

# THE TAB

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ARTS & LETTERS

## The Art of the Teardown

An interview with the artists whose effort to highlight the fate of kidnapped Israeli children ended up underscoring the moral and social rot of our cities and universities

BY EMILY BENEDEK

**I**sraeli street artist Nitzan Mintz, 32, and her partner, Dede Banaid, 36, had just arrived in New York to study at an art residency, when Hamas terrorists crashed through the Gaza border fence and unleashed their barbaric rampage of murder, rape, arson, and torture on Jewish communities inside Israel. The shocked couple withdrew from their art program before it had even started, and tried to think of what they could do to help the desperate situation at home. Recalling the "Missing Children" pictures on milk cartons that Banaid said had become "iconic" around the world via American films, they focused their attention on the hostages, whose number, at first thought to be around 130, has now risen to 239.

With the help of Tal Huber, an accomplished graphic designer in Israel who is the founder and creative director of the branding house Giraffe, they came up with the now-famous posters featuring a thick red border on top with "Kidnapped" in white capital letters, and below that, photos of the babies, toddlers, adults, and elderly men and women who were dragged from their

homes in the early morning of Oct. 7 into Gaza's labyrinth of tunnels and underground hideouts by an army of murderous terrorists. On the posters is a brief description of the attack and on the bottom, the message: "Please bring them home alive."

The couple, both of whom are from Tel Aviv, have been together for a decade. Banaid says they started to make "street art" in their teens, separately "painting walls or sketching random vandal art" with spray cans after school. After they served in the army, they attended art schools, he at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem, she at the Minshar School of Art in Tel Aviv, "all the while creating in the streets." After they met, they shared studio space and worked together, traveling and creating, with their work being shown in galleries and museums around the world.

Banaid is a painter, whose work often features images of Band-Aids. He has written: "I was seeking a way to express and heal my wounds. The band aid then became a symbol for all kinds of difficulties—personal and social—seeking fix." Nitzan is a poet. She paints her poems in public, sometimes as stand-alone

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In Israeli restaurants, people are coming together across religious and political lines

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Pallywood's latest global media star is the representative moral and artistic phenomenon of our age

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Will America revert to lockdowns and panic again? Watch the debate taking place now.

BY JAY BHATTACHARYA AND  
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graffiti, sometimes besides her partner's representations of Band-Aids.

On Oct. 9, Banaid and Nitzan put up their first posters in New York City. They began in Central Park and walked down to lower Manhattan. "At the beginning people didn't want anything to do with us," Banaid told me. To increase their reach, they uploaded the posters to Dropbox and announced their availability through social media. They opened Facebook and Instagram accounts called "KidnappedfromIsrael." They made a

website with the same name. Anyone could download the posters, print them out, and put them up in public spaces.

When I first spoke with Banaid on Oct. 12, people were printing out their posters and hanging them in France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and sending back photos to the group's Instagram and Facebook pages. Within days, the couple needed help to manage the internet traffic. By Nov. 2, "it is everywhere, around the world," Banaid told me, with the locations of the most downloads being Germany, London, Paris, New York, and Argentina. Interestingly, the posters were also being downloaded in unexpected places like Qatar, the Emirates, Morocco, and Egypt. "Maybe they have another idea for our files," Banaid said, "but it's being downloaded there." The posters have now been translated into 30 languages, and the system is "updating all the time" as Mintz and Banaid collect more hostage names and information, in coordination with the families. In addition to the "thousands" of people hanging posters, others approached Banaid and Nitzan with ideas like digital TV trucks, billboards in sports arenas and in Times Square, even what he calls "guerrilla projections," including on the walls of the United Nations.

Banaid and Mintz knew that their project could be controversial. They warned on their website: "Be safe—don't provoke or instigate any conflicts with people or officials. Act quickly and stay alert."

That advice would turn out to have been prescient in ways that the artists themselves didn't imagine. Immediately, people began pulling down the pictures of hostages from walls, subways, bus stops, telephone poles, angrily, purposefully, often tearing the paper posters right across the faces of kidnapped children. They carried them away in self-righteous handfuls or stuffed them in trashcans. In addition to helping raise awareness of the fate of the hostages, Banaid and Nitzan's poster campaign was now also highlighting the startling prevalence of raw antisemitism within the flagships of Western enlightenment—in large cities and on university campuses.

"The first torn-down posters we saw I think was a video coming from London," Banaid recalls, "two Muslim women tearing down posters." When observers criticized the women, they responded, "We are doing this for Palestine."

It was not immediately clear, to most normal observers, why concern for the fate of hundreds of innocent people grabbed from their homes and held as hostages in inhumane circumstances in blatant violation of international law should elicit any reaction but grief. Yet the teardowns increased, and soon became the story. Some of the vandals filmed themselves tearing down posters and uploaded footage of their actions to social media, as proofs of their virtue and in the hopes of inspiring others. Others yelled at strangers filming *them*. The destruction went on in Boston, London, Miami, New York, Melbourne, Philadelphia, Ann Arbor, Los Angeles, and Paris. Hitler mustaches were drawn on the faces of two 3-year-old twin girls. Vandals scrawled "Actors" and "Lies" on others.

"There is no possible justification for such heartlessness," wrote Jeff Jacoby in *The Boston Globe*. "The whole purpose of the fliers is to heighten awareness of the Israeli (and other) civilians kidnapped by the Hamas terror squads—to put names and faces to the hostages, all with one goal: to bring them back home. How can a project so heartfelt and humane trigger such a poisonous response?"

The vandals had their own ideas. These ideas were often confused, illogical, sometimes wrong on the facts, but were all expressed with intense, shaking emotion. They seemed rooted in a deep identification with the hapless, helpless, and voiceless, which in their minds justified not just tearing down posters of real human beings in terrible circumstances but also the kidnappings themselves.

The hundreds of videos of people tearing down posters have become as widespread as the posters themselves. Some of the perpetrators are enraged and inarticulate; some are furtive and defensive; some are proud of their actions; some are creepily smug. All of them seem to be operating on a similar

odd frequency, in which their actions signal their belonging to a group with impenetrable beliefs that are not open to discussion or questioning, like a cult. In the U.S., at least, nearly all were current or aspiring members of the professional classes.

A worker at the University of Pennsylvania's Carey Law School, videotaped while tearing down posters on campus, was asked why he was destroying posters of innocent victims. He shouted, "Get the fuck out of my face," and when informed the photos were of innocent victims, said "There were people killed in the hospital bombing," referencing the deaths at the Al Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza that was later attributed to an Islamic Jihad rocket gone astray. When asked why she was tearing down the posters, a woman in New York said, "Because they are fake." Francesca Martinez-Greenberg, who according to her LinkedIn profile is a graphic designer at the Center for National Security at Fordham Law School, said, "This is part of a concentrated propaganda effort to rile up support for the genocide of Palestinian people." A man identified as Joe Friedman tore down posters at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, explaining, "what about the Palestinian children?" and then made fun of an observer's Israeli accent, calling it "fake." Friedman, who comes from tony Silver Spring, Maryland, was previously arrested while disrupting a pro-life event on campus at VCU.

The teardown artists elicited their own social media-driven response, which in some cases included real-world consequences. Observers hunted down the rippers on social media and outed them. NYU law student Ryna Workman, who was filmed destroying posters with a companion, who coyly said she was "very proud" of their actions, saw her job offer from a top law firm rescinded after video of her acts was posted online. Laurel Squadron, who works part time as a babysitter for ArtistBabysitting, a boutique child care agency serving families in Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, and New Jersey, was filmed tearing down posters of children and screaming, "you support genocide you asshole," at observers. The agency later

**"The barbarity of the Hamas attack on innocents was thus impossible for those who hate Jews to process, so they didn't."**

denounced her actions and pulled her profile off the job site. An endodontist tearing down posters in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, was outed by StopAntisemitism and fired from her job. New York County public defender Victoria Ruiz was filmed tearing down posters of kidnapped Israeli children, and she later resigned from her position.

In a viral incident reported by the *New York Post*, construction workers jumped out of their truck to stop a man in Queens from tearing down the posters. "This is a free country," said one of the men, named Paulie. "You can wave your Palestine flag and say death to the Jews and America whenever you want, but we can put up f-king signs." He pointed out the man was breaking the law by littering.

Although Bandid had anticipated some trouble, he admitted the poster destruction "was not so nice to see." He was also surprised to observe the vandalism on the Upper East and Upper West sides of Manhattan. "You would think there are so many Jews there, that maybe it will be more protected, but you can feel the hate."

And hate it was—sometimes calm, cool, self-confident, and entitled, and sometimes hysterical. A 24-year-old Israeli student enrolled in general studies at Columbia University in New York

City was putting up posters on campus when he was assaulted by a masked female Jewish student named Maxwell Friedman, who was later arrested and charged with assault after breaking her victim's finger with a stick. A vandal tearing down posters while walking her dog in Miami admitted Hamas was a "terrorist organization" but, shaking with emotion, she said she was ripping down the pictures of hostages to "protect Palestinian civilians" who "over decades have been oppressed; they're in apartheid because of what Israel is doing."

One observer on Instagram understood right away what was happening. A young Israeli woman from South Africa explained the rippers were compelled to tear down the photos of innocents kidnapped because "it doesn't fit the propaganda they've been feeding the world," which denies the humanity of Jews and Israelis while painting them as monsters who oppress innocent Palestinians. "Every video we post, every death and missing person we announce, it's all 'fake' and we're 'making it up,' never mind the fact that the most graphic videos we have of the crimes committed on our innocent Israeli angels are taken by their own leaders."

The barbarity of the Hamas attack on innocents was thus impossible for those who hate Jews to process, so they didn't. Rather, they attempted to deny the evidence by throwing away photos of the real-life Jewish victims, in a vain yet chilling attempt to resolve their own logical impasse. "Precisely because the massacre and abductions had been so unspeakably horrific," Jeff Jacoby wrote, "it was necessary to reinforce the narrative of Jewish villainy."

Mintz and Bandid are hurt by the blood-curdling reactions, but they remain undeterred. "You know, we are only going to put the posters up again, and all the thousands of people who are with us, they just print more and put them back up," says Bandid. "We put innocent civilians on these posters because we know they can't speak for themselves right now. We have to keep their names up there and keep spreading awareness until they gain their freedom."

Bandaïd and Nitzan’s posters continue to be downloaded. (There are fewer reported takedown in the Far East.) Posters have been displayed on 240 chairs surrounding an empty Shabbat table that has been constructed and displayed around the world: in New York, Geneva, Boston, Berlin, Rome, Frankfurt, Washington, D.C., Johannesburg, London, Copenhagen,

Tel Aviv, Melbourne, Tbilisi, Chicago, Vienna, LA, and Lisbon, to name a few.

In the fourth week of the war, analytics show that kidnappedfromIsrael.com has been visited an average of 30,000 times per day.

Nevertheless, Bandaïd has to admit the rage is terrifying. “They tear down photos of babies and elderly people!” the artist told me. “It’s just pure evil. It’s not

human. It’s really crazy. It’s really upsetting. We see antisemitism rising everywhere. It’s not a nice feeling to have when you’re abroad, and we feel less and less safe. It’s scary and it’s depressing to see the world act like that. But we will just go out and put up more.” ■

*This article was originally published on November 13, 2023.*

ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

# Who Is Committing Genocide?

China, Russia, and Iran

BY CARL GERSHMAN

**H**amas’ barbaric attack on Oct. 7, when the terrorist group gruesomely slaughtered 1,400 Israelis and seized over 200 hostages, most of them civilians, has brought the issue of genocide to the forefront of global attention. The attack, which was the largest massacre of Jews in a single day since the Holocaust, summoned all the old traumas of anti-Jewish hatred and pogroms. President Biden spoke of the “sheer evil” of the Hamas butchery, which included the beheading of infants and small children, the murder of entire families in their homes, the rape and murder of women, and the mowing down of hundreds of young people as they ran screaming from a music festival. French President Emmanuel Macron rightly called Hamas “the new Nazis” and compared Israeli children trying to escape Hamas gunmen to Anne Frank and other young Jews who had to “hide in attics” during the Holocaust.

Shockingly, though, and almost incomprehensibly, there’s been a global

eruption of protests charging that it is Israel, not Hamas, that’s guilty of committing genocide. Demonstrations across the United States were organized by a campaign called Stop the Gaza Genocide, and there was even a demonstration at the U.S. Capitol organized by a leftist group shamefully named the Jewish Voice for Peace where the signs read “Jews say stop the genocide of Palestinians.” The U.N. human rights official Craig Mokhiber, known for repeatedly charging Israel with genocide, said he was resigning his position because the U.N. was “once again” showing itself powerless to stop genocide *in Gaza*, while the congressional squad member Rashida Tlaib attacked President Biden for supporting “the genocide of the Palestinian people.”

The accusation of genocide against Israel serves a number of purposes for Israel’s opponents. Gerard Baker said that what is “especially malignant” about the use of the term genocide against Israel is that those propagating it know full well “its resonance in the history of the Jewish people, and they use it deliberately to equate what happened to the

Jews at the hands of the Nazis with a military action today that is justified in self-defense.” He called this a form of Holocaust denial since it is “explicitly reducing the Holocaust to the level of a regrettable byproduct of a legitimate military campaign.” Accusing Israel of genocide is a way to delegitimize that military campaign, thereby denying Israel the right of self-defense.

But most important, turning the charge of genocide against Israel also hides the fact that it is Hamas and not Israel that indisputably stands in violation of the 1948 Genocide Convention. The convention defines as genocide “acts committed *with intent to destroy*, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group” (emphasis added). Israel has repeatedly made clear that its intent is to destroy Hamas, not Palestinian civilians. It has called upon civilians to leave the war zone, repeatedly paused its offensive, and opened “humanitarian corridors” that have allowed hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in northern Gaza to flee south. It’s true, of course, that thousands of Palestinian civilians have been killed in the Israel-Hamas war, but that is because Hamas has embedded itself deeply into the civilian infrastructure, using civilians as human shields and firing rockets from schools and hospitals. The Al-Shifa Hospital is the most egregious example of a hospital that doubles as a command center sitting atop fuel reserves, and an important part of the vast tunnel network that is used to store weapons and move fighters and resources. The Geneva Conventions regulating the conduct of armed conflict are quite clear that hospitals lose their legal protection if

they're used for military purposes. International law distinguishes between war and war crimes, and it is Hamas that is committing war crimes in ruthlessly using civilians to protect its fighters.

It is also Hamas that demonstrated genocidal intent in the atrocities committed during the slaughter on Oct. 7, which Yossi Klein Halevi has called "a pre-enactment of Hamas's genocidal vision." If the jubilation Hamas terrorists displayed in videos of their savage acts that they proudly posted online were not sufficient proof of genocidal intent, the organization's founding charter (adopted in 1988) stands as the most unequivocal expression of genocidal intent of any government, institution, or political movement in the world.

The Hamas Charter says that "Israel will exist and will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it," that Hamas "strives to raise the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine," and that unceasing holy war (or jihad) is the only way to attain that objective. It declares that "The Day of Judgment will not come about until Moslems fight the Jews (killing the Jews), when the Jew will hide behind stones and trees. The stones and trees will say O Moslems, O Abdulla, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him." The charter embraces the most odious antisemitic tropes and conspiracy theories, in particular the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the infamous early-20th-century Russian forgery alleging that Jews have a secret plan to control the world. Article 22 of the charter declares that with their money, the Jews took control of the world media and, using that power, "were behind the French Revolution, the Communist revolution," imperialism and colonialism, as well as "World War I when they were able to destroy the Islamic Caliphate" and "World War II, through which they made huge financial gains by trading in armaments, and paved the way for the establishment of their state." Article 32 states that "the Zionist plan is limitless," and that "after Palestine, the Zionists aspire to expand from the Nile to the Euphrates" and pursue "further expansion after that." The Hamas Charter is not only a crazed call for genocide but is itself a violation

**"The Geneva Conventions regulating the conduct of armed conflict are quite clear that hospitals lose their legal protection if they're used for military purposes."**

of the Genocide Convention, which says in Article III that acts punishable under the convention include incitement to commit genocide, which is precisely what the Hamas Charter proclaims.

Israel's opponents have shown no interest whatsoever in the issue of genocide as such, since for them genocide is little more than a term of abuse in the political war against Israel. But genocide is in fact a gravely serious international problem that urgently needs to be addressed. Israel's accusers, for example, have been conspicuously silent on the genocide that China has been carrying out against the Uyghurs, a Muslim people no less. Unlike Hamas, which fervently broadcasts its genocidal intent, China has rejected as "slandereous" criticism of its treatment of Uyghurs. But the U.S. government and the parliaments of the United Kingdom, Canada, the Netherlands and Lithuania, along with the special Uyghur Tribunal chaired by Sir Geoffrey Nice, the British barrister, have said that Beijing's persecution of the Uyghur people constitutes genocide under the convention, which designates as genocidal not just killing members of a group but also "deliberately inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction" by "imposing measures intended to prevent births within the

group" or "forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."

Numerous reports, among them one by the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, have documented acts committed by the Chinese government that are punishable under the Genocide Convention, among them forced sterilization and abortion, the suppression of Uyghur religious practices, the destruction of more than 16,000 mosques since 2017, taking children from their parents and sending them to state orphanages where they are forcibly assimilated, massive internment in state-sponsored concentration camps, forced labor, and repressive practices targeting women that are focused on preventing births.

A report in *The Wall Street Journal* in 2019 noted that while the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had called an assault on Uyghurs in Urumqi a genocide a decade earlier, he and other Muslim leaders, who claim to oppose "Israeli genocide," remained silent when Beijing stepped up its repression in 2017, interning up to 3 million Uyghurs in "counter-extremism centers" and re-education camps. The shift, the *Journal* noted, isn't hard to explain, since "China is simply too central an actor in the Muslim world ... for the cause of the Uyghurs to matter much."

Muslim leaders have not only failed to speak out against the crackdown on Uyghurs but have actually defended it, as Mohammed bin Salman did during a visit to China in 2019 when he endorsed what he called Beijing's right to undertake "anti-terrorism" and "de-extremism" measures against the Uyghurs. In addition, Turkey and other Muslim countries, among them Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt, have arrested Uyghur refugees, often on trumped-up terrorism charges, and sent them back to China, where they face harsh punishment. With very few exceptions, governments in Islamic countries remained silent on the Uyghur genocide.

Russia is also committing genocide against the people of Ukraine, and unlike China it has been very blunt and explicit in proclaiming its intentions. In a lecture delivered in October 2022, eight months after Russia launched its

invasion, Yale historian Timothy Snyder carefully laid out acts Russia had committed that violate the Genocide Convention, among them the deportation of 10 percent of Ukraine's population (the equivalent, he said, of deporting the entire population of New England, New York, and Pennsylvania), the systematic bombing of civilian targets, the destruction of entire cities, and the transfer of 700,000 Ukrainian children to Russia, where they are to be forcibly Russified. He demonstrated genocidal intent by detailing the many arguments the Russians have made to justify their invasion, including the denial that Ukraine has ever existed as a real country or nation and the dehumanizing portrait of Ukrainians as deracinated people detached from the soil and representing an alien threat to Russia's identity and redemptive mission. Since Russian propagandists regularly make clear that the government's war aims are exterminationist, Snyder was able to cite the following

straightforward examples of genocidal speech drawn from broadcasts on Russian state TV in just "the last few days" (Snyder was speaking on October 28, 2022):

They should not exist at all. We should execute them by firing squad. We will kill one million. We will kill five million. We will obliterate them all. We will drown the children in the raging river. We will throw the children into burning wood huts. END

Russia's crimes against humanity are also ignored by those marching against Israeli "genocide."

The fact that China, Russia, and Iran are all committing or aspiring to commit genocide—Iran, of course, through the agency of Hamas—shows how far the world's most powerful and aggressive dictatorships are prepared to go to achieve their objectives, and to what extent they've already brutalized and degraded the international system.

Shortly before Oct. 7, Walter Russell Mead wrote in *The Wall Street Journal* that "the rules-based international order has not been this imperiled since the 1930s." It became far more imperiled after Oct. 7, which unleashed a global wave of antisemitism that is toxic to democratic civilization. Speaking to a gathering in the U.S. Congress on Oct. 24, the Canadian human rights lawyer Irwin Cotler called antisemitism "the bloody canary in the mineshaft of global evil," and warned that it threatens not just Israel and Jews but "our shared humanity and the rule of law as we know it." This threat comes at a time when the United States remains debilitated by crippling political divisions and rising isolationism. May the stirrings of alarm provoked by the horrible events of Oct. 7 awaken us before it's too late to respond to the sobering challenges that lie ahead. ■

*This article was originally published on November 16, 2023.*

#### NEWS & POLITICS

# Argentina's Would-Be Jewish Trump

While promising to dollarize Argentina's economy and defeat the country's political class, Javier Milei, the outsider in this weekend's election runoff, keeps the Torah close

BY MARTÍN SIVAK

**I**n June 2021, Javier Gerardo Milei, a 50-year-old economist, was a political neophyte up for representative of Buenos Aires in the national Chamber of Deputies, under his La Libertad Avanza party. He was mortified by generic accusations of being a "Nazi" that had been directed at him on social media. Over the ensuing months, these would get amplified

to such a degree that the unthinkable happened: In March 2023, even the country's president, Alberto Fernandez, would say that "Milei is a threat to democracy" and, as if the comparison were possible, reminded people that "Hitler did not come [to power] through a coup d'état, he came through the German people's vote." Milei called Julio Goldstein, a politician in his party and his conduit to the Jewish

community, to meet at a hotel. Goldstein suggested some ways to restrain the attacks, and proposed an introduction to Shimon Axel Wahnish, the chief rabbi of the Moroccan Jewish community of Argentina (ACILBA).

Goldstein accompanied Milei to that first meeting with Wahnish, but he did not go in for their interview. "They spoke at length, and then it turned into a kabbalistic meeting in which the rabbi noted that Javier would lead a liberationist movement in Argentina. Milei left the meeting excited," Goldstein told me. From then on, Milei studied Torah with Wahnish.

Twenty-six months after that encounter, in August 2023, Milei won the most votes in Argentina's presidential primaries. He came in second in the general election in October, and will be on the ballot Nov. 19 against Sergio Massa, the economy minister in the incumbent Peronist government. Milei plans to introduce radical change to Argentina during an abysmal crisis. The poverty index is over 40%, inflation is at 143%

annually, there are 20 different exchange rates for U.S. dollars, along with a crushing external debt. Milei's proposal is to dollarize the economy, as has been done in Ecuador, El Salvador, and Zimbabwe, and to eliminate the Central Bank in a framework of all-out defense of the market economy, along with a vague but electorally expedient promise to end the country's political class.

In the midst of this proposal for change, Milei, born Catholic, has advanced his own personal change: a conversion to Judaism. He told me about it during a two-hour conversation on July 16 in loaned offices across from the River Plate, in Puerto Madero, central Buenos Aires. There was no furniture, nor paintings. Just three seats for us to sit on, and a mirror still in its packaging. I asked him if there was something holding back his conversion plan.

"If you are Jewish," he told me, "because your mother is Jewish, you are not obligated to comply with the precepts of Judaism. If you convert, you are obligated to. If I become president, what will I do during Shabbat? Are you going to disconnect from the country at sundown Friday to sundown Saturday? Questions like this make it incompatible."

At the time Milei was polling a distant third place, and his results in various previous state elections were fairly bad. Even so, he was thinking about the practical dilemma of how to handle Sabbath restrictions while being president. From what I can glean from Milei's unstable personality, he'd started to read the Torah as part of his nerdy approach to economic theory. But as he discovered a new world opened up to him by Torah study, he glimpsed the possibility of a more spiritual life, at which point he'd decided to convert to Judaism. (As of this writing, he has not yet completed his conversion.)

On that July afternoon, Milei was in a notably bad mood. He had fought with one of his campaign managers over an ad, and his body showed the wear of the 11-hour New York-to-Buenos Aires flight he had taken that morning. He hadn't made public his trip or his reasons for it: to visit the tomb of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, known as the Lubavitcher Rebbe. A Twitter

**"If I become president, what will I do during Shabbat? Are you going to disconnect from the country at sundown Friday to sundown Saturday?"**

user had uploaded a short video showing Milei wearing a kippah, with a Torah under his arm.

When I asked Milei about his foreign policy, he was cutting.

"Our most natural allies are the United States and Israel. I want nothing to do with the communists of Cuba, China, North Korea. What does that mean? Trade with whoever you want, but I am not going to foment those relationships."

Like Trump, Milei wants to move the Argentine Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Argentina is the country with the most Jews in Latin America, and ranks fifth in Jewish population outside of Israel.

One day after Hamas' brutal Oct. 7 attack on Israel, where nine of the 1,400 dead were Argentine, the second presidential debate was held in Buenos Aires. Milei declared his solidarity with Israel and its "full right to defend its territory from terrorists." He claimed that no other candidate would go as far in their support. He promises to be the Argentine president most friendly to Israel.

Up until the pandemic in early 2020, Milei worked as chief economist for an important economic group, Eduardo Eurnekian's America Corporation. Eurnekian is a 90-year-old airport magnate and one of the five richest people

in Argentina. Milei began to make appearances on television, in particular on a channel in which Eurnekian owned shares. He got noticed for his histrionics, his piques of anger, and his premeditatedly unruly hair. Nothing was meant to go unnoticed. Not even his relationship with his dogs.

Milei owns four English mastiffs that he named after economists—Murray (Rothbard), Milton (Friedman), Robert, and Lucas (for Robert Lucas)—and he considers them his grandchildren. They are cloned from Conan, who died in 2017. He has said that Conan was the being that he most loved in his life and the only one, along with his sister Karina, who has never betrayed him. When I asked him if it was true that he still talked to Conan, he replied that it was a private matter. As a television pundit he has brought his mastiffs to the studios of America TV.

In those appearances, his central theme was the economy and economic theory in a country that was demanding explanations for its cyclical, worsening crises of the last few years. Milei declared himself an admirer of the late 19th-century Austrian school of economics. The market is everything, the state should be nothing, he postulated. He was headed for anarcho-capitalism and to finding an identity: libertarian liberalism.

The strict quarantine Fernandez's center-left Peronist government imposed during the pandemic was heavily criticized, in particular for the prolonged shutdown of schools. Bit by bit, Milei began to gather in Buenos Aires all those angry at the lockdowns, and he managed, in the name of liberty, to gain some sticking power among the under-30 set. He had for the first time in his life stepped into party politics, and he decided to run for national representative for Buenos Aires.

During one of those assemblies, Milei found onstage a powerful phrase: "I'm not here to guide sheep, I'm here to awaken lions." He wanted to invert the kind of representation that he believed the governing Peronism offered: a state that herds and supports its followers based on perks and clientelism. His hair helped suggest the symbolism of the

party lion. That symbol needed an anthem, and he found “Panic Show,” a song by the Argentine rock group Le Renga:

*Hello everyone! I am the lion  
The beast roared in the middle of  
the avenue  
Everyone ran, not knowing why,  
Panic show in the full light of day  
Please don't run from me  
I am the king of a lost world  
I am the king, and I will destroy you,  
All accomplices are appetizing to me.*

In the 2021 legislative elections, Milei got 17% of the vote in the city of Buenos Aires, which represents 7% of the national vote. After that auspicious result he began to plan his presidential candidacy, with the disadvantage of lacking a national party, but with one relative advantage: the poor handling of the economic crisis by the Peronist government and its predecessor. Mauricio Macri, a right-wing businessman, ex-president of the Boca Juniors professional soccer team, had risen to power in 2015 with a promise of change. To avoid defaulting on its international debt, Argentina got the largest loan in the history of the International Monetary Fund: \$44 billion. Despite that extraordinary aid, Macri didn't make it out of the first round in the following elections. On that double frustration—the discouraging economic situation under the past two governments and no real prospects for the future—Milei has been capturing the anger going around.

The close of the 2023 primary campaign was the second Monday of August, at the Movistar Arena, which was built on land belonging to Atlanta, a Jewish athletic club in Villa Crespo—one of the neighborhoods of Buenos Aires with a large Jewish population. In the 1950s and '60s, a question made the rounds on radio and television: *What is the capital of Israel? Villa Crespo, also called Villa Kreplaj.* Raanan Rein, the Israeli historian who has written about 20th-century Argentina, tells in his book *Fútbol, Jews and the Making of Argentina* how for first-generation Jewish immigrants, belonging to Atlanta was a form of conversion, to become Argentines.

The night the campaign came to a

close, Milei gathered some 13,000 people. After the lights went out, the screen lit up with an illustration of a man with an instrument in the form of a ram's horn, and under it the word shofar in white letters. The goal of the symbol was pedagogical: to present the instrument to a people who knew nothing about the Jewish world or its culture. If on Rosh Hashanah the shofar is blown to welcome the new year, at the Atlanta event it marked the start of a series of images of buildings collapsing, maritime explosions, seas parting, smoke, fire, and huge waves. These images could be understood as representing the will to rebuild Argentina after its catastrophes.

From one of the corners of the field, Milei appeared wearing a suit. With a practiced step, he headed to the stage, surrounded by supporters.

“All the political class is appetizing to me,” he shouted wildly, uninhibited, citing his theme song “Panic Show.” It was also an evocation of the young Milei, who used to sing covers of The Rolling Stones with his band Everest.

“You tell 'em, Wig!” shouted a man in his 60s, tall, serious and beetle-browed, standing next to me in Movistar Arena.

The mostly young crowd was not one that might typically attend a political rally, except for a few of them who were wearing name-brand soccer jerseys, hats, and shoes. It seemed more like the audience that might attend a concert at Movistar Arena. Some were wearing hats with the motto “Strength From Heaven,” a favorite of Karina Milei, the candidate's sister and campaign manager. It's an abbreviation of 1 Maccabees 3:19: “It is not on the size of the army that victory in battle depends, but from heaven the strength.”

In the crowd I spotted a friend's son, the only one there wearing a kippah.

“I like Milei because he's seriously opposed to the political caste,” Ariel, 22, told me.

But neither the shofar, nor the choice of Atlanta, nor the Maccabean phrase were aimed at Ariel, nor at the Jewish vote, which electoral sociologists don't recognize as a variable in Argentina. It's more from Milei's own interest in the Torah and Judaism.

One week after the Atlanta event

came the largest electoral shakeup since the return of democracy in 1983. Milei won the election with 30% of the vote, just 2 percentage points more than another opposition candidate, from the center-right Juntos por el Cambio party, and 3 points more than the government. But that win, which neither the pollsters, nor the analysts, nor the mainstream media predicted, gave Milei momentum heading into the October general elections.

Alas, the elections witnessed a second black swan event: Massa, the government candidate and economy minister, won with almost 37% of the vote, compared with Milei's 30% and 24% for Juntos por el Cambio. With consumer prices soaring above 12%, poverty at 40%, and economic collapse amid persistent social decline, Massa defied all expectations to take on Milei in a runoff. Patricia Bullrich, the candidate from the third-place party, announced a few days after that she would be supporting Milei. In the midst of a massive economic crisis, Argentina appears to be on a roller coaster of electoral emotions that will end on Nov. 19, when Milei may or may not become the next president of Argentina.

Unlike Donald Trump, who chose the narrative of an outsider but achieved the presidency as a Republican, or Jair Bolsonaro, who was a member of different political parties for many years before ascending to the presidency of Brazil, Milei had no party, and just a barebones legal apparatus for launching his candidacy in 2021. The Integration and Development Movement (MID), a tiny party without parliamentary representation, was one of the parties that loaned its cloak to Milei, through its leaders Julio Goldestein and Oscar Zago. Goldestein, an economist by profession, has a political history: first with a student chapter of the centrist Radical Civic Union (UCR), then as an adviser to President Fernando de la Rúa (of the conservative wing of the UCR) when he was a national senator, and later in second- and third-tier positions in Radical, Peronist, and Juntos por el Cambio governments.

“You have a clean and pure stamp



here,” Goldestein and Zago told Milei before the first election, referring to the MID. (The remark was confirmed by both Goldestein and Milei’s camp.)

As part of their agreement, Zago became third on the list of legislators from Buenos Aires in 2021. In the 2023 election, Zago and Goldestein were second and fourth on the candidates lists for national representative for Buenos Aires. Goldestein was the only candidate from the Jewish community on any of the lists.

“In 2021 we began to have talks on specific questions about the Torah, and we argued over who knew more,” Goldestein remembered. “I said that the first economic project is in there, and it was Joseph’s when in Egypt he saw seven years of skinny cows and seven years of fat cows and understood economic cycles.”

At that time, Milei was not systematically studying Torah. His interest began years before, when he was an economic tutor for a member of the low-profile Sutton family, owners of two of the most important hotels in Argentina—the Alvear in Buenos Aires and the Patagonia Llao Llao. As Milei remembered it, his student, who wanted to be a rabbi, asked him the best questions he had ever heard about economics.

Milei started systematically studying Torah in June 2021, the day Goldestein introduced him to Rabbi Wahnish. A modern Orthodox doctor of educational psychology, Wahnish was director and professor at a Jewish study center for young college students at Sucath David Programs, until he took over the Moroccan Jewish community of Argentina (ACILBA). ACILBA has its headquarters in the heart of Palermo, one of the hippest neighborhoods of Buenos Aires. Its self-described goal is to “assist any member of the community in whatever way they need, with all types of spiritual consultations and accompanying them through every step of life. Hewing to our Moroccan roots, living a present of continual growth, and dreaming of a future where all Jews can be part of the community.” During the pandemic, Wahnish became known for his “couples spaces.” “We have the illusion that marriage will help us solve a lot of the

drama that we bring, but no, marriage amplifies the problems,” he would say in those classes, as the Argentine newspaper *Perfil* described them.

Milei’s study method has been mostly in-person and sometimes by text messages, in which he also sends Torah passages. “He’s someone I love a lot, who I consult regularly, and sometimes the conversations require two or three hours: He stimulates me to do economical readings of Torah,” Milei told me. Wahnish declined to speak to me for this article and he has so far not made any public declarations about his relationship to the Libertad Avanza presidential candidate.

Milei began to fold his Torah reading into his public discourse. “My main reference, to whom I continually refer, is Moses,” he said in April of this year. He spoke of Moses’ infinite humility. “I work to be more humble, a battle you must wage every day against ego, greed, and lust.” He added, “Moses was finally rewarded with the greatest of all prizes, which is to know the One”—a reference to God. On a television program, he also said that Moses was a great leader but he didn’t know how to publicize his message. “God sent him Aaron to spread the word. Kari is Moses and I am the one who spreads the word,” he said, before breaking down in tears. Kari is his sister Karina, whom he masculinizes in Spanish, calling her “El Jefe.”

Carlos Maslatón is a lawyer and was a political leader until the 1990s when he turned to finance, later joining the ranks alongside Milei. An influencer and a regular presence in the media and on TV, Maslatón was always a reference for Milei in his nascent approach to the Jewish world, until Milei had a personal and political rupture with him.

In August 2021, two months before the election for representative, Maslatón had lunch with Milei and Wahnish in ACILBA. Maslatón saw in Milei a purely religious interpretation of Judaism, a Christian interpretation that was different than his own, which was, in his own words, more of a nation-building project. This is why he gave Milei Paul Johnson’s *A History of the Jews*, with the idea of offering Milei more of a

universalist vision of Judaism, removed from the more religious one he also saw in Wahnish. Milei asked Maslatón to dedicate it to him: “Dedicated to a great friend of the Jewish people and State of Israel, Javier Milei.” He also gave him Martin Gilbert’s *Jewish History Atlas*. On Aug. 31, 2021, Maslatón publicized this encounter, convinced that studying Torah with Wahnish would only reinforce in Milei that religious vision of Judaism.

Two months later, after the great electoral results in Buenos Aires, Milei started in on the weekly parsha and would read Talmud without assistance, Goldestein said. In November, he called Maslatón with a revelation.

“Milei told me that he spoke to the Almighty,” Maslatón recounted. “He said that he had been given the order to fight to make Argentina a liberal country. What was my response? How interesting. What am I going to tell him? With that he had entered a messianic period. He sees himself in this situation: climbing Mount Sinai, coming down with the Tablets of the Law, and rekindling the fire.”

Despite such an intense approach to the religious texts, Milei was never able to establish relationships with the main Jewish communal institutions, such as the Delegation of Argentine Jewish Associations (DAIA) or the Argentine Israelite Mutual Association (AMIA). In the first case, he believes that DAIA is too conditioned by its long association with the other opposition party, Juntos por el Cambio. With AMIA he has never gotten beyond the most basic formalities, according to representatives contacted for this article.

One episode mortifies him. This year the National Congress approved a law that declared July 18 as a national day of mourning for the victims of the AMIA bombings in 1994 that caused the death of 85 people. Milei first voted against it, and then he asked to change his vote. This last July 18, on the occasion of the commemoration, Milei was rebuked by some in attendance for his initial vote. “It was a plot against me,” he said—an idea that he returns to in other areas.

Alejandro Dujovne, a social scientist and author of the Argentine canonical

text *Una historia del libro judío* (A History of the Jewish Book), explains Milei's relationship to Judaism: "He approaches Judaism and claims to be converting to it, but his approach to and his understanding of the Jewish experience seems to be exclusively centered on the Torah. The social dimension, the centrality of communal life, is foreign to Milei. He probably does not understand what an organization like AMIA is or what function it serves, nor would he know the extension and vitality of the institutional interweaving of schools, sports clubs, synagogues. And still less the diversity of religious, cultural, and political viewpoints that shape Argentinian Jewish life."

On Sept. 21, nearly 4,000 Jewish artists and intellectuals—the majority identifying with the left and progressive causes—published a letter of concern for "expressions of hate" by

Milei and his "political use of Judaism, its texts, and its symbols ... to underwrite his discourse of hate." They say he makes "declarations of discriminatory, misogynistic content, contrary to sexual diversity, political plurality, and democratic coexistence in general." They also accused Milei of decontextualizing religious texts for his own political goals.

One week later, there was another dust-up. Martín Krause, tapped for the education portfolio in a Milei administration, participated in a talk with other possible cabinet members of other candidates, at the Torcuato di Tella University. At one point in his presentation he used a rhetorical question to explain Argentina's decadence, with the state being administered by *chantas* (a very Argentine expression that could be translated as "unreliable") and others who don't do their jobs—a common topic for Milei,

who is looking to drastically reduce the state.

"Imagine if the Gestapo had been Argentines. Wouldn't it have been better?"

Krause answered his own question.

"Because instead of killing 6 million Jews it would have been less. Because there would have been bribes, inefficiencies, they would have been napping—but they were German. That was the problem."

When the comments became public, they were repudiated by DAIA, other Jewish communal institutions, and every other candidate, for banalizing the Holocaust. Krause apologized, and Milei kept him in his potential cabinet. ■

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*Translated from the Spanish by Matthew Fishbane.*

## COMMUNITY

# 'We Are Forging Our Own Jewish Path and That Path Is Part of Jewish History'

A roundtable with Black Jews about racism, antisemitism, questions of belonging, and the problem with the term 'Jews of color'

BY ABIGAIL POGREBIN

**O**n Oct. 12, we gathered a roundtable to talk about what it's like to be a Black Jew in America today, including experiences of racism in the Jewish community, and antisemitism in the Black community. The conversation had been set up before the Hamas

attacks of Oct. 7, and the questions we intended to focus on were not about the situation in Israel, so we adhered to that original scope for the purposes of this exploration.

First, however, we had to talk about terminology. For instance, our participants—including three clergy members—had a lot to say about the term

"Jews of color," and how they choose to identify themselves. Some dislike the expression, feeling that it glosses over the specific experiences of Black Jews; others appreciate it, saying that it draws much-needed attention to issues of marginalization and racism in the community.

That marginalization can be overt and direct; some of our participants recall specific incidents where they've been made to feel offended in Jewish spaces, or assumed to be outsiders. Other times, it may be less obvious: Several people in this roundtable explained how tiresome it is to be asked, "How are you Jewish?" "I think where the question goes wrong is when there's a presumption of otherness," one person noted. "Sometimes it feels, as a Jew of color, I might be the only one who has to make sense of my story for other people."

We talk about how the Jewish community responds to Black Jews, and whether Jewish philanthropy has given adequately to Black leaders or initiatives. What comes through most indelibly is that these participants have an unshakable Jewish identity—and at the same time, a fairly uniform frustration

with how slowly the larger Jewish community has been evolving.

## THE PARTICIPANTS

Their ages, locations, and the terms they use to describe themselves

**Ray:** 36, Brooklyn. *Black and Jewish.*

**Sabrina:** 71, Riverbank, California.

*“Black and Jewish, sometimes Jewish and Black.”*

**Izzy:** 35, New York City. *“I identify as a Black Jew with white skin.”*

**Tova:** 24, San Francisco Bay Area. *“I use the term Black Jew.”*

**Jared:** 40, Philadelphia. *Black and Jewish.*

**Lindsey:** 36, San Francisco. *Black and Jewish.*

**David:** 39, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

*“Black and Jewish. Love those words. Love that label.”*

**Yanna:** 40, New York City. *Black and Jewish.*

**Ilana:** 38, San Francisco. *“I’m still figuring out what my identity is, but I guess I usually say Jewish and African American.”*

**Kylie:** 29, Hudson, New York. *Black and Jewish.*

**Tablet:** Kylie, you once said that you don’t want to be called a “Jew of color.” Can you say a little bit about that?

**Kylie:** It is an all-encompassing term that I don’t feel really connects me to other people. “Jew of color” encompasses anybody who is not a white Jew. So somebody who is Filipino and Jewish is considered a Jew of color, somebody who is Asian and Jewish, Chinese and Jewish, Japanese and Jewish—they’re considered a Jew of color. I don’t have anything in common with them, really, just because they have a parent who is not white. So I don’t find it to be something that accurately hits on the nuance of what it is to be Black and Jewish ... It’s too much of an umbrella term.

**Tablet:** How do you respond in the moment when someone uses it in front of you?

**Kylie:** It’s been a little while, honestly, since I’ve heard it. It definitely was something that people were saying a lot in 2020. Things have evolved a bit since then. But if somebody assumed

that that was how I would identify, oftentimes I would say, “I actually have a problem with that term—it’s not something that’s applicable to us, it mutes what it is that I have and other people have. So that term really doesn’t speak to me.”

**Sabrina:** There was a time two decades ago when we were using “Jews of color” to identify people in the Jewish community who were *like* us. It was an organizing, educational tool to talk about racism inside the synagogue specifically. And it’s true that in 2020 it exploded as a large term to the point where now I’m getting application or registration forms where people want to know if I identify as a Jew of color. I don’t. That said, I often mark the box—because I want whatever it is that they are providing.

The term ‘Jew of color’ has created visibility for racism within Jewish life.

**Tablet:** Can you clarify what you mean when you say you want “whatever they’re providing”?

**Sabrina:** It could be a conference, a fellowship, any of a number of things.

**Jared:** I didn’t actually call myself a Jew of color until the end of 2015 when I was applying for the Selah leadership program and needed to identify as a Jew of color in order to get those resources. I still struggle with that.

**Izzy:** The term “Jew of color” has created visibility for racism within Jewish life. The acronym—JOC—has allowed funders and philanthropists to channel resources to an issue they care about, while in some cases it’s more like guilt or shame dollars, virtue-signaling dollars.

**Tablet:** You’re saying that Jewish funders started giving to JOC initiatives to show they weren’t racist?

**Izzy:** It’s pennies. Less than \$2 million is given out a year for racial equity toward Jewish life, while there’s billions of dollars given out a year in Jewish life total. So when it comes to the term “Jews of color,” it’s been helpful but not actually helpful enough. I do agree with Kylie in the sense that when we just make this assumption that anyone who’s non-European or has non-European descent should just all get into a room and talk—yes, the Jewish route will bring us

together, but our racial identities are so different. When discussing certain issues, including American democracy, I wouldn’t have the same conversations with a Latin American Jew or an Asian American Jew the same way I would with a Black Jew—or a Black American or African American more broadly. Same when it comes to Zionism and Israel. I wouldn’t have the same conversations. My levels of comfort would shift. I hope that the term “Jew of color” is used less and less, that we get more specific to people’s racial identities.

**Lindsey:** I personally identify with the term “Jew of color.” I know that it’s an imperfect marker of identity, but for me, “Jew of color” provides a way to name the experience of marginalization that people who experience racism in this country and are Jewish—what we might have in common. It can set the container for creating community together. So for those reasons, I do identify as a Jew of color, and it’s also one of many identities that I hold fast to—to create a full picture of who I am.

**Yanna:** I will say I think the one time that I probably used that term “Jew of color” was when I went to Israel. I did grow up in central Pennsylvania—in a very Jewish area, but it was all European or white Jews, and I never really knew any Black Jews or Jews of color. So when I did go to Israel for the first time, it was a moment of, “Wow, look at all these Jews of color!”—whether they be Black or Arab or whatever, that was a moment where the term felt applicable.

**Kylie:** Being Black and Jewish in America is supremely important because it has a deeper context than being Latino in America and Asian in America. Not to say it’s more or less important, but the weight of being Black and Jewish in America is very different than being another ethnicity and Jewish in America.

**Tablet:** Can you say more about what you’re describing as “the deeper context”?

**Kylie:** There’s a very dense history of being Black in America. To then unite us with all people who are different just completely wipes or washes over the very thing that makes us very unique, which is that we carry an immense amount of pain in our history and our

lineage—being an outcast in a way that other people haven't experienced in the same way.

**Jared:** It's a fact that any group of new immigrants who has gained upward mobility in the United States of America has done it on the backs of Black people and indigenous people. And the ways that people have shown anti-Blackness in order to gain the keys to upward mobility in this white supremacist system, that's what resonates with me, because of that history of pain, the continued legacy of having every new immigrant take their turn to put their boot on the throat of Blackness in this country.

**Tova:** The foundation of America—as we know it—is rooted in Black people and Native Americans, because they were here, indigenous to this land. There would be no America without what our ancestors built for free. That is a very unique experience. I have a different relationship to this country compared to other groups of people—not trying to discount what they've experienced and their connection to this country. But it's just different.

**Tablet:** I've heard many Black Jewish people say that being asked about one's Jewish story or how one came to be Jewish is an affront by itself. Can you help readers understand how that question—"How are you Jewish?"—is problematic on its face?

**Ilana:** A lot of times when people are curious about being Black in America, it can feel very uncomfortable—like you're in an interview when you're at a Shabbat meal or a birthday party. You're davening on Yom Kippur and thinking, "I'm just really thirsty, and now I have to explain who I am?" That's the exhaustion. But when there's mutual vulnerability and mutual sharing, it can feel very comfortable for me to tell my story in the right setting with the right people. For me, it's about being generous with the question and what they're sharing. That's a relationship. That's a conversation.

**Ray:** For me, it really is contextual. There are certain circumstances—often in a ritual space or some other kind of Jewish space where a person has chosen to engage me—and it's anywhere between question No. 1 to question 10

**"Because I am a Black person, it is assumed that I would be a certain religion, which is not what I am."**

of how am I Jewish? They really haven't sought to get to know me. Rather, it's the fact that it's so peculiar to them that I'm in this space. So they want me to rewind and replay my narrative as a result of that. When I sense that, I am less generous—internally, at least, and I'm immediately trying to figure out, "OK, how do I get away from this person?" But then in cases where I intuit someone's actually really trying to get to know me—they're asking a broader set of questions and it at least reads as obvious that they're not only interested in getting to: "and how does the Jewish make sense?"—then I feel like I'm much more generous with that. That's come up, for example, within my extended family because no one else in my family is Jewish, and some have never had the explicit conversation with me of how did my Jewishness develop? But there's a longer history of how we know each other, so in that case, I have a completely different response.

**Yanna:** It's always the first thing that people typically ask. If they don't ask, you can tell that they're trying to ask other questions to kind of tiptoe around that. There are a lot of assumptions made about identity—Jewishness and Blackness. Because I am a Black person, it is assumed that I would be a certain religion, which is not what I am.

I am a Black Jew. There is an assumption that I am Ethiopian or a convert—and I *am* a convert—but one shouldn't assume that without actually knowing my story. My family has a history of being African Methodist Episcopal. I also have Southern Baptist family members.

**Lindsey:** I think where the question goes wrong is when there's a presumption of otherness, or when it's asked with the expectation that I have to make sense of how I fit into this equation for somebody else's satisfaction. Oftentimes whenever someone is coded as "other," it is assumed that they're the only one with a story, when it's actually true that everybody has a story. Why is it that I'm the only one? Sometimes it feels, as a Jew of color, I might be the only one who has to make sense of my story for other people. That being said, I'm very proud of my story. As a Jewish community, we do better when we can better understand one another's stories.

**Izzy:** When people say, "What's your story?" it's classic Jewish Eurocentrism—this idea that Judaism started in the shtetl and that carried over. Already within the question is a certain limited framework of what and who is Jewish, what Judaism and Jews are. And that is only possible the way it's been possible for an American Jewish framework because of the Black/white dichotomy around race in America. So when it comes to Judaism and Jewish stories, I think about it through the language of history and historiography, history being the facts and historiography about how you tell the facts. And how we've been telling the facts has been a very limited frame where a lot of people have been left out.

**Tablet:** How would you say the larger Jewish community is doing when it comes to Black Jews in synagogues, JCCs, and other Jewish spaces?

**Izzy:** Black Jews have participated in rallies where they were *suspect* because of the color of their skin. Organized Jewish life does have a lot of unlearning, undoing, and biases to try to shift that will take a generation or more. When it comes to racial equity in Jewish life, the first major commitment from foundations and philanthropists is only five or six years old. So even though there have

## Poem

I forgave myself for  
my Ukrainian great-grandfather  
who joined a pogrom  
against my Jewish great-  
grandfather  
I forgave my Polish great-  
grandmother  
who tore at the braids of my  
Jewish great-grandmother  
I forgave myself for my  
moskal great-grandfather  
who took the last bit of food from  
my Ukrainian great-grandmother  
I forgave my Jewish great-  
grandmother  
who informed on my  
Ukrainian great-grandfather  
they are all here now  
at the last supper  
of my body  
leaning on the table  
each of them pulls  
at my heart  
rises up  
carves out a slice  
trots it out look  
this is ours  
and I have no time to ask with my  
every torn piece  
why am I on the line?  
eat my flesh  
in memory of yourselves  
drink of me, dearly beloved  
grandma  
grandpa

—Alex Averbuch

been leaders who have been doing this work for 20, 30, 40 years, racial equity in Jewish life—in terms of organizing around real philanthropy—is only five or six years old.

**Tablet:** David, you're a member of the clergy. Could you talk from that vantage point about how the Jewish community is doing?

**David:** Oh, boy. Yes. We have to be clear that race is different from color. People who want to say that Jews are a race—that boils my blood. Are you telling me that a Black Jew like Rabbi Sandra Lawson is the same race as any white Jewish person? No. So in Jewish spaces, I have to admit, I'm trying to make sure that I

am not saying things like this. Even saying "So-and-so looks Jewish" is a very problematic thing to say. Of course, a Black person is not going to feel welcome and loved—like they belong here. Too often in Jewish spaces things are assumed that are not the Black experience at all. Most Black Jews don't have a connection to the shtetl. I am a biracial Black person, so I do. But I'm sure that many on this call are not. I want to say to lay people, "Stop acting and speaking as if the white Jewish experience is the *entire* Jewish experience." For example, when we were talking to our teens about matzo ball soup, one of my kids said, "Well, every Jew in the world loves matzo ball soup!" And I said, "Actually, that's not the case; the Ethiopian Jews are not familiar with matzo ball soup." And it blew his mind.

**Tablet:** Is someone comfortable giving a specific example of when you've experienced racism in the Jewish community?

**Ilana:** Most recently, I was recovering at home after having my most recent child a few weeks ago. In my community, they bring meals to new mothers, and someone was delivering the meal to my house. I am Haredi and my last name is Moroccan, so they're expecting I guess, a certain look, or a certain person. And when I opened the door—and this actually was not the first time it had happened that week—the woman who met me at the door assumed that I wasn't who I said I was, although she had a list with my name on it and I was in my own home. She was hesitant to even leave the breakfast with me. I was on a conference call and really worked up, and I just told her if she didn't want to give it to me, fine. I didn't say it in such a nice way. I slammed the door in her face. And then I went back to my Zoom meeting, and I had a text message from her that said, "I left the breakfast with your helper—or your help." To which I responded, "I'm the help. You gave it to me." That's one example, but it's happened to me thousands of times. And it bothers me time after time. It's one thing to be a part of a community that doesn't allow people to join it; Judaism's not like that. We allow people to come in. So even if you can't imagine how I could be born this way, or how

I could be associated or affiliated, your mind must assume I could have converted! It really is baffling to me that in today's day and age, people are so shocked that I'm Jewish, who assume my children are someone else's children, that my house is someone else's house.

**Jared:** I've often had the police called on me when approaching a synagogue, with squad car lights and everything, very traumatizing. And I still get those same questions—"Oh, so you're Jewish. What happened?" Or in college, when a Jewish professor asked me, "I heard that you're Jewish. How did that happen?" I have a long list of crass responses: "My parents had really great sex. How about yours?"

**Sabrina:** In the last few years, I have been invited to come into synagogues as a scholar-in-residence or artist-in-residence for Shabbat services. There was a time when I was in Philly—we had a conversation, dinner, and I went back to the closet to get something out of my coat. And as I was coming out, somebody handed me their coats and said, "Oh, great, can you take care of these for me?" And I stepped back and said, "No," and walked away. Later, of course when they saw that I was the speaker who they were coming to hear, they were quite embarrassed. But that's pretty typical.

**Tova:** I have definitely experienced discrimination and racism in the Jewish community. I'm very light-skinned, and I've had people ask me, "How are you Jewish?" They make assumptions about my identity. I've experienced that. But I don't necessarily always get the questions that other Black Jews get walking into Jewish spaces. I want that to be acknowledged. I'm Black and Ashkenazi, so that's part of my heritage. One of my parents is Black and not Jewish, and the other one is white-presenting and Jewish. So while I have had people question my identity and make me feel othered, I haven't probably experienced it to the same degree as other Black Jews. When people see that I'm [in synagogue] they think, "Oh, she's probably half-Jewish." Some of us are welcomed in—or accepted—a little bit more in certain Jewish spaces because of the way we actually present outwardly.

**Kylie:** It becomes this game of—how much darker am I than you? Like the Shade Game a little bit—“My skin’s a little bit darker, so maybe I experience a little bit more [racism].” As a very young child, I picked up on very subtle things and figured out how to be accepted and acceptable in the community. I also have the added advantage of growing up in Israel, I speak fluent Hebrew, I studied American Jewish history in college, and I’m getting my Ph.D. in Jewish thought. So I can talk about anything that anybody wants to about Judaism, I’ve been very *in[side]* the Jewish world. But a lot of what I chose to do, I have come to realize, was motivated by my feeling of, “If I do this, then nobody will question me.” I was an Orthodox Jew—that was the community that I [chose] because it was the one where that was the most Jewish and you couldn’t argue with my Judaism if I was keeping Shabbat and kosher. It’s also a byproduct of the family that I grew up in. My mom put me in an Orthodox school when I was in middle school. It’s how I figured out how I could fit in.

**Tablet:** You’ve told me that one of the hurdles for understanding the Black Jewish experience is the wider ignorance of *how many kinds of Jews* there are.

**Kylie:** Communities are so insular—especially in the Northeast, that they literally don’t even know about *Reform* Jews. And then you’ve got Jews of different races? We’re doing well just to know what Conservative Jews believe, Chabadniks or modern Orthodox Jews—people don’t know. We’re not telling other people’s stories and they’re not very visible.

**Tablet:** Could you help leaders understand better how it feels to have fellow Jews not assume that a Black person in a Jewish space is Jewish?

**Lindsey:** Belonging is one of the most basic facets of humanity and humanness. So what we’re talking about is a very pervasive disconnection that people are visiting on one another. To have someone deny what you know is true of yourself and who you belong to—so much so that eventually you might be experiencing self-doubt, which is some of what Kylie described—which can be

“I experience less antisemitism in the Black community as compared to the racism I’ve experienced inside the Jewish community.”

named as internalized oppression or internalized racism, that is a very powerful force that one has to work very hard and proactively to overcome.

**Ray:** I’m a convert and then got ordained by one of the major seminaries. I think that a bit earlier in my journey toward becoming Jewish, it did hurt a little bit more. Now, because, number one, I’m clergy who doesn’t work in a synagogue and two, I’m really intent on creating whatever Jewish experience and world that I want, if someone doesn’t assume it of me, so be it. It used to sting much more and now just kind of rolls off because it feels like I’ve gained enough social, cultural, and friendship capital along the way, that the people who are *for* me—I know they have my back. For those who don’t, it doesn’t sting as much. But it took a long time to get there.

**Tablet:** What was your experience as a Black Jewish rabbinical student in seminary?

**Ray:** Largely positive. I’m a Black Southerner. Whatever racism I did experience in my rabbinical school training was “weak” relative to what I’ve experienced elsewhere in my life. So rabbinical school was largely a good experience for me. The only thing that would get to me is moments where I could tell everyone else was so uncomfortable with how to respond when something racial

came up ... People, come on. If something lands as racist, I’ll let you know.

**Tablet:** Can I see a show of hands if you have had any difficulty being Jewish in your Black community? I see seven out of 10: Ilana, Yanna, Kylie, Ray, Sabrina, Izzy, and David.

**David:** I come from a very religious family and going to church on Sunday and being a Christian—Blackness is equated to Christianity. It really has felt like my family doesn’t feel like they can relate to me being a Jewish faith leader. I distinctly feel that a lot of them don’t even feel that I’m Black because I am Jewish. They equate Jesus with Blackness. And that can be very hurtful.

**Sabrina:** One thing that I think it’s really important to contextualize is that centuries ago there was a very deliberate attempt by machers to make a distinction between “European Jews”—specifically Ashkenazi Jews—and everybody else. There were all sorts of slurs against Sephardic Judaism—even in *The Forward* in its early press. So all of those things are part of the racism. It’s not just the idea that the shtetl isn’t every Jew’s history. It was a very deliberate attempt to get closer to whiteness with the false belief that it would protect Ashkenazi Jews in this country.

**Yanna:** It just goes to the fact that being Black is just so synonymous with Christianity. I think there’s just a lot of ignorance, naiveness. I wish people could have seen life through the lens that I have been exposed to—so many different types of people. But that’s just not the case in some Black communities, especially in the South, where a lot of my family is. Unfortunately there has been a long learning curve in terms of Judaism and what that is. There is also a component of the historical belief that the Jews killed Jesus. That is very much a theme that has stuck with a lot of people and they live by. I just wanted to put that out there.

**Jared:** I’m in Philly and grew up in this area. I have gotten everything from Nation of Islam guys asking me why I wear that Jewish jawn on my head to when I was a kid and my Christian classmates tried to stone me to death. But I also get the other thing where white Jews tell me, “You haven’t experienced

antisemitism.” I would say that I experience less antisemitism in the Black community as compared to the racism I’ve experienced inside the Jewish community. One greatly outweighs the other.

**Ilana:** My experience has been the opposite. Although it’s very painful to be thought of as not a Jew on a daily basis by the Jewish community, it is—to me—even more painful to be told antisemitic things by some Black people knowing I’m Jewish and some people not knowing I’m Jewish. The Black people who know I’m Jewish just assume that because I’m Black, it must be more important to me than the fact that I’m Jewish. So they just tell me their antisemitic slurs or how much they think the Jew-man should go back to Israel, even though whoever they’re talking about may or may not be from Israel. I have been screamed at in the street by Black people. My husband and I have been threatened. Our lives have been threatened. It’s real. And, you know, on the other side—[racism from Jews]—I have experienced real things, but not to that level.

**Tablet:** Izzy, anything you can share about the experience of Black Jews in the Black community?

**Izzy:** My non-Jewish Black family members still assume that all Jews are white and that we are the one Black Jewish family. I’ve shown them data that says otherwise, but there is a strong American bias that all American Jews are of European descent and all Jews globally are of European descent. This binary thinking and lack of appreciation for the beautifully rich racial and ethnic diversity of the Jewish people is also part of our own doing—through how Hollywood has depicted the stereotypical Jew—but this is slowly changing. Our family is like the U.N. We are Muslim, Jewish, Methodist, and come from four continents. So my family parties have always been multiracial, multifaith and integrated community settings. With that said, our religious identities, our differing theologies, our ideological frameworks for identity, belonging and peoplehood, at times create a thick curtain between us where we hear murmurs instead of full-throated dialogue.

“Be curious, but don’t expect that we’re going to bare our souls or that our trauma is the summation of who we are.”

**Tablet:** If there is one thing you would want the larger American Jewish community to know about Black Jewish Americans, what would it be?

**Sabrina:** We are not the first Jews and we will not be the last. There was a time when the Jews were mostly dark-skinned, and that history has been forgotten deliberately and replaced.

**Ilana:** I want people to know that we’re not all the same. All Ashkenazi Jews aren’t all the same. All Sephardic Jews aren’t the same. All Black Jews aren’t the same. So really take the time to get to know a person, get to know their soul, get to know who they are.

At the end of the day, we’re all Jews and we should all love and respect each other.

**Jared:** There are Jews of color or Black Jews who have experienced trauma, and there are some who have not experienced the same trauma. I would say: Be curious, but don’t expect that we’re going to bare our souls or that our trauma is the summation of who we are.

**Tova:** We as a Jewish community should be prioritizing *Ahavat Yisrael*—loving your fellow Jew. And when we are in community with one another, we need to be open and willing to accept the beautiful diversity of our people. At the end of the day, we’re all Jews and we should all love and respect each other.

**Izzy:** I think that there’s a crisis of belonging in Jewish life that’s costing us not only billions of dollars, but is also hurting the legacy of our ancestors and impacting the trajectory for our descendants. If we don’t make the work of racial equity in Jewish life a *we* issue, not an *us/them* issue, we’re compromising our integrity and preventing ourselves from moving forward.

**Yanna:** One thing that was said to me on my conversion journey by my rabbi was that I should be able to walk into any Jewish space and feel like I belong. But it’s impossible to do that without reciprocity.

**Kylie:** If there is anything that I would share, it would just be my truth, which is that it’s immensely difficult to be a mixed Jew. It is really hard to have two different peoples, and it is a journey of reconciliation that I think will take a lifetime to complete.

**Ray:** For all of the similarities of experience that we might have touched on here, there are so many other things that make us uniquely who we are. And if you are lucky enough and also kind enough, you’ll get the blessing of experiencing that.

**David:** Black Jews are a sacred people. We are forging our own Jewish path and that path is part of Jewish history. We are part of the story of the Jewish people.

**Lindsey:** I’m just struck by the awe that’s induced by the capacity of Judaism to expand, to hold all of these different realities and definitions of not only what it is to be Jewish, but the specificity of experience of each one of us who have a Black Jewish identity in common, but which means something unique and beautiful to each one of us. ■

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 NEWSLETTER



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## THE REST

→ **The Palestinian Authority told the Biden administration that it is open to a role in governing Gaza after the current war, but only if the United States commits to a two-state solution,** The New York Times reported Thursday. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu responded Friday by saying that the IDF would control Gaza after the war, rather than handing it over to external forces, “to ensure there is no longer a threat from Gaza to Israeli civilians.” Later in the day, Netanyahu clarified his statement in an interview with Fox News: “We don’t seek to conquer Gaza. We don’t seek to occupy Gaza. And we don’t seek to govern Gaza.” He added that Israel will “have to find a civilian government.” Netanyahu may be understandably loath to involve the PA, but if Israel does not want to occupy Gaza, it is hard to imagine an alternative. That gives the PA a good deal of leverage, which it now appears to be using.

→ **Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel’s Abraham Accords partner states (the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan) helped block several anti-Israel measures at a joint summit of the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Riyadh over the weekend.** The final resolution adopted by the summit included strong language against “Israeli aggression” and “war crimes” in Gaza, a demand for the UN to implement a cease-fire, and a call for the international community to block arms sales to Israel. But the summit considered and rejected several more concrete anti-Israel measures.

→ **Anger at Biden over his public support for Israel is growing among junior U.S. government staffers. On Tuesday, more than 400 political appointees and staffers from 40 agencies sent a letter to Biden protesting his handling of the war and calling for a cease-fire,** according to The New York Times, which also cited officials who said that the dissent over Gaza “comes mostly from employees in their 20s and 30s.” News of that letter came one day after Axios reported on an internal dissent memo signed by 100 employees of the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development, which attacked the Biden administration for spreading “misinformation” and supporting Israeli “war crimes.” That memo, which echoed the language of “progressive activists” outside government, was organized by Sylvia Yacoub, the foreign service officer who has publicly accused Biden of supporting “genocide” and who was described as “hysterical and unprofessional” by a congressional staffer who spoke to The Washington Free Beacon. Last week, Politico reported on a separate memo from State Department staffers calling on the United States to push for a cease-fire and publicly criticize Israel’s “violations of international norms.” In response to this wave of semipublic dissent, 116 former Obama and Biden officials signed a letter Tuesday in support of the administration. Unlike the dissenters, they publicly signed their names.

→ **An estimated 200,000 people attended a rally in support of Israel on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., on Tuesday.** Speakers at the March for Israel, organized by the National Jewish Federations of North America, included Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY), House Majority Leader Mike Johnson (R-LA), House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY), and New York Democratic Congressman Ritchie Torres. Senator John Fetterman (D-PA), formerly a darling of the socialist left, was seen outside the Capitol waving an Israeli flag at pro-Palestinian protestors who were being arrested by Capitol police.

## THE BIG STORY

Faced with Jewish students, faculty members, and donors enraged by the outpouring of support for Hamas on campus, Harvard President Claudine Gay announced in an email on Thursday several steps the university was taking to combat campus antisemitism. These included convening “support sessions” through the Harvard Office for Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging. Gay also distanced herself from the phrase “From the river to the sea”—named in a critical letter posted to X by billionaire hedge fund manager and Harvard donor Bill Ackman over the weekend—which Gay said “engender[s] both pain and existential fears within our Jewish community.” In essence, Gay was offering Jews the protection of the campus DEI (sorry, EDIB) bureaucracy. Gay’s announcement, in effect, is a fig leaf: an offer to officially designate, by administrative fiat, Jews as a protected victim group rather than as oppressors—a question about which there is apparently some confusion on Harvard’s campus. In a worldview that equates strength and success with evil and holds that all “overrepresentation” is the result of theft and exploitation, it is rational to conclude that Israel—and the Jews—are a problem. This worldview is not a mistake or misinterpretation that can be cleared up by designating Jews as a protected category; it is the ideological core of the DEI enterprise.

—Park MacDougald

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# Jainism, American Style

Far from the religion's ancient roots in India, a younger generation in the U.S. looks to a spiritual leader who channels the wisdom of a renowned mystic through his global network of Jain study centers aimed at making the teachings more 'approachable'

BY MAGGIE PHILLIPS

**W**hen she was growing up, Diyaanka Jhaveri was part of a group of kids from Dallas who visited London for a global youth festival and spiritual retreat. They played soccer in a kind of spiritually infused youth World Cup, in which the scoring team would pause after each goal to bow to a statue of Shrimad Rajchandra, a 19th-century reformer, saint, poet, and mystic in the Jain religion. He is the guru of a contemporary Jain mystic, Rakesh Jhaveri, who has founded a transnational Jain spiritual movement based in Gujarat called Shrimad Rajchandra Mission Dharampur, or SRMD.

That global youth festival continues to take place every year in Gujarat, where SRMD's sprawling headquarters is located. The SRMD campus now hosts its own sports complex, where artificial turf is used instead of grass, as a means of extending Jain principles of nonviolence to plant life.

Today, Diyaanka Jhaveri is a 26-year-old teacher in Chicago. (While Jhaveri is not an uncommon name in India, Diyaanka Jhaveri is also a distant relative of Rakesh Jhaveri, who is known to his followers as Rakeshbhai.) Raised Jain in the U.S. (her father emigrated from India in 1992), she credits SRMD's youth education program, Divinetouch, and its 360-degree approach to life—mind, body, and spirit—with her continued commitment to the Jain religion, an ancient faith that began in India around 2,500 years ago. SRMD's 202 worldwide satellite centers offer an approach that is not unusual in diaspora Jainism:

It differs in some ways from traditional Jainism—it smooths over some of the historical sectarian and cultural differences that affect the way the faith is practiced in India—but also offers points of access to Jain communities outside the country, since its religious authorities are prohibited from traveling via mechanical means, traveling only by foot.

Central to all of this is Rakeshbhai, who was in turn inspired by Rajchandra's life, remarks, and writings. Through them, Rajchandra developed for Jains from all walks of life a practical, methodical approach to spiritual enlightenment, which he contended would free the individual soul, corrupted from its true divine nature, from the temporal bondage of earthly concerns and consequences. He boiled this philosophy down to six fundamentals, confined to a 142-verse work designed to be memorized, called the Shri Atmasiddhi Shastra, which his followers said he wrote in an hour-and-a-half in 1896, at the age of 28.

An intellectual and academic prodigy who demonstrated a profound spirituality from a young age, Rajchandra left behind a prolific body of philosophical and poetic works, and a radical example of detached asceticism, that inspired many after his death in 1901 at the age of 33. His world-renouncing ways—going into seclusion; living, dressing, and eating simply; remaining detached from worldly enjoyments—were to have a powerful influence on a young Mahatma Gandhi, as were his attitudes toward religious tolerance, and opposition to religion as a system of dogmatic principles to be followed by rote and believed

merely as an institutional abstraction. Rather, Rajchandra contended that faith in God had to be something personal and single-minded, taking precedence before all else.

As Rajchandra's 20th- (and now 21st-) century disciple, Rakeshbhai's reknown as a spiritual teacher grew, and since establishing the SRMD headquarters in Gujarat in 2001, he has expanded his organization's work there to include an ashram (temple)—where he hosts talks on sacred texts and meditation retreats—as well as a hospital, animal shelter, the sports complex, and education and job programs. He also gives talks internationally, and between 2005 and 2010, he established SRMD centers in North America, the U.K., Singapore, and Hong Kong to serve as study centers and community hubs.

Today, Rakeshbhai fuses his 19th-century guru's back-to-basics approach to Jainism with an accessible multimedia and multidisciplinary approach: fat-burning yoga videos and mindful eating tips on the SRMD website, as well as online lectures, meditations, and prayers, and social outreach programs.

Over the phone, Diyaanka Jhaveri spoke enthusiastically about her memories of attending an SRMD global youth festival. She recalls U.S.-born kids like her taking care of cows, and because of their grounding in the Jain religious principle that all living things matter, "we knew what it meant to give back, even to a cow." Conveyed via SRMD's physical centers worldwide, and its multimedia empire, Rakeshbhai's 21st-century approach to sharing his guru's own version of the religion "makes Jainism such an approachable" way of life and practice, Diyaanka said. For a faith that is a minority even in its own country of origin, with a diaspora whose successive generations have little connection to India, the model has proved successful.

Jainism's exact founding date is murky. Scholarly estimates place it as early as the seventh century BCE, others later, in the fifth century BCE, coming out of eastern India's Ganges basin. Lacking a single founder, it emerged amid an anticlerical sentiment that was in the ether at the time, which objected to practices,

such as priests as intercessors, elaborate ritualistic trappings, and especially animal sacrifice (Jains shared their animus toward the contemporary priestly class with Buddhism, which also originated around the same time and place). Jainism, while distinct from Hinduism as the religion is commonly understood in the West, shares certain concepts and cultural features with Hinduism. It is not an offshoot, but is more accurately understood as having emerged in parallel with Hinduism. “What we think of as Hinduism today emerged quite a bit later,” said Steven Vose—Bhagwan Suparshvanatha Endowed Professor in Jain Studies at the University of Colorado in Denver—in an email. Their shared cultural similarities defy traditional Western understandings of religious denomination: To the extent that Jainism can said to have risen from Hinduism, it is helpful to remember that the term “Hindu” was initially a geographic and cultural signifier, a Persian term for anyone who lived on the other side of the Indus River from the Persian Empire’s holdings (it was later picked up as a religious signifier by the British imperial census-takers).

Even today, while Jains maintain a separate set of scriptures and religious texts, and venerate different figures from Hindus, they often closely associate with Hindus, whose ceremonies, rituals, and narrative stories their own can resemble, and with whom they share in common the Sanskrit language. The very name of the faith derives from a Sanskrit word *ji*—meaning “to conquer,” which represents Jainism’s focus on ascetic renunciation of worldly cares and priorities.

Examples of similarities include the Hindu figures Rama and Krishna, who also appear in Jain texts, as well as the two faiths’ shared principle of karma, the cosmic law of cause-and-effect with long-lasting impacts on the soul. However, while the names of the people and concepts are the same, they mean different things to Jains than they do for Hindus. For example, Jains recontextualize the Hindu heroes Rama and Krishna by their relationship to different figures in Jain history. Karma is also understood differently in Jainism, where it is

a substance (as opposed to a ledger of good deeds that must be balanced, in order to be freed from a cycle of rebirth, as it is in Hinduism), with particles that can be picked up over time through one’s actions. In the Jain understanding, accumulated karma weighs the soul down, and must be jettisoned to attain final liberation, hence the emphasis on ascetic practices like fasting and isolated retreats, as well as meditation and acts of service to others. The essence of Jain belief in intentional, pure practice of Jain religious principles and its moral code is on display in its total commitment to nonviolence, which extends to a practice of vegetarianism.

Jains attribute their canonical teachings to tirthankars, human beings who they believe to have attained omniscience, and who laid down the principles of Jain thought and belief. Although they are not deities, Jains pray to tirthankars in hopes of emulating their perfection and karmic detachment. (Rajchandra is believed, in a past life, to have been a close associate of the last tirthankar, who lived in the late fifth century BCE, and from whose teachings his are said to be derived.)

Over the phone, Vose gave me a crash course on Jain history up to the present day, explaining the complex disputes that emerged after the last tirthankar, which gave rise to its existing denominational differences (for example, delineations over idols versus no idols, and over white-robed monks and nuns versus naked monks).

There are estimated to be fewer than 6 million Jains worldwide today, with the majority in India (around 4.5 million, according to the last census), where they constitute about 0.4% of the population. In the 20th century, Jains began arriving in the United States after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 opened up U.S. immigration, increasing South Asian immigration in particular. Today, Jains are estimated to number between 150,000 and 200,000 in the United States, with their larger population centers in Chicago, Southern California, Texas, and New York.

Jains in the U.S. today are largely white collar, which is unsurprising given Jains’ status in India, where,

according to Vose, they are one of the most literate religious groups. This set of circumstances has its roots in history and geography, in south and west India, where Jains migrated from their original home in the eastern Ganges basin and prospered as merchants. As a religious minority, they often found themselves buffeted about by external political and military events in India. Vose contends that because merchant capitalism attracted elites, it offered a degree of prestige and protection to Jains, whose status as arrivistes in the central, western, and southern parts of India would have otherwise been precarious.

While even lay Jains have a set of vows to anti-violence, the ascetics, known as Maharaj Sahebs, and their communities represent “the foremost living authority on Jain text and knowledge,” to whom the Jain community looks for spiritual guidance, and who are charged with handing down teachings. However, because they can travel only by foot, Jains must travel to India to meet with them face-to-face.

“Temples become really important centers for teaching children. It’s sort of the very big crisis for diaspora,” Vose said, as Jainism spread around the world, but their teaching authorities were prohibited by their vows from traveling by any means other than walking.

Like many diaspora and immigrant communities, Jains worried about handing down the faith to their young people. “The people who migrated here post-1965 started having kids,” said Vose. “And you know, watching their kids, like, not really understand a lot of things.” The way things their parents had always done things in India “didn’t always work.”

This predicament led to reform in the mid-20th century, according to Vose, including the creation of a sort of semi-ordained monastic order of men and women, called samans and samanīs, who can travel abroad to expatriate Jain communities who would otherwise lack traditional in-person religious leadership. Other solutions included the creation of transnational organizations, such as the Federation of Jain Associations in North America (JAINA), which serves for the umbrella organization for the 72

Jain centers that span the United States and Canada—JAINA's youth branch, the Young Jains of America, has produced a helpful series of Jainism 101 videos—as well as the Rakeshbhai's international SRMD satellites and online presence.

The U.S. has also played host to new, international forms of spreading and preserving Jain tradition, notably two Jain monks who either renounced or redefined their vows to immigrate to the U.S. in the 1970s. The Harvard Pluralism Project calls these men, Sushil Kumar and Muni Chitrabhanu, “iconoclasts in India”: “They became institution-builders in America,” where they established “neo-orthodox” institutions that were “seen as more open-minded, realistic, and practical than traditional Indian Jain orthodoxy, while simultaneously preserving the deep spirit of the Jain tradition.” While Kumar and Chitrabhanu helped found and establish various cultural and religious sites around the U.S., their Americanization of Jain practice to make it more accessible outside India (downplaying asceticism, ritual, and intrafaith sectarian differences, in favor of emphasizing more universal value-based practices like vegetarianism and nonviolence) garnered criticism for diluting the faith.

Criticism of Kumar's and Chitrabhanu's work in the 1970s, to make Jainism something more readily understood by their contemporaries inside and outside the faith, is echoed today in critiques of SRMD and Rakeshbhai, whose social media presence Vose said really expanded in the 2010s.

“He's also probably the most controversial Jain religious leader today,” Vose said of Rakeshbhai. “He really preaches a kind of a Jainism that makes sense to people's everyday lives,” a practical self-help approach that includes meditation, and handling the stress of everyday life.

Rakeshbhai is disinterested in older, traditional sources of authority, and de-emphasizes things like caste, which is an important topic for Jain audiences in India. His flattened Jainism, which is inflected with his own personal brand, and which incorporates different academic, spiritual, and philosophical

disciplines, has made him popular with young Jains in the Anglosphere.

Jain practitioner Jasvant Modi is a retired doctor who first came to the United States from India in the early 1980s. In 2010, he became active in founding Jain chairs of study at major U.S. universities. When asked about Rakeshbhai's appeal, he acknowledges that SRMD is not representative of the Jain religion in the U.S. as a whole. “His ideas are progressive and liberal compared to orthodox Jain people who believe something a little bit different,” Modi said, but it is less of a controversy than a “difference of opinion.”

Rakeshbhai's belief that his guru, Rajchandra, is the reincarnation of a close disciple of the last tirthankar and direct conduit of his teachings—as well as his flattened approach to devotional practices—set him apart from the mainstream.

Modi explained Rakeshbhai's importance to contemporary U.S. Jains: “He has an ability in terms of speaking and explaining complex Jain principles into a simple language where people can understand and follow.”

Rakeshbhai's videos for youth on the SRMD sports page include titles like “A Quick Tip on How to Change Your Habits” and “How to Achieve Growth in Any Field,” sounding much more like a self-help guru—something Americans understand—than an actual guru.

“The biggest thing that I would say that he does that really appeals to especially the American audience is that he's really big on charitable work,” said Vose. While Jainism has a tradition of service called Seva, which traditionally meant service on and around the grounds of an ashram, or house of worship, “Jains are not big on Seva, historically,” he said. “[Rakeshbhai] has made Seva part of his spiritual platform, but it really looks like the charitable activism that you would expect from, like, American organizations.”

Rural hospitals, schools for the academically and caste-disadvantaged, and public health initiatives at the SRMD ashram in Gujarat all tap into professions that attract younger Jains. “He's got a willing cadre of young doctors

who go to the hospitals for a month or so out of the year to work there,” said Vose.

American SRMD centers also advance this concept of service. “Community service and religion go hand-in-hand,” said Diyaanka's father, Devang Jhaveri, who has run the Divinetouch program in Dallas for a decade. He told me about past years' initiatives, community service trips, crocheting items for children with cancer, and working with food banks.

Diyaanka Jhaveri agrees: “The reason why I'm still a teacher post-pandemic,” she said, “is this drive to help others,” which she credits to her parents and the influence of SRMD and its guru.

Divinetouch lays a foundation in religious literacy, teaching younger children about the major world religions, then instructing middle-grade children in Jain religious principles, and finally guiding teens to apply the earlier knowledge gained to real life situations. It is “a really good way for someone who's been born and raised in this country,” Diyaanka Jhaveri said, to see how Jain principles pertain to real life. As a teen, going through an early iteration of the teen program, Spirituالتouch, she said she was able to understand how *ahimsa*, the Jain commitment to nonviolence, extended beyond “don't hit,” to the idea that “my words and my thoughts can have implications,” which she said were a big help as she navigated her drama-filled teen years.

Diyaanka Jhaveri also said that when she was a teen, having the foundation of a Jain principle—the multiplicity of viewpoints—helped with conflict resolution at home, too. “Everybody kind of understands where the other person is coming from,” she said, “at least in theory.” The English-language religious education she received through SRMD youth programming helped create a shared emotional vocabulary with her family, she said. “It's not like we're throwing around Sanskrit Jain principles all the time,” she said, but she was able to appreciate that parental advice was based on values that she herself knew and understood.

Today, as a teacher who works with 12- to 14-year-olds, she said the valuable

strategies that she learned as a teen herself—anger and stress management, along with viewpoint tolerance—have equipped her with valuable practical tools she still uses.

Devang Jhaveri still volunteers with Divinetouch, which he said is especially valuable now, with teen mental health issues at a societal peak, by giving young people a “safe environment to talk about their daily challenges” through a Jain lens.

“What’s so amazing,” Diyaanka Jhaveri said of SRMD’s service component, and Divinetouch youth programming, is the way in which it reaches young people who aren’t ready for complex theology. They see the positivity of their guru, Rakeshbhai, and the effects of the principles learned in class when they apply them in real life, which in turn, she said, makes them curious to know more about the underlying principles.

Both Jhaveris are keen to express Rakeshbhai’s influence, especially on the young, who may encounter him

in person at a retreat at his mission in Gujarat, at a global youth festival, or during one of his frequent visits to the United States. When “blessed with a conversation, or a piece of advice” from him, Diyaanka Jhaveri said, or when listening to his lectures and stories in English, “it makes Jainism such an approachable” way of life and practice. When we spoke, she was in training with SRMD to become a yoga teacher.

Like many religious diasporas, Jains are grappling with how to keep subsequent generations in touch with the culture and religion from which they emerged. Outside of SRMD, study groups for young and old alike are common. The very fact that Rakeshbhai travels at all, unlike traditional Jain vowed monastics, makes him more appealing and accessible to American Jains, said Modi.

Within Jainism, Rakeshbhai is sui generis. In the mold of his iconoclastic 1970s forebears, Kumar and Chitrabhanu, he is a modern spiritual authority, something altogether different from the

traditional religious authorities—from a monk, who cannot really travel, or even from a saman or samani, who can. Rather, he operates outside traditional Jain structures, traveling around the world to speak to his followers, and claiming for himself an appeal to the authority of his guru, Shrimad Rajchandra, whose discipline, according to Vose, “has always been an independent and frankly intellectualist streak within modern Jain life.” By adopting his 19th-century guru’s philosophy for a new, modern audience, Rakeshbhai has developed “a comprehensive devotional practice that’s moved out of just the intellectual work,” said Vose, and infused it with more devotional and popular forms of worship and spirituality.

By returning to first principles, embracing technology, and (literally) meeting its followers where they’re at—particularly the young—SRMD appears to have found a way to engage U.S.-born Jains. ■

*This article was originally published on November 10, 2023.*

## COMMUNITY

# From Hostage to Pop Icon

On Oct. 7, Rachel Edri was held hostage by Hamas terrorists. One month later, the Israeli grandmother’s image appears on everything from T-shirts to tattoos, cartoons to TikTok videos.

BY DANA KESSLER

One of the best-known stories from the beginning of the Israel-Hamas war is the story of Rachel Edri—the Israeli grandmother from the city of Ofakim in the Southern District of Israel, who was held hostage by five terrorists whom she

stalled by cooking for them; giving them cookies, pineapple, Coke Zero, and coffee; and chatting with them until she and her husband were rescued, 19 hours later. The entire world heard of this woman’s level-headedness and resourcefulness, which saved her life. The beautiful and moving narrative of this quintessential Jewish mother, who

knows that the best way to keep someone calm is to feed them, was reported on the news; she even got a hug from President Biden.

In Israel, Edri is known simply as “Rachel from Ofakim.” Her persona and her story intertwine humanity with guile and slyness in a way that everybody can relate to. The fact that this courageous woman became a national hero and was made a symbol of this war is not surprising. The interesting part is what happened next: Rachel from Ofakim became a pop icon.

From Elvis to Frida Kahlo, we are used to seeing pop icons’ faces morphed into pixel art, faux Andy Warhol pop art, caricatures, and anything else that can be printed on physical merchandise or virtually distributed. Usually, to turn into a pop icon, one should be young, talented, charismatic, sexy, good looking—and preferably dead. James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, and Amy Winehouse possessed all of those qualities, while

Albert Einstein possessed some. Arguably, Edri possesses none. She turned into a pop icon in her country for different reasons altogether, and she did so faster than most. She did it instantly, before she even had a chance to sweep the terrorists' cookie crumbs from the floor.

You might think that it's an exaggeration to call her a pop icon, but it's not. About a week after Oct. 7, newspaper headlines in Israel announced that Edri signed with the ITM modeling agency, which represents some of the country's top models, like Eden Fines, Yael Shelbia, and Anna Zak. It's safe to assume that Edri will be starring in cookie commercials in no time. She also graced the cover of *La'Isha*, Israel's leading women's magazine, which usually depicts models and beauty queens, and was interviewed live on Instagram by pop star Noa Kirel.

Rachel from Ofakim became the subject of countless memes popping up on social media, and was swiftly turned into a character on *Eretz Nehederet*, Israel's leading prime-time TV satirical sketch comedy show. Israeli artists, cartoonists, illustrators, and designers started creating Rachel-inspired artwork, while nonprofessionals used AI and Photoshop to generate minivirtual shrines to her. Cartoonist Daniel Amit created a digital illustration of Edri as a Marvel or DC Comics superheroine, while Omer Agam made her into an imaginary Pixar movie poster. Graffiti artist Adi Yonatan Cohen painted a mural of her face on a public wall in Haifa. Illustrator Dana Barlev created a round design that looks like a sticker or an iron-on patch depicting a Kawaii terrorist surrounded by an assortment of cookies and the clever wordplay "I Accept Cookies."

Musician Roey Bitan created a web series of short animated clips on Instagram that spread to TikTok and YouTube, called *Rachel Power*. The series reimagines Edri as Wonder Woman, one of the Powerpuff Girls, and various other characters, by superimposing her head on their bodies in little *South Park*-esque gags. The videos cast Edri as a character in *Pokemon* or *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, or show her with *Sesame Street*'s Cookie Monster. The

**"The T-shirt, named 'Rachel Our Mother' after the biblical Rachel, was the first in their line of 'War-merch,' which is what they call their humorous Israel-Hamas war T-shirt collection."**

series also has a funny theme song, that plays homage to dubbed action cartoon theme songs from the 1980s and '90s. Consequently, graphic artist Ori Keinan created a one-off Rachel Power collectible action figure as part of his bootleg toy company Almost Toys. Online you can find other Rachel action figure designs as well, which are not real toys but AI-generated designs. Oh, and there is also a Rachel Power online computer game in which the player is Edri and needs to throw cookies at terrorists for points.

Apropos of cookies, the simple fact that Edri's story is about food struck a chord in the Israeli psyche. From competitive reality TV cooking shows to foodies on Instagram, food is an essential part of today's popular culture. "Home cooking" in this realm is code for "emotion"—as proven by any reality TV cooking show in which every grandma's recipe is accompanied by a sob story. This fake emotion gives meaning to life and defeats the masses' fear of death, and Edri's homemade cookies evoke something maternal and folkloristic that soothes the soul when mediated through popular culture.

There is also Rachel fashion. Funky T-shirt designers Bootleg Studios created a fun and colorful Rachel T-shirt, which can be purchased from their

website. The T-shirt, named "Rachel Our Mother" after the biblical Rachel, was the first in their line of "War-merch," which is what they call their humorous Israel-Hamas war T-shirt collection. While viral videos, T-shirts, and tattoos cater to youngsters, there is also Rachel-merch for preschoolers: Graphic designer Hen Macabi made her into a Zionist coloring page. This illustration was then turned into a tattoo by tattoo artist Lior Yosefi.

All of this seems unbelievable, but it is the reality in Israel. This, of course, is not the first time that politics or war have been absorbed into mass culture, but this is different. Images of Che Guevara or Lenin started being printed on T-shirts long after their death, and people sporting those T-shirts more often than not know very little of what those people did or what they stand for. It seems that these figures had been emptied of meaning somewhere along the way, enabling them to become hollow pop icons. But with Edri, it happened overnight.

My visceral reaction to all of this was too soon. And it undeniably is. A woman who endured a horrific experience amid the most traumatic day her country had ever known, and is essentially a war hero, had been introduced—all too quickly—into pop culture. If "the medium is the message," then memes, TikTok videos, and T-shirts are ultimately memes, TikTok videos, and T-shirts, no matter if Kurt Cobain, Mickey Mouse, or Rachel Edri are depicted in them.

The Rachel from Ofakim craze attests to current day-to-day life in Israel, which is officially referred to as "*shigrat milchama*," meaning wartime routine—an oxymoron constructed to keep the country and its economy afloat in a fake business-as-usual illusion. This all seems insane, but we live in an insane time. A time in which popular culture is as strong a force as war. A world in which silly TikTok videos and war atrocities coexist in nauseating proximity.

Since everyone knows what Edri did, for the simple reason that it happened five minutes ago, she hasn't yet been turned into an empty signifier, like Che or Lenin (and it's safe to assume her 15 minutes will be up before that will

happen), but she had certainly been put in the familiar matrix by emptying her dramatic story of gravitas and transferring it to an imaginary pop world.

Does turning Edri into a caricature trivialize what she endured and what she did? Is this all too vulgar and maybe even disrespectful to all the people who lost their lives and their loved ones in this horrible war? Maybe, and maybe not. The horrific events of Oct. 7 were of biblical proportions, or like an Eastern European pogrom from the early 20th century, from a time and place

that didn't have pop culture. However, in 21st-century Israel, mass culture is king, and it's the way a large part of the population processes things.

All the Rachel paraphernalia and jokes can be viewed as a means for Israelis to try and integrate the reality of war into their daily lives. Whether it's as a plush doll, a fridge magnet, or a cellphone cover (three products that as far as I know haven't been produced yet, but may very well be in the works), Rachel's image is extremely comforting for people, and they want to see more

and more of it. It might be one of the only things in this bleak time that can make online visits to social media a bit less heavy and traumatic. Plus, which fun and casual attire could one wear during their wartime routine, if not a Rachel from Ofakim T-shirt?

Rachel gives Israel hope—hope in the ability to enjoy novelty items, hope in humanity, and hope that the Jews will ultimately outwit their enemies. ■

*This article was originally published on DNovember 9, 2023.*

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## COMMUNITY

# Giving Notice

We've read about people losing their jobs because of opinions they've posted on the Israel-Hamas war that their employers don't like. But some employees are also quitting because of things their employers have said—or haven't said.

BY FLORA TSAPOVSKY

A few days after the Oct. 7 Hamas massacre, Asaf Eyal, a field education instructor at Columbia University's School of Social Work, was participating in a quiet vigil on campus, mourning the dead and remembering the kidnapped Israelis. A large group of pro-Palestinian protesters soon appeared, singing and, according to Eyal, chanting hateful slogans. When Eyal, who also has a master's from the university and had worked there for over three years, approached the campus security representatives and asked whether the protest was allowed, he was told that in the name of freedom of speech, nothing could be done. "At that moment, I, as an Israeli and a Jew, felt abandoned by the university," he told me. The next day, Eyal sent in a resignation letter, leaving his position effective immediately.

The public discourse about the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas,

which erupted with an unprecedented attack on several kibbutzim in the Gaza envelope, has now permeated the workplace. While stories about people getting fired for expressing their opinions—on either side, even on their personal social media accounts—have been dominating the headlines, another phenomenon is quietly persisting: Around the United States, Jewish workers like Eyal have been quitting their jobs in protest of their organizations' stance.

Although some must have heard about screenwriter Dan Gordon's resignation from the Writers Guild of America due to its ongoing silence on the matter, or about the British journalist Noah Abrahams, who threw away a desirable freelance gig on BBC Radio by condemning the media outlet's description of Hamas as *militants*, most resignations are small and relatively private acts of bravery, fueled by a deep sense of disappointment and betrayal. Though Eyal has another source of income—a

social worker, he manages a homeless family shelter in Brooklyn—he said, "If Columbia was my only job, I would have done the exact same thing. I had a lucrative position and gave it up because morally, I just couldn't do it."

Though a feeling of betrayal laces Eyal's decision, he didn't exactly expect greatness from his alma mater, given the much-covered anti-Jewish tendencies of leading U.S. universities. Slightly more surprised was mental health clinician Bari Goldojarb, who, until recently, was employed at the Bay Area chapter of an international nonprofit, the mission of which is to eliminate racism and empower women. When the organization remained silent about the Oct. 7 massacre for several days, including internal communication, Goldojarb, who was "reeling," messaged her boss and the chapter CEO, concerned. She was told that the chapter echoes the national headquarters' messaging, and that for international affairs, the world headquarters weighs in.

After a quick Google search, Goldojarb found that the world headquarters' official statement didn't mention the massacre or the hostages, instead calling on the international community to recognize the root cause of the unending situation and suffering: the Israeli occupation. The U.S. statement, while acknowledging the Hamas attack, used general language at best. "This was enough for me," Goldojarb said. "I thought, your antisemitism can't be stronger than the need to condemn

this massacre. It was just a point that I couldn't continue working here."

Goldojarb went out with a bang, sending an agencywide email to more than 100 employees, expressing the painful realization that in the nonprofit's mission to eliminate racism, Jews weren't included—after which, her email was promptly shut off. She also published a post on LinkedIn, sharing the decision. "I felt fearful," Goldojarb said of the sentiment surrounding the rather risky move. "I've spent an incredible amount of time understanding racism, and then just realizing that an agency with a mission to eliminate racism is too timid in calling it out." Though posting on LinkedIn may hurt her chances of finding a job in the future, Goldojarb had felt the urge to share her decision publicly.

What she and Eyal did can be seen as "a beginning of a possible trend," said Adam Neufeld, senior vice president and chief impact officer at the Anti-Defamation League, in which "many Jews across the country are rethinking their relationships with a lot of organizations and institutions they've held dear for so long." He said that since the war started, the ADL has seen two to five times more alerts about antisemitism in the workplace.

Neufeld added that when it comes to supporting Jewish employees, better efforts can be seen in the for-profit sector than at nonprofits and universities. In the "parts of the quote-unquote progressive far left," he said, "certain groups are weighing the pros and cons of the different stakeholder pressures and coming to the wrong conclusion." Some organizations go as far as issuing special resolutions; the city council of Richmond, California, recently voted for a resolution supporting the people of Gaza, a move that resulted in two Jewish members of the city's Design Review Board resigning. As an American Jew with a longtime career in the nonprofit sector, Goldojarb describes herself as "very left, very progressive, very liberal"—and, at the moment, "very alone" in her professional community.

In the arts space, where the concept of community runs deep and reigns

supreme, the sense of isolation may be even more palpable. The compact art community of Tucson, Arizona, experienced turmoil following an Instagram post by the Museum of Contemporary Art that responded to recent events with the familiar accusatory refrain of Palestinian genocide and colonial oppression. (The story was reposted from the account of Keioui Keijaun Thomas, one of the museum's featured artists.) In response, multimedia artist Leah Schragger, who splits her time between Tucson and New York City, promptly resigned from MOCA-Tucson's board of directors.

"I didn't feel I could support the mission of the museum anymore as a board member or a donor, because of the hypocrisy, the smoke and mirrors, and the gaslighting," Schragger said. Being heavily involved in the New York art scene as well, she had learned that voicing an unpopular view can be considered "career suicide." But the way the art world has treated the war—including the infamous *Artforum* incident—has led Schragger to speak out and make her resignation known. "I haven't seen a single art institution comment on what happened in Israel," she said. Her resignation, Schragger added, had resulted in some "very unkind" emails from people she had previously considered close.

In Los Angeles, Ido—an Israeli with deep ties in the West Coast DJ community—reports feeling "excluded and lonely." Ido prefers to keep his real name private due to the ongoing tension surrounding the musical nonprofit he established and ran until recently. When the war broke out, he asked his team's approval to issue a statement on behalf of the nonprofit, condemning the killings at the Nova music festival. The organization, Ido said, has the goal of supporting up-and-coming electronic music creators by raising funds, promoting talent, and eventually establishing a radio station, and he thought focusing on Nova was appropriate.

The team's WhatsApp group stayed silent for two weeks—regarding both Ido's suggestion and his own state of well-being. Similarly, the music community provided him no respite. "I haven't lived in Israel for 12 years,

but people know me and my origins," he said. "No one has even checked in on me. Yet they cared enough to post inflammatory content on social media." Feeling vulnerable, Ido notified his colleagues that he's resigning from the nonprofit, later following up with a public social media post sharing his frustration and disillusionment. "I grieve the fact I'm leaving this beloved project due to the current climate," he said.

Compared to reposting cease-fire cries on Instagram or creating catchy TikToks, those who have decided to give up a chunk of their income or let go of a lucrative title in protest may very well deserve the title of activists, whether they want it or not. Some, like Schragger and Eyal, are channeling their energy into projects that aim to influence public opinion and counter the narrative prevalent in their professional communities; recently, Eyal had been spearheading Flip Your Diploma, an initiative in which U.S. academics pose with their upside-down diploma, as a response to their institutions' upside-down views. Schragger is in the process of establishing The Museum of Non-Political Art in Tucson as an alternative to the highly politicized, identity-driven curatorial approach she has witnessed in the art world throughout the years. Others, like Goldojarb and Ido, are still healing amid an ongoing crisis of faith.

Whether their acts are the start of a bigger movement depends on what workplaces do next, according to Neufeld. "Do they call out antisemitic incidents in America?" he asked. "Do they post every day about civilian deaths in Gaza without ever referencing the hostages of October 7? I anticipate Jews will think about that when they decide where to work, who to socialize with, who to give money to." Either way, he hopes, the days of quietly blending in—an "incredible privilege" many U.S. Jews had enjoyed—are over.

Goldojarb put it simply: "I can't be shy or timid right now. Antisemitism thrives in the silence." ■

*This article was originally published on November 15, 2023*

# Dairy-Free Green Bean Casserole

BY LEAH KOENIG

## INGREDIENTS

- 2 pounds green beans, ends trimmed and cut into 2-inch pieces**
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper**
- Vegetable oil, for frying and greasing**
- 1¼ cups all-purpose flour, divided**
- 2 small yellow onions, halved through the root and thinly sliced**
- 5 tablespoons nonhydrogenated margarine (ideally Earth Balance)**
- 2 shallots, finely chopped**
- ½ pound cremini mushrooms, chopped**
- 2½ cups vegetable broth**
- ½ cup almond milk**
- 1 teaspoon onion powder**

## PREPARATION

### Step 1

Bring a large pot of salted water to boil over high heat. Meanwhile, prepare an ice bath in a large bowl. Add green beans to boiling water and cook until tender but not mushy, about 5 minutes. Drain, dunk into the ice bath, drain again, and set aside.

### Step 2

Fill a large saucepan set over medium-high heat with 1-inch of vegetable oil. While it is heating, place 1 cup of flour in a large, zip-top bag. Separate the onion slices into rings and add them to the bag; shake to coat. Remove onion pieces and shake off any excess flour. Working in 3 or 4 batches, drop the floured onions into the oil and fry until golden brown, 3 to 4 minutes. Use tongs or a slotted spoon to transfer to a paper-towel-lined plate and sprinkle with a little salt; set aside.

### Step 3

Preheat the oven to 375 and grease a 9" x 9" baking dish with a little vegetable oil. Melt the margarine in a medium saucepan set over medium heat. Add the shallots, mushrooms, and a pinch of salt, and cook, stirring occasionally, until vegetables are tender, 7 to 8 minutes. Sprinkle the remaining ¼ cup flour over the vegetables and stir to combine. Stir in the vegetable stock, almond milk, onion powder, ¼ teaspoon of salt, and a generous amount of black pepper and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to low and simmer, stirring often, until mixture thickens 5 to 10 minutes.

### Step 4

Combine mushroom sauce, green beans, and 1 cup of the fried onions in a large bowl, then transfer to the prepared baking dish. Top evenly with remaining onions and bake until bubbling, watching to make sure the onions don't burn, about 20 minutes. Serve hot.

**Yield:** Serves 6 to 8

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