. There’s Holy Grill, Meshuga 4 Sushi, Lenny’s Casita—which has a kosher crunch-wrap supreme to rival Taco Bell’s for stoner bochers who won’t touch the treyf stuff—Got Kosher, Kosher Pizza Station, and Schnitzly, the motzei shabbos watering hole, to name a few.

I enlisted the help of my college buddy Sammy, a perennial campaign staffer who grew up in nearby Cheviot Hills and just moved back from Boston to Pico-Robertson to be my tour guide. Sammy is an alum of Sinai and Milken, two of the city’s big Jewish day schools, and currently an outfielder on the Sinai Sluggers softball team, part of the city’s Synagogue Softball League, which according to their website was established in 5755. We have gloriously gross Chinese food at Fu’s Palace, then walk the boulevard.

There’s a big mural on the corner of Pico and Wetherly that gets edited every week telling the community when to light Shabbat candles. This week, it was 5:09 p.m. Taking up the two blocks between Doheny and Cardiff on Pico is a Pacific Coast Energy oil rig; 40 wells and an oil derrick hidden just beneath a huge beige structure made to look like a synagogue facade. We pass the glatt kosher grocery store where the owner got busted in 2013 for selling nonkosher meat. We take a minute to mourn the loss of Label’s Table, a shuttered deli that, according to its faded sign, featured “Russak’s premium gold brand cured and smoked products,” which sound deluxe.

On the sidewalk across from Young Israel of Century City we meet two homeless people, Jenny, 37, from Illinois and Scott, 52, from Utah, who have spent the past six nights sleeping against the wall of Ahavat Shalom, another Orthodox synagogue. They have a tray of vegetables, mainly green peppers and tomatoes that they scored dumpster-diving. I want to drop dead after pointing to it and asking, “So is this like the kitchen area?”

Scott and Jenny like LA’s West Hollywood neighborhood best, and that’s where they met, in the food line, the night Trump was elected, but cops don’t come by as often on Pico. “Everything

**FOOD**

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**Dodger Stadium**

**Ancient Jewish Burial Ground**

Dodger Stadium is nestled just north of downtown, providing fans with a stunning view of the San Gabriel Mountains to the north. The stadium itself is surrounded by tens of thousands of parking spaces sprawled over a large number of parking lots. Below the southernmost parking lot, parking lot 10, a hill slopes down to a street called Lilac Terrace. On the south side of this street, just west of the corner where Lilac Terrace turns into Lookout Drive, there is a bronze plaque, which reads as follows:

FIRST JEWISH SITE IN LOS ANGELES

The Hebrew Benevolent Society of Los Angeles (1854), first charitable organization in the city, acquired this site by deed on April 9, 1855 from the City Council for a sacred burial ground. This property represented the first organized community effort by the pioneer Jewish settlers. Plaque placed by the State Department of Parks and Recreation in cooperation with the Jewish Federation Council of Greater Los Angeles.

September 29, 1968

—Aaron R. Katz
has been weirder since Trump won,” says Jenny. “Half the country is looking for something that’s not there, and the other half is just going along.”

Scott says that his grandfather, David “Ernie” Perkins, fought in the 45th Infantry Division, and liberated Dachau, and he took pictures of what he saw there, but Scott never saw the pictures. “People on the streets are crazy,” Jenny tells me from his perch on a mattress, “We avoid them at all costs.”

Among Scott and Jenny’s possessions is a playbook for Summer: The Donna Summer Musical at Pantages Theatre on Hollywood and Vine, a box of cigarette butts, and a makeshift lantern made from an empty gallon of Arizona Iced Tea and a flashlight. Behind Jenny is a guitar case full of clean clothes, and they each have a grocery cart festooned with American flags and foil streamers, and an overflow of filthy blankets, to pack it all up in.

Scott is visibly tweaking, and even though Sammy is “not remotely afraid of people who are currently experiencing homelessness” he is quite obviously spooked. So we hand over the leftover Chinese and reroute our night from housing crisis to identity crisis. At Schnitzly, two blocks away, we find a comforting gaggle of 16-year-olds congressing over the remains of orders of onion rings and plastic condiment cups of ketchup and Russian dressing under a picture of the Rebbe. There are eight high schoolers, all of whom are Persian except one girl whose parents are from Ukraine. They mostly go to Milk’s, and Sammy went. Two go to Santa Monica College.

There’s a popular hack among the Persian crowd where they get their GED at 16, then enroll for two years at SMC, a community college, before transferring to UCLA. By 20, they’ve saved their parents a fortune and earned themselves a degree with a world-class label.

They tell me about the play they just finished reading in school, A Streetcar Named Desire; “It’s about this girl who goes and stays with her sister’s husband’s family. They used to own a place and have a lot of money but now for some reason they don’t have money anymore”; about the best place to grow up, “Texas or Florida”; and the best Drake Song, “HYFR” (Hell Ya Fucking Right) from his album Take Care.

At Milken, I’m told by Chloe, a tiny girl in a gray sweatshirt and leggings, 90% of the students are done with COVID and masks. But it’s the 10%, the girls, “who wear miniskirts with thigh-high socks and high boots and they just sit in the corner all day and never get written up for breaking dress code,” they’re ruining it for everyone by demanding that the masks stay on, indoors and out. The teachers have to wear N95s. These kids’ freshman year was held entirely online, their sophomore year was half-online, and half in Israel, on a program called Tiferet Israel Fellowship. Now they’re back in school, albeit with masks.

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Satuday night, not even close. They haven’t been in weeks! But, sometimes, they tell me, you have to break up the pizza dinners and the pastas and the salads with a platter of fries and chicken fingers, for old time’s sake.

Sammy and I end the night at Munchies, the “Largest Kosher Candy & Chocolate Selection West of New York.” The glatt kosher candy emporium is lit like a Costco. It’s run by a band of 12- and 13-year-olds who dispense soft serve, Pesek Zman chocolate bars from Israel, and kosher gummies in every color and shape you can possibly imagine. They also sell frum magazine titles (Ami, Binah, and Mishpacha) as well as newspapers (Hamodia, Jewish Press, and Yated Neeman).

The crowd at Munchies is younger and more religious. The girls, who are mostly Ashkenazi, have flip phones, and wear thick, black, wool pleated skirts. Their whole torsos are prone against the shop’s small circular steel tables as they crane their necks toward the screens of the one or two smartphones present. They have scrunchies in their hair and wear flats; knockoff Gucci mules and slip-on Keds. They go to Beis Yaakov and Torat Emes.

George Washington would be proud, if sort of mystified, by Munchies, as well as by Fred Segal and everything else about Los Angeles. But Sammy is done for the night. “There’s something about this place that makes me feel incredibly Jewish,” he says. “And at the same time not nearly Jewish enough.”

This article was originally published on February 7, 2022.
Arroz con Garbanzos (Chickpea Rice)

BY ORGE CASTELLANO

INGREDIENTS

1 ¾ cups long-grain rice
3 ½ tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
½ teaspoon ground cumin
½ teaspoon turmeric
1 cup cooked and drained chickpeas
3 fresh bay leaves
2 tablespoons currants
2 cups vegetable stock
kosher salt and freshly ground pepper
½ cup cilantro leaves or sprigs finely chopped or crushed

PREPARATION

Step 1
Wash the rice under cold water until it’s no longer cloudy, then drain. In a large saucepan, heat the olive oil, add the cumin, and toast the seeds for two minutes. Next, add rice and turmeric and stir well for over two minutes until the grains are well coated in oil.

Step 2
Meanwhile, place the vegetable stock over medium heat, avoiding letting the stock boil. Add the chickpeas, currants, and bay leaves and stir for one minute.

Step 3
Pour in the hot vegetable stock and season with salt and pepper. Cover and simmer over moderate heat for about 17-20 minutes or until the rice is soft. If the rice dries too soon, add ¼ cup of water and adjust the salt and pepper. Garnish with the cilantro on top. Serve hot.

Yield: Serves 4

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