

THE TAB

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NEWS

China's Future Ain't What It Used to Be

20 years after the Goldman report, the BRICS are floundering

BY JOSEF JOFFE

In January, China's National Bureau of Statistics made it official: After decades of fabulous GDP growth, the rate is now down to 3%. The culprit is Xi Jinping's "zero-COVID" policy, plus ruptured supply chains and soaring energy prices. In the post-lockdown recovery, growth will of course bounce back, but not into the enduring double-digit rates prevailing since the 1980s, when China became the envy of the world.

To unearth the longer-term trends, look at the whole film, not just at single frames—and then beyond China at all those nations touted as winners in the global sweepstakes. A good starting point is Oct. 4, 1957, when the Soviets launched Sputnik, the first man-made satellite, into space. The shock reverberated around the world, never mind that the orbiter would burn up three months later. America was sinking and the USSR was soaring. Such projections have filled a small library by now. The theme is "the decline of the West and the rise of the rest." But just as regularly, the doomsters have proven as reliable as weather forecasters.

The USSR never managed to outpace the U.S. Instead, it fell apart on Christmas Day 1991. But 20 years ago,

its Russian heir was anointed, this time with a much-hyped scenario authored by a team of economists at Goldman Sachs. Like Sputnik, "Dreaming with the BRICS: The Path to 2050," published in 2003, made waves around the world. As a paradigmatic example of predictions of Western decline, the report deserves rereading. It should sober up all clairvoyants, past and present.

Goldman's futurologists spun out a mesmerizing tale. The BRICS—Brazil, Russia, India, and China—were on a roll. By 2040, they would outstrip the advanced economies of North America, Japan and the EU. So, onward and upward—if things go right. But they never do.

Like all such prophecies, "Dreaming" has not fared well. Today Russia's GDP ranks just a shade above that of Italy, which has one-third of Russia's population. Twelve years after releasing its report, Goldman closed its BRICS Fund after a loss of \$700 million in assets. This marked the "end of an era," according to the *Financial Times*, "in which the four developing economies appeared to be shaping a new world order." Jim O'Neill, the Goldman team leader, recanted in 2021. "Brazil and Russia [are now] back to where they were 20 years ago. If it weren't for China—and India,

ALSO IN TABLET THIS WEEK

Bibi's New Deal Power Grab

American conservatives should be aghast at Netanyahu's judicial reforms

BY YOAV FROMER

Found in Transliteration

However awkward it may be, rendering Hebrew in English letters allowed generations of American Jews to pray in Hebrew without ever learning to read it

BY JENNA WEISSMAN JOSELIT

Writers of the World, Denounce!

Progressive activists repeat the sins of the past

BY JAMES KIRCHICK

Bibi's Typist

Transcribing the Israeli leader's autobiography helped me see Netanyahu in a new way

BY OPHIR FALK



to some degree—there wouldn't be much of a BRIC story to tell."

Indeed. Retrace real historical GDP (with inflation and exchange rates factored out) from 2003 to the present. The G-7's share of the global take dropped from 67% to 58%. The BRICS scored nicely by nearly doubling theirs from 13% to 24%. But look again. Today, Brazil (below zero growth) and Russia (ditto) are economic basket cases. India added 1 percentage point to its share, which is being eaten up in per capita terms because of explosive population growth. India's per-person GDP ranks just above Zimbabwe's. Only China leaped from 7% to 17% of the global economy.

China's growth, though, has been dissipating as well, and the problem runs deeper than the damage done by

"zero-COVID." The causes are not fleeting. They grow out of an economic model of copying yesteryear's fast risers, Japan, Taiwan and South Korea. Herbert Stein, economic adviser to Nixon and Ford, formulated this law: "If something cannot go on forever, it will stop." China's growth dropped from 14% in 2007 to single-digits in the 2010s—long before COVID.

Why can't double-digit growth last? Behold the downward trajectory of East Asia's *Wunderkinder*. Japan's breathtaking growth ended in 1970, falling to 3% at the end of the decade and segueing into 20 years of stagnation. South Korea used to shine with double-digit gains; in the aughts it averaged around 3%. Taiwan excelled with nearly 10%—down to 4% by the 2010s. What is the lesson for all would-be prophets?

This trio had set the model for China's "catch-up capitalism." It comes in five parts: an export-first growth model, artificially depressed currencies, underconsumption, and overinvestment. Plus, a state on top pouring streams of cheap money into favored industries, which bred collusion and helped to keep out foreign competition. The strategy of the "Little Dragons" yielded phenomenal growth during their takeoff from humble beginnings. These always yield spectacular percentages. As an economy grows into maturity, the rate peters out—the richer, the slower. Germany, using a similar recipe, also grew by leaps and bounds when climbing out from the ashes of World War II. Its "economic miracle" is past history.

China ran with the model of East Asia's early risers while ignoring its already visible flaws. Overinvestment, the brother of cheap money and underconsumption, comes with two curses. One is overcapacity. As one estimate has it, there are 65 million unsold apartments in China. Multiply that by an average of three persons per household, and you could house 200 million people with all the empty apartments in China—the combined total population of Germany, France and Britain. This misdirected capital could have been put to more productive use.

A second curse of overinvestment is an old acquaintance known as the law of

diminishing returns. It states that each new unit of a production factor produces less. In everyday terms: Buy one tractor, and you double the yield; get two or three, and each adds less grain per acre. Five will run into each other and bring the harvest to a standstill.

Nor does the story end here, given China's disastrous demographics. Beijing's worst enemy is the steady decline of its working-age population, driven by plummeting birth rates. Also in January, China went past the tipping point, reporting negative population growth for the first time in 60 years—a loss of 850,000 inhabitants. By midcentury, China will be the oldest big economy in the world, with an army of 350 million pensioners who don't produce but soak up ever more social support resources.

Welfare leaves less for warfare while Beijing keeps arming itself furiously to topple the U.S. from its geopolitical perch, starting in the western Pacific. Among the world's large industrial nations, the U.S. will be the second-youngest after India. "Young" translates into "productive."

A shrinking labor pool raises wages, which eats into China's competitive advantage as the "factory of the world." Nor is this startling news. As early as 2012, a Boston Consulting Group study did the math. "In 2000, factory wages in China averaged just 52 cents an hour, a mere 3 percent of what U.S. factory workers earned. Since then, Chinese wages and benefits have been rising by double-digits each year, averaging increases of 19 percent from 2005 to 2010. The fully loaded costs of U.S. production workers rose by less than 4 percent annually." To boot, productivity is lagging behind labor costs, dropping from a 10% increase in 2010 to 6% just before the pandemic. It is expected to fall for the rest of this decade, according to S&P Global Ratings. So, offshore manufacturing comes home or wanders off to low-wage economies, presently in Asia and tomorrow in Africa.

Let's shift from statistics to the politics of Xi Jinping, leader for life. In the late 1970s, Deng Xiaoping had invented "Sinocapitalism," triggering stunning growth. The party loosened its heavy grip in favor of cultural freedom and

entrepreneurial autonomy, the unwritten motto being, “enrich yourselves, but leave the driving to us!”

Deng thought that growing wealth would keep the masses in line. Under Xi, hogging the wheel ever more tightly beats the national weal. Unleashed capitalism is yielding to a perfect surveillance state that demands obedience and denies initiative. The private sector is shrinking in favor of lavishly funded state-owned enterprises (SOE), which add less value than private firms, stifling efficiency and innovation. So, the puzzle: Why would Xi strangle the golden goose?

Since Lenin, Western sages—think George Bernard Shaw or Jean-Paul Sartre—have fallen for what I call “modernitarianism” as the fastest path to development. The state, they believed, was better than the market, delivering both wealth and equality. They kept

missing the point. In the clash between power and profit, power wins. Even assuming that Xi’s henchmen had told him the truth about “zero-COVID” as an economy killer, why would a despot care? When reality knocks, control comes first, suppressing real-time feedback. Until very recently, Beijing methodically suppressed the horrifying COVID data.

Vladimir Putin keeps pillaging Ukraine, and never mind his sinking economy. His underlings will not risk their careers by confronting him with the bad news on and off the battlefield. In the sloppy, anarchic West, corrective feedback is built-in, and free markets don’t lie—they are the best information systems governments have. It is an iron law: The more concentrated the power, the less nations can adapt to economic ruptures. Five-year plans don’t allow for speedy revision.

Democracies cannot squelch dissent; that is their enduring advantage over the authoritarians. In crisis, strongmen invariably resort to suppression, which is good for them but bad for the economy. Repression does not increase returns, as the experience of all autocrats shows, most recently in Venezuela, Iran, and Russia. Xi’s China is looking at a similar fate. When power rules, growth falters.

The prophets who keep announcing the decline of the West and rise of the rest should recall Yogi Berra, who once quipped: “It’s tough to make predictions, especially about the future.” As to China, a slightly amended Yogism would be right on target: Its “future ain’t what it used to be.” Diviners beware. Leave prophecy to the Isaiah’s and Jeremiah’s. ■

This article was originally published on February 20, 2023.

COMMUNITY

Opening Our Home to Ukrainian Refugees

More than a century after my own great-grandfather left Odessa for America, a family from Kharkiv found refuge in our house in New York

BY RACHEL JACOBY ROSENFELD

I have a black-and-white photograph of a man in his 20s: dark wavy hair, mustached, staring grimly at the camera. On the back, the name of the studio in Odessa where it was taken. It is my great-grandfather Morris Verechovsky. He came to America shortly after the photo was taken, changed his name to Morris White, and married my great-grandmother Sarah, whom I knew when I was a young child. I don’t know much more about Morris. Nevertheless, when a fellowship program for Jewish professionals brought

me to Odessa in 2008, I asked my Ukrainian colleague Alina to take me to the address on the back of the photo. I felt I was reaching into the past as I stood in the doorway my great-grandfather had once crossed, if only to have his photograph taken, trying to understand something about his story and therefore my own.

Fourteen years later, I read the news in horror as people fled for their lives after Russia invaded Ukraine. My colleague Alina went to the border on her own steam, asking people what they needed, and then running to the store

to purchase hundreds of pairs of underwear. Later in New York, sitting with me over drinks, she told me about the cruelty and devastation, about people packing for two weeks only to realize after crossing the border that it would be months or even years before they could return to their homes, if ever. I imagined my great-grandfather’s loneliness and confusion as he left Odessa amid pogroms. Someone here must have helped him. I felt a strong pull to help that I can only describe as being called, and so I blurted out, “Our kids have both left for college, we have an empty nest. Our doors are open.” Five days later Alina texted me: “There’s a family that needs a place to stay in New York. A couple and their 2-year-old daughter.”

I spoke with Vira* for the first time the next day. She was so cheerful, self-possessed, and positive that I found myself momentarily confused and asking the absurd question of why she left Kharkiv. “The war!” she answered, taken aback. We set a time to meet two days later at our home in New York.

In the short video Vira sent me after we spoke, a small child bundled in a heavy

coat and knit hat crawled quickly across a table as a siren blares in the background. There were packed bags on the edges of the frame. Her frantic movement captured their need to leave and quickly. An accompanying photo taken in San Diego showed Vira in a brilliant red dress holding a huge teddy bear in one arm and that same little girl in the other. Anna was also dressed in red, they both smiled widely. A young man with a light beard embraced them both; this is Ivan.

They left Kharkiv a month into the war. “Bombs were falling all around us,” Vira said, gesturing toward Anna, now playing with the train set I saved from when my children were small. “There wasn’t a choice.”

They got in their car gripped with fear, carrying two small backpacks, a jar of cash, and papers demonstrating that Ivan had recently been hospitalized with a serious medical condition (so he couldn’t be drafted). They drove toward the border with Moldova. They reached a part of the road flanked by forest, no other cars in sight but an unmarked enormous tank coming toward them from the opposite side of the road. If the tank were Russian, they knew they would be killed. Vira shut her eyes and held her breath. “It must have been Ukrainian,” she said, now standing in my kitchen. They made it to Moldova, then to Romania and then to Bulgaria. From there, they made their way to Mexico and then across the border to the United States.

Refugees from Ukraine who crossed the border into the U.S. prior to April 11, 2022, have Temporary Protected Status (TPS). Those who crossed on or after April 21 are part of the Uniting for Ukraine program, which lasts two years and presumably has a process for renewal. Our family, the Kovalenkos, arrived on April 12, during the 10 days between these programs.

The Kovalenkos are considered “parolees,” just passing through on their way to ... who knows where. They have work authorization papers and visas that expire on April 10, 2023, just 363 days after arrival. We have been unable to find any means of determining how or whether these credentials for residing

and working in the United States will be renewed.

They and thousands of others will lose their right to live and work here in less than two months. They may have to give up their jobs, leave the country and then begin all over again.

In late August, Vira and Anna, dressed in matching powder blue chiffon dresses, knocked on our door for the first time. Ivan, who was still in Southern California, joined us on Facetime as I walked them around our modest narrow and vertical brick home in Riverdale. *This is the guest room where you can stay, if you’d like*, I told them. *Anna can stay in one of the children’s rooms. Here’s the bathroom you will use—you’ll be sharing it with our two children when they are home from college. And there are two things you need to know about us that are a little strange. The first is that we keep Shabbat. The second is that we keep kosher.*

Apart from all that, I said, I think we are “pretty normal.” Before I could reassure her further Vira accepted our offer. “Two months” she said, “we will be able to find jobs and move out within two months.”

“OK,” we said, “but no one will kick you out. It may take longer than that to get on your feet.”

They moved in two days later; Ivan joined them the following week. I felt nervous and a little guilty that I had drawn my whole family into a commitment that would at the very least mean a significant loss of privacy. And we didn’t know this family, the dynamics between them, or how they felt about us as Americans or Jews. And yet, what if we were in the same situation? How would we hope that others would behave toward us? Again, I thought of Morris White—it wasn’t that long ago that we were, in fact, very much like them.

That first Friday night Vira and Anna were with us, we set the table for Shabbat with a tablecloth the color of Ukrainian sunflowers. A delighted Vira took photographs for her Instagram feed. We sang “*Shalom Aleichem*,” blessed our children, who were home for one last week before returning to college,

and washed for *motzi*. More than once I thought of the words in the Passover Haggadah, “let all who are hungry come and eat.” We had opened our doors, and this family now sitting at our Shabbat table had crossed the threshold. The next week, Anna took to playing Shabbat, pulling a stepstool up to the couch with a little toy teacup in her hand and pretending to splash the water alternately over each hand as she’d seen us do.

Ivan arrived the following week. He is an introvert to Vira’s extrovert. “I don’t know how you people live in a city like this,” he said as he walked in the door. Vira explained that this was Ukrainian humor.

Ivan picked pieces of onion out of the soup I cooked. “They remind me of my childhood,” Ivan said. “My grandmother used to make soup with pieces of onion—that’s all it was, water and onion.”

“They were very poor,” Vira added. “This was after the fall of the FSU [former Soviet Union] and there was no food to eat.”

In mid-September, about two weeks into their stay with us, I realized I should prepare them for our observance of the Jewish High Holidays. “We have a lot of holidays coming up,” I started, “and I thought I’d tell you about them so you know what’s up.”

Ivan, without missing a beat, asked if I meant the new year, and in response to my look of surprise, Vira jumped in to explain: “His grandmother who raised him is Jewish. Everyone in Ukraine is Jewish.” (Several months later she asserted that everyone in Ukraine is Christian—both are probably true.) I was shocked that this was the first time Ivan and Vira thought to mention their connection to Judaism; how could they think it was irrelevant? But this small piece of a shared heritage strengthened our sense of connection to the Kovalenkos and deepened our trust.

I practiced blowing shofar before the holidays. Ivan gave it a try, turning red-faced and laughing as he failed to make a sound. We hung drawings Anna made in school from the bamboo that covered our sukkah. The construction paper fluttered over our heads as we enjoyed the borscht that Ivan prepared, not unlike the one my grandmother used to serve.

In the first several weeks they were with us, Vira and Ivan spent hours on their computers, searching for and applying for jobs. Vira wrote a strong cover letter, agreeing with reluctance to describe herself as a refugee, only as an explanation of her work history. “I hate that word,” she said. Ivan was more sanguine, confident in his experience as a software designer, but more impatient with the process of resume writing. In the end they both found jobs within a month of each other, Ivan as a front-end software designer for a kitchen appliance outfit in Brooklyn, Vira as a case manager for a faith-based social service organization for other Ukrainian parolees. They were happy to hire someone who speaks Ukrainian, Russian, and English and who was obviously completely overqualified, and they didn’t know that Vira was also a parolee with expiring authorization to work. Ivan’s employer did not know, either.

The Kovalenkos are living with us. We fall into a routine; summer becomes fall becomes winter.

Anna’s toys are now scattered across our living room. The closet is stuffed with extra coats and smells vaguely of Ivan’s cigarettes, and the fridge is packed. A stroller is collapsed in our front entry way next to a miniature plastic Mercedes, a replacement for the one Anna had in Kharkiv. Vira’s and Anna’s matching white sweaters hang on the drying rack in the laundry room, and Ivan, now given license to work from home, sits at our dining room table working on his laptop.

When I come home from work, the smells of newly cooked food greet me, sometimes the sweet cinnamon of cheesecakes or *blintzchikis*, sometimes the unmistakable scent of baked fish. Ivan cooks with his sense of smell—lifting lids and sniffing at the rising aromas to determine what’s inside. He hovers as I cook, asking me the names of things and how to tell the difference between the words “pour,” “pure,” and “poor.” I’m tired after a long day at work and these English lessons require more patience than I can easily muster. But then, Anna comes through the door from the Russian-speaking day care that has waived

“When I ask Vira what she misses, she answers she is glad the three of them made it out with their limbs intact.”

her fees. She is stuffed into her snow pants and down jacket with a powder pink knit hat tied beneath her chin. She waddles toward me with her arms outstretched. “My Rachel!” she shouts with pleasure and falls into my lap for a cuddle.

I love this little girl.

There are also the mornings that we awaken to the sounds of urgent conversation in Ukrainian: Vira’s parents are locked out of the car in the mountains in Bulgaria, delaying their efforts to immigrate to the Czech Republic. When they eventually arrive, they are told that there is no longer a program to absorb Ukrainian refugees, and they will need to return to Bulgaria. Vira and I cry together in the kitchen, overwhelmed by the challenges she and her family face.

This is what it is like to live with another family at a moment when their lives are in upheaval, when they are trying to orient themselves in a new city, learn a new language, parent their small child.

The Kovalenkos move out on Jan. 15. A neighbor’s family is on sabbatical for six months and offers to rent their home at a rate significantly below market. It’s a sacrifice for them, and a stretch for the Kovalenkos. Vira is very anxious about taking on monthly rent when their futures are so uncertain. I

share her concern and I am truly sad as they stuff all the toys they’ve accumulated into FreshDirect bags. I will miss them and yet I feel it’s time for them to reconstitute themselves as a family, to have their own space and privacy. And of course, my family is relieved to return to the normal routine of our own lives. And yet I wonder: What will it be like for them to be back together as a family, without us there as caretakers, translators, and witnesses? And what will it be like for us to come home to a house without a warm oven, without a little girl bursting through the door, calling us her own?

Vira curates a beautiful Instagram feed. As I scroll through her feed, I see images of her life in Kharkiv before the war. There she is dressed to the nines pushing a Cadillac of a stroller. There they all are, framed by bouquets of silver balloons celebrating Anna’s first birthday. There she is, a newly minted Ph.D., posing outside a university building in Kharkiv. She looks chic in her over-the-knee black suede boots. All of her Kharkiv photos from before the war are captioned with the hashtag #NYC, where she dreamed of someday going. Now it is where they are building a new life.

They have gumption, smarts, and relentless optimism.

When I ask Vira what she misses, she answers she is glad the three of them made it out with their limbs intact. Their apartment building is still standing, though bombs have eviscerated the neighboring buildings. Their wedding album and other prized possessions were rescued from the apartment by friends who tucked them away in closets and under beds. “When we are more sure of our status here,” says Vira, “we will ask them to send these things.” I think of the ways that the address in Odessa on the back of my grandfather’s photo somehow connected us to the Kovalenkos across generations and geography. My heart breaks for all they have lost—not just their jobs, their friends, their community, but the material objects that can unlock family narratives for generations to come.

The family has lawyers working pro

bono on their case, and we have spoken with our representatives. As the expiration of their work and residence authorization nears, Vira is circulating a petition calling for the United States Customs and Immigration Service to fold the Ukrainians who arrived during the mid-April gap into the Uniting for Ukraine program. She has started a WhatsApp group for others who share her liminal status. It has more than 2,000 members.

We have settled into a new routine: stopping by their home to bring pizza and play with Anna, sending photographs throughout the day and updating one another, with increasing apprehension, of their options come April 10. I am unsettled that despite our efforts and the strong conviction that how we responded reflects our heritage and values as both Jews and Americans, that the Kovalenkos will be forced to give up their jobs and leave

the country. When Anna comes to visit she crawls into my lap and holds my face in her hands. “My Rachel!” And I feel I am her Rachel and also Morris White’s great-granddaughter, honoring both his legacy and the efforts of those who helped him make a new life in this country. ■

**Names have been changed
This article was originally published on February 21, 2023*

NEWS

Welcome to America’s Racialized Medical Schools

Forget about the oath to do no harm, future doctors are being forced to swear allegiance to racial dogmas

BY JOHN SAILER

Earlier this month, the White House announced a five-year plan for redressing racial inequality. It is essentially the Biden administration’s version of a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) plan, like those issued by nearly every major university, only at a vastly larger scale. The policy aims to “advance an ambitious, whole-of-government approach to racial equity and support for underserved communities” by embedding equity goals in every aspect of the government.

From the highest offices of the state down to the smallest local bureaucracies, DEI now pervades almost all levels of American society. And while it was once thought that the fringe racial theories that animate the DEI agenda could be confined to small liberal arts campuses, it is clear that is no longer the case.

Increasingly, medical schools and schools of public health are enthusiastically embracing the values of DEI and instituting far-reaching policies to demonstrate their commitments to the cause. To many in the universities and perhaps in the country at large, these values sound benign—merely an invitation to treat everyone fairly. In practice, however, DEI policies often promote a narrow set of ideological views that elevate race and gender to matters of supreme importance.

That ideology is exemplified by a research methodology called “public health critical race praxis” (PHCRP)—designed, as the name suggests, to apply critical race theory to the field of public health—which asserts that “the ubiquity of racism, not its absence, characterizes society’s normal state.” In practice, PHCRP involves embracing sweeping claims about the primacy of

racialization, guided by statements like “socially constructed racial categories are the bases for ordering society.”

These race-first imperatives have now come to influence the research priorities of major institutions. Perhaps no better case study exists than that of the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), an institution devoted exclusively to the medical sciences, and one of the top recipients of federal grants from the National Institutes of Health. Last May, UCSF took the unprecedented step of creating a separate Task Force on Equity and Anti-Racism in Research, which proceeded to make dozens of recommendations.

That task force builds on layers of prior DEI bureaucratic expansion, spanning nearly a decade. This programming includes the “UCSF Anti-Racism Initiative,” started after the summer of 2020, which established dozens of new institutional policies throughout the university, such as “evaluating contributions to diversity statements in faculty advancement portfolios.” The School of Medicine, meanwhile, has published its own Timeline of DEI and Anti-Racism Efforts, which documents such steps as adding a “social justice pillar” to the school’s curriculum and creating an anti-racist curriculum advisory committee.

The policies often promote an idiosyncratic and controversial understanding of concepts like diversity and racism. Through its Difference Matters initiative, the medical school created a document titled “Anti-Racism and Race Literacy: A Primer and Toolkit

for Medical Educators”—which is filled with eyebrow-raising assertions. Racism, the guide asserts, “refers to the prioritization of the people who are considered white and the devaluation, exploitation, and exclusion of people racialized as non-white.” Anti-racism, meanwhile, involves directly shifting power from those who are white to those who are Black. “Anti-racism examines and disrupts the power imbalances between racialized and non-racialized people (white people), to shift power away from those who have been historically over-advantaged and towards people of color, especially Black people.” Of course, when applied to the allocation of lifesaving medical care, these ideals can carry weighty consequences. During the height of the COVID pandemic, New York, Minnesota, and Utah issued guidance for allocating monoclonal antibodies that heavily prioritized racial and ethnic minorities.

While this hyper-racialized approach has long been the norm in humanities departments, it now appears to have fully crossed over into the hard sciences as well, with medical schools leading the charge. Med schools across the country have aggressively embraced DEI programming, often instituting policies that promote a narrow vision of social justice. In 2021, the University of Michigan Medical School created its Anti-Racism Oversight Committee Action Plan, making a set of new policy recommendations that had won the endorsement of the medical school’s leadership. That action plan called for

“From the highest offices of the state down to the smallest local bureaucracies, DEI now pervades every level of American society.”

a new curriculum to help inculcate a “demonstrated increase in understandings of DEI, antiracism, and intersectionality concepts in medical students and residents.” For medical residents, the plan stipulated that the curriculum should be based on Ibram X. Kendi’s book *Stamped from the Beginning*.

Some of these initiatives create obvious issues of academic freedom. In 2020, the UNC School of Medicine created a “Task Force for Integrating Social Justice Into the Curriculum,” issuing a report with dozens of recommendations. One called for faculty to adhere to “core concepts of anti-racism,” listing several of these required “concepts,” including “race is not a set biological category” and “specific organs and cells do not belong to specific genders.” The task force also called for students to “be trained in core advocacy skills”—even listing a number of political causes that it deemed important for students to embrace. These causes, which the report labeled “health realms,” included “restoring U.S. leadership to reverse climate change,” and “achieving radical reform of the US criminal justice system.” The school initially listed every recommendation as “On Time” on an online implementation tracker, though it eventually walked back some of the more controversial requirements.

All of this comes under the broad umbrella of “diversity, equity, and inclusion,” illustrating how the term is both far more radical and more deeply entrenched than its defenders often claim.

Shorn of any context, the principles of diversity and inclusion strike many people as unobjectionable, and even laudable. But in practice they are used as a shorthand for a set of divisive ideological dogmas and bureaucratic power grabs. Under the banner of DEI, medical institutions that are supposed to focus on protecting human life are being sacrificed on the altar of the racialist ideology.

Because of the ideological project associated with DEI initiatives, critics often highlight their effect on curriculum and teaching. But the more potent effect, in the long run, could end up being on scientific research and scholarship.

For the UCSF Task Force on Equity and Anti-Racism in Research, the stated goal is to transform the university’s research enterprise. “To truly rectify the entrenched, structural harms from racism in research,” the task force report notes, “we must start from its foundations in the way that we privilege knowledge, methods, and people. The overarching changes required to mitigate racism in research is a philosophical shift in the mindset of those in power and those who produce research.”

Although the policies listed in the report are only recommendations, some have already been implemented, and many are likely to be in the future. The report’s first recommendation, for example, calls for a new vice chancellor for DEI in research. In September, UCSF announced the role was given to Tung Nguyen, co-chair of the task force. The report—referred to by Nguyen as a “labor of love and trauma”—states that the recommended policies will show that “anti-racism” is “centered in all aspects of the way we work and function as a research enterprise.” That includes emphasizing diversity statements even more strongly in the promotion and tenure process, and evaluating university leadership along such lines as their “record of hiring women and members of historically excluded populations.” Not necessarily



PODCASTS

THREADING THE NEEDLE

In Episode 350 of the ‘Unorthodox’ podcast, Ashley McKinless and Zac Davis talk about Lent, and we travel across the JEW.S.A. to Seattle



the qualities that people suffering from serious illnesses would look for in their medical care providers.

The task force calls for inserting similar DEI requirements into its research enterprise and adding “scoring criteria on equity and anti-racism” to UCSF’s internal grant programs. It recommends expanding UCSF’s existing anti-racism research grant program—something Nguyen has emphasized since taking his new role. The report itself links to UCSF’s “Pilot for Anti-Racism Research” program, which funds small research projects within the university. That program provides perhaps the clearest articulation of what UCSF means by “anti-racism research.” It borrows the language of UCSF’s “Anti-Racism and Race Literacy” guide, noting: “Anti-racism examines and disrupts the power imbalances between racialized and non-racialized people, to shift power away from those who have been historically over-advantaged and towards people of color.” It later adds, “Anti-racism research uses approaches such as the Public Health Critical Race Praxis for applying Critical Race Theory to empirical research.”

In other words, under the new ideological regime that has taken power both inside the federal bureaucracy and in institutions like UCSF, even medical research has become yet another front in a larger ideological battle. Tomorrow’s doctors and medical experts are being selected and trained on the basis of their willingness to “disrupt power imbalances between racialized and non-racialized people.”

Much of the report raises obvious concerns. Some, for instance, might reject the task force’s assertion that racism pervades all areas of the university—especially in such a progressive bastion as UC San Francisco. It is telling that the university seems to actively encourage this assumption in research, but also unsurprising—after all, the “ordinariness of racism” is one of the tenets of public health critical race praxis, which is now being pushed by Nguyen under the guise of anti-racism research.

More broadly, many of these measures could pose a threat to academic

“The task force also called for students to ‘be trained in core advocacy skills’—even listing a number of political causes that it deemed important for students to embrace.”

freedom. Organizations such as the Academic Freedom Alliance and the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression have argued against mandatory diversity statements. After all, given that DEI is often associated with a narrow set of social and political views, it’s not hard to see how evaluating a professor’s commitment to DEI invites viewpoint discrimination. An “anti-racism” advisory board that reviews grants would only extend that policy further.

By the time it published the report, the UCSF task force was aware of all of these issues. Each had been brought up by UCSF employees during the comment period. The comments were published in the report’s appendixes, which make up perhaps the most telling part of the whole publication.

One commenter repeated the same line in every answer: “I fundamentally do not feel or have ever felt that UCSF is a racist place. These are grossly misdirected funds and efforts.” Several cautioned against embracing discriminatory policies in the name of anti-racism. “All of the above sounds to me like trying to fight racism with more racism,” one noted. Still others urge the task force not to distract from UCSF’s focus on scientific research. As one commenter put it, “UCSF is a medical and life science campus. Its strength lies in

its objective data-driven experimental approach. Qualitative and sociological research has no place at UCSF and no place in scientific medical research and will undermine UCSF’s reputation.”

Yet rather than addressing the concerns of the school’s employees, the report attacks them while presenting its authors as the real victims.

It is important to note that while many of the comments received were constructive and helpful, task force members were traumatized by a striking number of comments that denied the existence of inequities and racism, and others that minimized the burden that racism has imposed, particularly on Black Americans at UCSF.

The forward to the report quotes one of the task force co-chairs, Sun Yu Cotter, who adds:

It is extremely important to acknowledge the magnitude of the emotional labor and trauma that many of the Task Force members endured in doing this work, particularly during the public comment period. Not only are many of the Task Force members, especially our Black colleagues, encountering and navigating racism on a daily basis at work and outside of work, we are also volunteering our very limited time to dive into grueling work (the minority tax is real!). Then to be gaslit by some members of our very own UCSF community was very painful.

Take note. This is the future of American medicine. ■

This article was originally published on February 22, 2023.

FOOD

Culinary history, recipes,
and ideas at
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THE REST

→ At a news conference on Tuesday, **Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro said the “arrogance and incompetence” of Norfolk Southern’s “failed management” of the crisis that followed its train derailment earlier this month in East Palestine, Ohio, has prompted him to make a “criminal referral”** to his state’s attorney general’s office. Speaking alongside Shapiro, Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine said the train crash near the Ohio-Pennsylvania border shows the need to update the regulations that dictate how trains carry dangerous chemicals across state lines. According to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Michael Regan, if Norfolk Southern doesn’t properly handle the cost for the cleanup and damage done because of the chemical fallout, his “agency will immediately step in, conduct the work ourselves and then force Norfolk Southern to pay triple the cost,” he said. But the Northern Kentucky Water District isn’t waiting around for Norfolk; it announced it closed off its water intake from the possibly polluted Ohio River after finding chemicals in the water.

→ After proving their mettle in Ukraine, **autonomous drone swarms, the next generation of military technology, are getting the royal treatment at the U.S. Department of Defense.** As part of its new Autonomous Multi-Domain Adaptive Swarms-of-Swarms project, the DoD will develop fleets of swarms made up of thousands of independent drones that can take off from aircraft or on the ground and coordinate attacks on enemy jets or other pieces of critical military infrastructure. Relatively inexpensive as far as military weapons go, a recent analysis by the RAND Corporation found that drone swarms could become decisive pieces of equipment should the U.S. military need to intervene in Taiwan following a Chinese invasion of the independent island nation.

→ Settled science on the history of our universe just became a little less settled after **researchers reported on Wednesday in the journal Nature that six mega galaxies were found to have existed sometime within 600 million years of the Big Bang.** Using the James Webb Space Telescope, scientists at Australia’s Swinburne University of Technology were stunned to find six galaxies that appear to weigh billions of times more than our sun, suggesting a string of galaxies that preceded the creation of our universe. “The revelation that massive galaxy formation began extremely early in the history of the universe upends what many of us had thought was settled science,” Pennsylvania State University’s Joel Leja, who collaborated on the project, said in a statement.

→ **Number of the Week: 80%.** That’s the percentage of all **American Jewish adults who say antisemitism has worsened over the past five years**, according to new research from the American Jewish Committee. Carrying out a pair of studies at the end of 2022, researchers found that more than 1 in every 4 American Jews had been the target of either an online or in-person physical attack motivated by antisemitism. Anti-Jewish sentiment was front and center over the weekend at **a girl’s high school basketball game** between Shalhevet Firehawks and the Buena Park Coyotes, with Shalhevet **players retelling several episodes of antisemitism** to the *Jewish Journal*. “My friend was standing across the gym by the other team when she texted me and told me they were chanting Kanye West at her the entire game. They were shouting at her and yelling that they were going to fight after the game,” one player said. “When our girls were shooting foul shots, some Buena Park students held up pictures of Swastikas on their phones to distract them.”

THE BIG STORY

Deepening the relationship between Russia and China, Russian President Vladimir Putin confirmed that he will soon host Chinese leader Xi Jinping in Moscow. The comments came during a visit to Moscow by China’s top diplomat, Wang Yi, on Wednesday. Wang was wrapping up a tour of visits with European leaders after three years of pandemic seclusion had weakened China’s diplomatic relations abroad. “Beijing is ready to strengthen cooperation with Moscow in the interests of our countries and the whole world,” Wang said, a statement that underscores the failure of the Biden administration’s efforts to drive a wedge between the United States’ two premier rivals.

Beijing has maintained its “no limits” friendship with Moscow—and continued to serve as an economic lifeline from Western sanctions—even as it publicly assumes a new role as a lead negotiator to the end of the war in Ukraine. Western leaders remain skeptical, however, waiting to see if Beijing will replenish Moscow’s dwindling arms store or legitimately attempt to pressure Putin into accepting the terms of a peace deal.

Putin, for his part, announced on Tuesday during a state address that Russia will withdraw from a nuclear arms treaty, and he accused the United States of fueling a world war because of its ongoing support for Ukraine.

—Sean Cooper

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Finland Takes Another Look at Youth Gender Medicine

A recent interview with the country's top gender expert shows how out of step the American medical establishment is with its European counterparts

BY LEOR SAPIR

Dr. Riittakerttu Kaltiala knows gender medicine. She is the top expert on pediatric gender medicine in Finland and the chief psychiatrist at one of its two government-approved pediatric gender clinics, at Tampere University, where she has presided over youth gender transition treatments since 2011. Her research has even been cited—though not accurately—by American supporters of “affirming care” for gender-dysphoric youth. She is one of the last people in the world who could be accused of being “reactionary,” a “transphobe,” or uninformed on the subject of trans health care.

Earlier this month, however, just a few days before Finland passed a law granting its adult citizens the right to have their self-defined gender recognized in government documents, Dr. Kaltiala gave an interview with *Helsingin Sanomat*, Finland's liberal newspaper of record. Her comments were a sobering reminder of just how out of step the American medical establishment is with its European counterparts when it comes to treating minors who reject their sex.

The background to this interview is important. Finland was among the first countries to adopt the “Dutch protocol” for pediatric gender medicine, which prescribes—in certain restricted cases—the use of puberty blockers and cross-sex hormones to treat adolescent

gender dysphoria. By 2015, however, Finnish gender specialists, including Kaltiala, were noticing that most of their patients did not match the profile of those treated in the Netherlands and did not meet the Dutch protocol's relatively strict eligibility requirements for drug treatments. Due to the extremely high rate at which children with gender issues come to terms with their bodies (or “desist”) by adulthood, the Dutch protocol requires patients to have gender dysphoria that begins before puberty and intensifies in adolescence. It also requires them to have no serious co-occurring mental health problems, to undergo at least six months of psychotherapy, and to have the support of their family for hormonal treatments.

Within a few years of their country adopting the Dutch protocol in 2011, however, Finnish researchers noticed a sharp rise in the number of patients referred for services. Most of these patients were teenage girls with no history of dysphoria in childhood, and some 75% had a history of severe psychopathology prior to the emergence of their gender-related distress. During this same time period, the U.K.'s largest pediatric gender clinic, at the Tavistock Centre, witnessed a 3,360% surge in patient referrals between 2009 and 2018. Most of the new patients were females—whose representation in the clinic rose 4,400% during this time frame—with a history of serious psychological problems and no gender dysphoria prior to adolescence. Similar trends were being

observed in other countries with pediatric gender clinics, including the United States. In 2018, the American physician-researcher Lisa Littman published a study suggesting that teenage girls with high rates of mental health problems were suddenly declaring a transgender identity, often in friend groups and after prolonged exposure to social media.

A year later, Kaltiala and her Finnish colleagues observed in a peer-reviewed article that “[r]esearch on adolescent onset gender dysphoria is scarce, and optimal treatment options have not been established ... The reasons for the sudden increase in treatment-seeking due to adolescent onset gender dysphoria/transgender identification are not known.” This lack of research, and lingering doubts about the Dutch protocol itself (the only attempt to replicate it in the U.K. failed), led health authorities in Finland, Sweden, and the U.K. to conduct systematic reviews of evidence for the benefits and risks of hormonal interventions.

Systematic reviews represent the highest level of evidence analysis in evidence based medicine. The three European countries that did these reviews independently came to the same conclusion: Due to their severe methodological limitations, studies cited in support of hormonal interventions for adolescents are of “very low” certainty. For health authorities in these countries, this meant that the studies were too unreliable to justify the risks and uncertainties of “gender affirming care.” Sweden, Finland, and England have since placed severe restrictions on access to hormones. Although these countries now allow hormones in a very carefully selected cohort of patients who fulfill the criteria of the Dutch protocol, they do so against the findings of their own systematic reviews. That is because the systematic reviews found the Dutch study, on which the Dutch protocol is based, also provides “very low” certainty evidence. Finland's Council for Choices in Healthcare recognizes medical transition for minors as “an experimental practice.”

Kaltiala was a major force behind the decision to reverse course in Finland.

More recently, she testified before the Florida medical boards in support of their decision to restrict access to puberty blockers, cross-sex hormones, and surgeries for minors.

Asked by *Helsingin Sanomat* what she thought of gender self-identification for minors—a proposed element of the new Finnish law that did not ultimately pass—Kaltiala emphasized that it is “important to accept [children] as they are,” but this means neither pressuring a child to conform to behaviors traditionally associated with the child’s sex nor “negating the body” by confirming that the child’s gender self-identification is real. “In either case,” said the psychiatrist, “the child gets a message that there is something wrong with him or her.” Evidence from a combined 12 studies to date demonstrates that when children with cross-gender or gender variant behavior are left to develop naturally, the vast majority—“four out of five,” according to Kaltiala—come to terms with their bodies and learn to accept their sex. When they are socially transitioned, virtually none do.

That most children desist from cross-sex identification does not necessarily mean that they will no longer experience any distress associated with their bodies; rather, it means that even if such distress lingers, it will not prevent them from becoming reasonably well-adjusted and living a good life. The notion that no human should ever have to experience any discomfort associated with male or female embodiment, including during the turbulent period of puberty, is the utopian promise fueling much of the gender transition industry. There has been a growing movement among gender activists to frame puberty as something that the autonomous, disembodied, self should have a “right” to choose. “Neither puberty suppression nor allowing puberty to occur is a neutral act,” writes the World Professional Association for Transgender Health in the seventh version of its Standards of Care.

Unlike progressive elites in the United States, who seem to regard social affirmation of “transgender children” as little more than an act of kindness, Kaltiala sees it as a powerful intervention in

a young person’s psychosocial development with potential for iatrogenic harm (i.e., harm caused by the treatment itself). Gender self-identification in youth is not a mere clerical “formality.” In Kaltiala’s words, “it’s a message saying that this is the right path for you.” Kaltiala thus concurs with NHS England, which recently noted that social transition—using a child’s preferred name and pronouns—is “not a neutral act” but rather one that can solidify what is otherwise likely to be a passing phase into a more permanent state of mind, or “identity,” and put the minor on a path to drugs and surgeries. The NHS now warns of the risks of social transition in children and recommends it only for adolescents who have been diagnosed with gender dysphoria and have provided informed consent.

As for adolescents, Kaltiala distinguishes between the minority whose dysphoria began in childhood and intensified during puberty and those whose dysphoria first appeared after the onset of puberty. For members of the first group, who qualify under the Dutch study, Kaltiala suggested that gender identity discordance may be more stable—although it should be emphasized that there are no controlled, longitudinal studies confirming this observation, and some experts believe that medicalizing teenagers even in this cohort creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. As for teenagers whose dysphoria began in puberty, these are, to repeat, primarily females with extremely high rates of co-occurring mental health conditions. Since “the phenomenon is new” and “there is no scientific knowledge about the constancy of this experience,” Kaltiala explains, it would be irresponsible to cement their gender self-identification in state documents.

Advocates of the American “affirmative” approach tend to ignore the broader trends of mental health collapse among teenagers over the past few decades, a deeply concerning trend that seems to affect girls in particular and is linked to social media use. Utilizing a “minority stress” framework developed in research on homosexuality and borrowed for this purpose, activists insist that co-occurring mental health

problems including anxiety, depression, ADHD, and eating disorders are caused by “unaffirmed” gender and can be solved or mitigated through social and medical transition. Autism in particular seems to be especially common in youth who identify as transgender and seek medical transition. A 2019 study on patients at the U.K.’s largest pediatric gender clinic found that 48% were in the autism range. In her book *The Gender Creative Child*, “gender affirming care” advocate Dr. Diane Ehrensaft suggests that gender transition can even be a “cure” for autism.

“The developmental mission of youth is not helped by the fact that young people’s self-expression is supported and directed from the outside,” Kaltiala said. “The environment should also not commit to identity experiments in a way that might make a later change of direction anxiety-inducing.” These comments are consistent with findings from the Netherlands, where social transition was linked with persistence of gender dysphoria and difficulty coming to term with one’s body and sex.

On the question of why so many minors are rejecting their sex (up to 9.1%, one U.S. study found), *Helsingin Sanomat* suggested that “many young people grab the idea available in the media and social media that their problems are caused by gender identity and will be solved if others start to see them as members of the other sex.” But that does not work, according to Kaltiala. “A balance of mind does not come from making others do and see what you want.” The Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau called this *amour propre*: self-love conditional upon how one is viewed by others. The problem Kaltiala is describing is characteristic of identity politics more broadly: If not just your dignity as a human but your very existence depends upon others agreeing with your self-characterization, you are destined for chronic existential dread. This is not a recipe for authenticity, let alone happiness.

Turning to the question of suicide, which has become virtually the only argument that “gender affirming” activists make in support of their preferred practice, Kaltiala did not pull her punches.

The popular “transition or suicide” narrative used by activists to push back against state reform efforts is, in Kaltiala’s words, “purposeful disinformation, and spreading it is irresponsible.”

Much of the public confusion about the suicide issue stems from a simple correlation-causation fallacy. While there *is* evidence that teenagers who identify as transgender have elevated rates of suicide and suicidality (a behavior that, researchers emphasize, often involved thoughts of suicide or nonfatal self-harming gestures and should not to be confused with actual suicide or serious attempts to end one’s life), there is *no* evidence that their elevated risk is *because of* unaffirmed gender identity *or* that social and medical transition will reduce their risk for self-harm. Studies purporting to find that hormones reduce suicidality are typically designed in such a way that valid inferences about cause and effect cannot be drawn. Considering that roughly three-quarters of teenagers who present to gender clinics these days have preexisting mental health conditions like depression and autism, which are themselves risk factors for suicidality, it is probably more accurate to say that teenagers with suicidal inclinations are more likely to gravitate toward a trans identity.

Thankfully, moreover, suicide is extremely rare even among transgender-identified youth. There was no epidemic of suicides among gender-distressed teenagers before “gender affirming” hormones became available roughly 15 years ago. A study from the U.K. found that the suicide rate among minors seeking medical transition between 2010 and 2020 was 0.03%—nothing close to the 41% risk commonly cited by American activists. Suicide, according to *Helsingin Sanomat*, was a “very rare occurrence in about ten years among young people seeking gender identity diagnoses. On the other hand, in a large Swedish study, suicide mortality had clearly increased among adults who had received gender reassignment treatments.” For Kaltiala, “it is not justified to tell the parents of young people identifying as transgender that a young person is at risk of suicide

“There was no epidemic of suicides among gender-distressed teenagers before ‘gender affirming’ hormones became available roughly 15 years ago.”

without medical treatments and that the danger can be alleviated with gender reassignment.”

Indeed, the suicide discourse that has come to dominate gender transition activism may itself contribute more to youth self-harm than the bans on hormones and surgeries currently being passed in U.S. states. As Alison Clayton has argued in a peer-reviewed paper, “an excessive focus on an exaggerated suicide risk narrative by clinicians and the media may create a damaging nocebo effect (... “self-fulfilling prophecy” ...) whereby suicidality in these vulnerable youths may be further exacerbated.” Tell kids that being suicidal is inherent to being transgender and that only hormones will solve their problem, and many may indeed become suicidal. The “affirm or suicide” discourse also runs counter to the recommendations of the Centers for Disease Control, which emphasizes that “[s]uicide is never the result of a single factor or event” and warns against “presenting simplistic explanations for suicide.” It’s hard to think of a better example of “simplistic explanations” than “trans kids kill themselves when not given hormones.”

Why the obsessive emphasis on the suicide issue? The obvious reason is that if suicide is the expected outcome, *any* risk from hormones and surgeries is probably worth it. The suicide discourse has

the effect, and probably also the intent, of preventing patients and clinicians from doing a careful weighing of pros and cons when deciding on treatment options. It strikes fear into the hearts of parents who worry about the risks and uncertainties about blocking their children’s natural puberty, pumping them full of synthetic hormones, and amputating their healthy breasts as early as age 13. It is also a powerful tool for silencing critics and—crucially—detering those who have questions about hormonal interventions from raising them in the first place.

Kaltiala thinks that the suicide discourse is being pushed by “adults who have themselves benefited from gender reassignment, have a desire to go out and save children and young children. But they lack understanding that a child is not a small adult.” Activists are driven by a combination of motives including misguided empathy, a savior complex, and projection.

Unlike American doctors who dare question “gender affirmative” orthodoxies, Kaltiala has the backing of professional medical groups in her country. The Finnish Paediatric Society, the counterpart to the American Academy of Pediatrics, has come out against governmental support for gender self-identification in minors in a statement to the Finnish parliament. Likewise, the Finnish Medical Association wrote that “the decision to limit legal gender recognition to adults is a good one.” These statements run directly counter to the American Academy of Pediatrics’ policy since 2018, which, drawing on a highly distorted interpretation of the available research, recommends immediate and uncritical “affirmation” of minors, regardless of age. It also conflicts with the de facto practice in American schools of socially transitioning children upon request, often without knowledge or consent from parents.

When it comes to pediatric gender medicine and related social policy, things are far from perfect in Finland. Compared to the United States, however, it is an oasis of sanity and accountability. ■

This article was originally published on February 21, 2023.

Ofra Haza, Tragic Israeli Pop Diva

The incandescent Yemeni Israeli singer sampled on Eric B. and Rakim's 'Paid in Full (Seven Minutes of Madness)' died 23 years ago today

BY DANA KESSLER

For Israelis, 2023 started with a great feeling of pride. On Jan. 1, *Rolling Stone* published its new list of the 200 Greatest Singers of All Time.

There, at number 186, between Alicia Keys and Bonnie Raitt, was Israel's very own Ofra Haza. This surprising honor, coming 23 years after Haza's death, is an excellent excuse to revisit the music of the "Madonna of the Middle East" and her magical, mysterious, and ultimately tragic story.

Ofra Haza remains, to this day, one of Israel's biggest cultural icons, with nine streets named after her across the country and a postal stamp bearing her image. Born in 1957 to Yemeni Jewish immigrants, Haza grew up in a traditional family in Hatikva Quarter, a working-class neighborhood in south Tel Aviv. As a young girl, she began singing at local weddings, and at age 13, she was recommended to Bezalel Aloni, the manager of Hatikva Quarter's Theater Troupe. Despite Haza's tender age, Aloni recognized her potential and took her under his wing, and her career took off, first as an actress-singer on stage and in musical films and later as a bona fide pop star.

After releasing three albums with Aloni's Theater Troupe, Haza released her first solo album in 1980. In Israel, she came to be associated with light pop and the genre known as Zemer Ivri—a clean-cut style of easy-listening music with folky roots and Zionist sentiments. By the early 1980s, she was a national celebrity, winning "Female Singer of the Year" four years in a row. In 1983, she

took her first step toward international stardom by participating in the Eurovision Song Contest. Her entry, "Hi"—which was actually "Chai" in Hebrew, meaning "alive"—came in second place.

A year later, at the height of her success, she released a collection of songs very different than what her fans were used to. *Yemenite Songs*, released internationally as *Fifty Gates of Wisdom*, was an album of Yemenite folk songs—some ancient and some written in the vein of those traditional songs—that Haza dedicated to her parents. Israeli radio was baffled. The songs didn't fit into the usual Zemer Ivri or pop of mainstream radio, and so it was only played on Mizrahi music programs, though it wasn't Mizrahi music either. But if Israel didn't know what to do with the album, it kickstarted Haza's international career. In Europe, a new marketing category called "World Music" was starting to gain popularity. The West was craving "authentic" music from faraway lands, and this is exactly what Haza brought them.

A dance remix of "Galbi," a song written and composed by Aharon Amram and produced by Izhar Ashdot, started to make waves in the U.K. This prompted another remix, this time of "Im Nin'alu," Haza's interpretation of Rabbi Shalom Shabazi's 17th-century poem. Ashdot's official remix of "Im Nin'alu" became a huge dance-floor hit in Europe in 1988 and made a splash in the U.S., too, reaching No. 15 on Billboard's Hot Dance Club Play Chart. The song's vocal intro was also sampled by English electronic duo Coldcut in their remix of New York hip-hop duo Eric B. & Rakim's

"Paid In Full." Haza became an international ethnic-dance sensation, winning "Female Singer of the Year" in Germany twice in a row.

The remixes of "Im Nin'alu" and "Galbi" appeared on her first international album, *Shaday*, released in 1988. This was the decade in which European pop culture was fascinated and titillated by anything exotic. German synth-pop band Alphaville conquered MTV with kimono girls in the video for "Big in Japan"; Duran Duran shot videos with exotic body-painted models in the Sri Lankan jungle; David Bowie protested racism by parodying Asian female stereotypes in the video for "China Girl." Europeans were fantasizing about beautiful dark maidens who didn't speak a word of English, and Haza fit the mold perfectly. She toured the world, wow-ing audiences from Tokyo to New York with her blend of Yemenite music and modern pop.

The first time we Israelis saw Haza through the eyes of foreigners, it was somewhat surprising, like the uncanny makeover scene in a teen movie. Haza's image in Israel was always squeaky clean—smiling, innocent, wholesome, full of love and optimism. Seen from the vantage of the Western male gaze, however, she was suddenly tantalizing and seductive. The innocent girl we knew was suddenly replaced by Scheherazade—exotic, erotic and untouchable. Haza, with her dark beauty and endless charm, played the part.

The early 1990s were the peak of Haza's international career. She collaborated with superstars ranging from Paul Anka to Paula Abdul, Sarah Brightman to Iggy Pop and The Sisters of Mercy. In 1993, she became the first Israeli to be nominated for a Grammy award, for her album *Kiryah*, co-produced by Don Was. Her songs were featured in movies such as *Dick Tracy* and *Wild Orchid*. She did talk shows around the world—including Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show*—and she performed at the 1994 Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in Oslo. One of Haza's last projects was voicing the character of Yocheved, mother of Moses (which was also illustrated to resemble her), in the DreamWorks animated musical drama

The Prince of Egypt, based on the Book of Exodus. Haza sang Yocheved's dramatic song, "Deliver Us," composed by Hanz Zimmer. She voiced Yocheved's dialogue in the original English version and in the Hebrew version, but being the professional that she was, she performed the song itself in 18 different languages for the film's dubbing.

But at some point along the way, her career began to falter, for unclear reasons. It has been said that bad business decisions were made, either by her or by Aloni. Whatever the case, it was all cut short by her untimely death in 2000, at the age of 42. Which brings us to the great mystery of her personal life.

To say that Ofra Haza kept her private life private would be a huge understatement. More accurate to say: She lived her life in hiding. For years, the Israeli press speculated about when would she get married. She often claimed to have a boyfriend, but her boyfriends were nowhere to be seen. The first man she introduced to the media was Doron Ashkenazi, a divorced father of two, whom she married in 1997. Afterward, she severed her ties with Bezalel Aloni and let her husband manage her career. Less than three years later, she was dead from AIDS. Ashkenazi died the next year from a cocaine overdose. The media revealed that he was HIV-positive too.

The cliché in Israel is that Haza didn't die of AIDS, she died of shame. She never revealed that she was HIV-positive—this was exposed in the press only after her death. Her family went so far as to claim that she didn't know the nature of her own illness.

Haza had been careful throughout her career never to show any pain or hardship. We never saw her without makeup or with messy hair—she was always picture-perfect, and she did everything she could not to tarnish that image. For instance, in her last TV interview before her death, Haza gave a video interview instead of coming to the studio. The audience was told it was because she was in London, but the truth was that she was at home, too sick to leave. She hid her illness to the very end and even refused to go to the hospital out of fear that people would find out about it.

“The cliché in Israel is that Haza didn't die of AIDS, she died of shame.”

Instead, she was treated at home by a doctor friend.

The nature of Haza and Ashkenazi's relationship has been the subject of scrutiny and speculation. Some say it was a beautiful love story, while others accuse Ashkenazi of abuse and allege that Haza swapped Aloni's domineering ways for her husband's. Haza's family blamed Ashkenazi for her death, and the moment she died, bitter courtroom battles regarding her inheritance ensued.


The popular assumption was that she was a virgin when she got married. That was the expectation for a woman of her background—a ludicrous one, given that Haza was a 40-year-old pop star. Nevertheless, members of her family held on to this assumption as it helped them claim that Ashkenazi was the one who gave her AIDS. The media, too, claimed at the time that her husband infected her with the disease, and Aloni later alleged the same in his book. One of the nastiest rumors was that Ashkenazi hid the fact he was HIV-positive from Haza when they wed and then infected her.

Others believe Haza was the one who caught the virus abroad, before getting married, and that she infected her husband. Shai Ashkenazi, her husband's adopted son, loved her dearly. In a TV interview he gave on the 10th

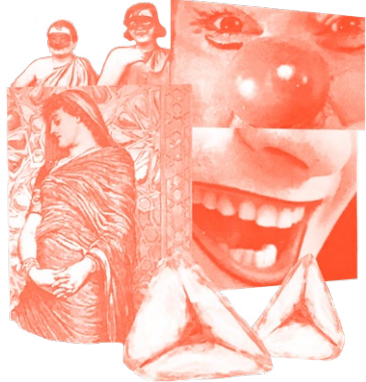
anniversary of her death, he said what a wonderful mother she was to him. He also said that he believed that they both were HIV-positive before they met and that was what brought them together. In another interview, he said that he believed his father committed suicide because he couldn't go on living without his beloved Ofra.

After her death, it became clear that Haza wasn't as innocent as we'd been led to believe. There are three sensational, very personal, and somewhat unseemly questions that Israelis who grew up with the myth of Ofra Haza remain curious about to this day: How did she get AIDS? Did she have any romantic or sexual relationships before she met her husband? And did she have an affair with her longtime manager, Bezalel Aloni? Except for one musician who claims he was her boyfriend early on and had sex with her, no one has yet produced more than hearsay on any of these matters.

A three-part Israeli documentary called *Ofra*, directed by Dani Dothan and Dalia Mevorach and broadcast in 2020, tried to untangle the enigma of the singer, but ultimately left more questions than answers. The series explores Haza's strange relationship with Aloni, who refused to participate. Haza moved in with Aloni and his wife

 **UPCOMING HOLIDAY**

Purim
The Story of Esther



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and kids when she was 14, and he was her manager and mentor for most of her life. Even though the documentary doesn't expose anything unsavory, we are all familiar with horror stories of relationships between teen stars and their managers, and are left to assume the worst. Even if nothing sexually untoward happened, however, the narrative that emerges from the documentary is bad enough. According to the people interviewed, Aloni isolated Haza from the world, molded her image, denied her any kind of social life, and controlled every aspect of

her career and personal life. A female friend and producer who worked with her at the height of her fame tells an anecdote of how she took Haza out to a club in Tokyo with Grace Jones. Haza was shocked to see Jones party freely without fearing what people would think, and was scared that Aloni would find out she went to a club. She was over 30 at the time.

Be this as it may, the documentary still paints her as something of a feminist icon. Haza may have been controlled by men, but in her own way she was still a rebel, having broken free of the family

expectations she was born into. Instead of getting married at a young age, having children and being a housewife like she was supposed to, she followed her passion and she did what she loved, achieving a very impressive international career. And while we may not know who she really was, her roots and heritage always proudly showed through. Ultimately, we are left with her songs, her voice, and her radiant smile—which should be more than enough. ■

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COMMUNITY

There Will Be Blood

The ceremony I had to 'affirm' my Jewish identity required a trip to the mikveh and a sharp pinch (or two)

BY DAVID SCHILLER

It is a cool and rainy spring morning on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and I am standing in the changing room of a mikveh in the basement of a brownstone.

The whole operation has an unexpected spa-like vibe, though you have to imagine a spa with fluorescent lights and linoleum floors, run by a middle-aged balaboosta. There's a waiting room with potted plants and magazines, a communal space jammed with rows of makeup tables, private dressing rooms, like the one I'm in, furnished with shower and sink and full regalia of single-use toiletries. A maze of narrow, humid hallways. And everywhere, the smell of water.

I stand naked and a little nervous under a thin, white terrycloth robe. By naked I mean shorn of everything—not just clothing but glasses, wedding ring, a Buddhist-ish bracelet with bone skull beads that I like to wear, fingernails and toenails pared to the quick. Naked, as the saying goes, as the day I was born.

And by a little nervous, I mean what I think of as a particularly challenging kind of nervousness, because in a moment a stranger will arrive to perform a symbolic circumcision.

I also like to think that I am standing naked before God. It only took the better part of a lifetime, but here I am—*hineni*—on the threshold of transforming from Jew-ish to Jewish. I was born a patrilineal Jew, Jewish on my father's side, which in the eyes of some is not Jewish at all, and in my own eyes not Jewish enough. It is this neither-nor ambiguity, these decades of feeling not quite, that I am here to resolve.

The journey to this moment started a half dozen years earlier, triggered by the confluence of three life-changing transitions: a divorce, the death of a beloved mentor, and the beginning of a new relationship, all of which peeled away layers of personas and habits until I could finally hear myself asking, who am I? In particular, the memorial service for my mentor had awakened

something deep inside me; a cantor led it, and there was just something in what she said, and how she said it, that struck a chord. I tracked down her email, and she introduced me to her rabbi. And that rabbi cracked the door to a kind of wondrous and never-ending library of books and writers and ideas that I still can't get enough of. Along the way, too, my Israeli-born girlfriend and I married, and soon enough it felt right to light candles for Shabbat and observe a new set of holidays.

Yet throughout those next few years of reading and studying, of learning my *baruchatas* and attending High Holy Day services, I struggled with an undercurrent of fret, obsessing over a growing conviction that there exists a you-are-or-you-aren't Jewish binary. And I was on the wrong side. Because religion is only part of it. Being Jewish is also culture, history, language. Family. Soul. And blood. Yes, blood. Even Chabadniks, I noticed, with all their energetic outreach, confirm this. They don't stand on street corners going, "*Pssst!*" to the passersby, saying, "Do you want to be Jewish?" No, they ask, "*Are you*

HISTORY

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Jewish?” The implication being, if not, keep walking. The times I do stop I feel it in their eyes: They know.

Nine months, auspiciously, before I found myself at the mikveh, I decided to sign up for a class hosted by a local synagogue, a kind of Judaism 101 designed to cover the basics and lead, for those who wanted it, to conversion. By this point I pretty much knew the 101 part; it was the possibility of converting that drew me there—this, maybe, could be the official declaration of Jewishness that I was craving. I’d dismissed the idea of a bar mitzvah. I felt too old, and besides, I understood it as a ceremony for people who are already Jewish. But even the idea of conversion opened up issues. Mainly, can you “convert” to something you kind of already are? Also, two recent teachers, one a retired Reform rabbi and the other a leader of a progressive shul, both told me I didn’t need to. What? Convert? You’re Jewish! Want something more? Go into a synagogue during services and have an aliyah—walk up to the front of the congregation and announce yourself. And that’s that. But I knew that my gut would never trust the “that’s that.” Too arbitrary, too easy. And who’s there to say you’re in?

Then, something serendipitous happened. During a call with the young rabbinic fellow who was leading the class, where she and I talked about the syllabus, about goals and expectations, about my background, and then touched on the whole knotty thing I had about conversion, she explained that I would, at the class’s end, be qualified to undergo a ceremony called an affirmation. As a patrilineal Jew I would be “affirming” my Jewish identity. All the wheels stopped spinning. I couldn’t believe it: This was exactly what I was searching for.

One day in April, with our class in

its final weeks, without preamble, my teacher called and told me that she and her senior rabbi had an opening next month to perform the affirmation at a local mikveh. The thing that was somehow going to happen in the hazy future had arrived. She went on to explain the basics of what would happen, the dunking, the prayers. We talked about whether I wanted to choose a Hebrew name, but agreed that my own—David—was Hebrew enough. I asked about a *beit din*, a kind of oral exam with a panel of rabbis. No need, she said, not for an affirmation. (I felt slightly let down but let it go.) Then came the awkward question of circumcision. I told her I was, with my best matter-of-fact voice. She nodded, ready to move on, but I brought up something my retired Reform rabbi once mentioned: I’ve heard it’s required that medically circumcised candidates for conversion undergo a symbolic ritual circumcision, a *hatafat dam brit*. Do I need that?

She didn’t say yes and she didn’t say no, and that’s when the doubts started. I pressed her for clarification. It’s really up to you, she said. Up to me? Things are different with an affirmation, she continued; it wouldn’t affect the outcome in any way. We kept talking until she sensed that I needed an answer she couldn’t offer, and she gave me the number of a mohel affiliated with the synagogue. Give him a call, she said, he’ll know more. Then you can decide.

He was easy to talk to on the phone, and sounded young, like a graduate student, focused and smart with a quick sense of humor. Within minutes we were discussing things—well, the *thing*—that I’d never talked with another soul about, the physiognomy of my penis. He asked if I’d originally been circumcised by a rabbi. No. Could I make out the site of the original circumcision? I had no idea (turns out I could, and it wasn’t where I thought it was). He then explained the procedure and told me what it would likely feel like, explaining that he knew it because—and this really reassured me—he once performed it on himself so he would be able to prepare, and empathize with, his clients. A sharp pinch, were the words he used. He also raised one caveat. Sometimes he’s unable to



Album of the Week

The Men, *New York City*

“When everyone left NYC, the sewer opened and we crawled out,” says the tough-to-Google band The Men, which has made a tough-to-Google record, *New York City*. Behind the generic names are powerful statements of intent: If we’re going to remember the ’70s, we should do so in as scuzzy and messed-up a way as possible. It’s a dig at all the people who fled New York when COVID got bad, and it describes the sense that the city could be retaken in some way, a feeling also enthusiastically described in Parquet Courts’ 2021 album *Sympathy for Life*.

“Hard times are over! / Now I just need coke,” bellows lead singer Mark Perro as the guitars wail on *New York City*’s opener “Hard Livin’.” Everything from the guitars to the vocals to pianos are focused on getting in a groove and playing the hell out of it. But if there’s some variety lost in this album’s single-mindedness, it also produces joy.

“God Bless the USA” is a standout, a true retro-throwback that feels like Chuck Berry’s “Roll Over Beethoven,” if Berry had ever followed through on the hard rock he helped start to create. While not referencing any one specific issue, the song’s message is clear enough: “there’s a fire burning / burning in the USA / US AAAAAAAAAA.”

—David Meir Grossman

BELIEF

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draw blood the first time around. Since the whole point is to show the presiding rabbi a bright red drop, if that happened I'd require a second prick, no pun intended.

He also said that he completely understood why I was wanting this, and though he didn't exactly give me a high-five over the phone, he clearly approved.

And now there he was, softly knocking on my dressing room door. I'd met him earlier, in the lobby, where we had a meaningless chat while waiting, and now I stood in my ridiculous ill-fitting robe and disposable slippers and we both half smiled as he came in with his black leather bag, the kind a doctor might've carried in the days of house calls. From then on, he was all business. A folding chair appeared. He sat. I heard the snapping of latex gloves, the tearing of a sterile wrapper. In a quiet, serious voice he asked me to step closer and open my robe. I did. At this point I could feel my mind slowly leaving my body, as happens in a dentist's chair, eyes staring, mesmerized, at a distant spot on the ceiling. Obviously he must have reached for my penis though I didn't register it. A moment later he said something like "Ready?" which was immediately followed by a sharper-than-I-imagined-it-would-be pinch. For a moment the air fell still with hushed concentration. Then came the words I just knew I was going to hear: Sorry, we have to do it again.

A second pinch, sharper than the first. Another moment of pregnant silence, shorter than the first. Followed by words of success, something like "We

did it." He showed me a square of gauze with a vibrant red dot on it. So little, I remember thinking. Then he stepped into the hallway and I heard voices. Of course there would be an audience on the other side of the door, like members of a Renaissance court waiting to see a blood stain on the sheet after the royal wedding night.

Buoyed by the sense of relief that this part was over, the rest of the ceremony passed by almost too quickly. The senior rabbi, my teacher, and a third witness, the synagogue's *chazzan*, led me, still in my robe and carrying a towel, feeling like the third character on the *Abbey Road* album cover, down another long hallway to the entrance of the mikveh itself, just beyond a privacy wall. At that point only the rabbi and I entered. The mikveh was like a small, deep, pristine blue swimming pool. There was a momentary scramble when I realized I'd forgotten to bring a kippah; the *chazzan* had an extra one and handed it to me from around the wall. Then the rabbi gave me my instructions: Immerse yourself completely under the water with no part of your body touching the walls or the bottom, come up, put on the kippah, and say a prayer. We'll do this twice. He had a laminated card with two prayers printed on it, transliterated to help me read the Hebrew. I kicked off my slippers, dropped the robe—after the experience with the mohel, I had not an ounce of self-consciousness left—and climbed down the steps into a warm pool. With a quick hand stroke I forced myself almost to the bottom, and hovered there

for a moment, feeling that rare skinny-dipping feeling of floating naked and free in a body of water. Then came up, doggy-paddled to the edge, put on the kippah, recited the first prayer with the rabbi, and then did it all over again. It was glorious.

Ten minutes later I was dry and dressed, and we were now all standing in that larger empty dressing room, joined by my wife, listening as my teacher read a declaration certifying my affirmation, first in Hebrew and then in English. The witnesses took turns signing it, and presented it to me with hugs, handshakes, and a few tears. So this was officially it.

I felt changed on the walk back home. Truly. Unlike so many experiences, this one lived up to my expectations. I knew that in the eyes of some I was still not quite Jewish enough, despite the *hatafat dam brit*. To be reminded of it, I need only to look at my certificate: signed by a woman as well as the men, each affiliated with an unaffiliated liberal synagogue—hardly a prescription to be welcomed by the Orthodox. But in my eyes, and, I believe, in God's eyes too, I was all good: I was Jewish. We made a covenant. The ancient covenant. A line from Exodus drifted through my head: "A bridegroom of blood you are to me." Exactly.

And that pinch, it actually lasted for the next day or two, persisting as a kind of phantom uncomfortable sensation. The mohel hadn't mentioned that, but every time I felt it, it made me happy. ■

This article was originally published on February 17, 2023.

STONE COLD TRUTH

Tablet

lite against everyone else.... **College is pointless...** No one's having babies a problem... The vaccine-hesitant are not who you think... Abandoning political affiliation is a sign of sanity... The divide today isn't between left and right. It's the elite against everyone else.... **College is pointless...** No one's having babies, and it's a problem... The vaccine-hesitant are not who you think... Abandoning your political affiliation is a sign of sanity... The divide today is

Raisa's Forshmak

BY SAMANTHA SHOKIN

INGREDIENTS

- 2 brined herrings, deboned and filleted
- 4 slices dark rye bread (Borodinsky or Lithuanian work well)
- 1 cup white vinegar, or enough to soak the bread slices
- 4 hard-boiled eggs
- 1 large Granny Smith apple, cored
- 1 small yellow onion

PREPARATION

Cut the ingredients down to size and soak the bread in vinegar for about a minute, draining the excess. Feed the ingredient pieces into the grinder on a medium coarse setting (4-5mm or what you would use for hamburger or sausage meat). The bread should be fed last so that it can push out any pieces that might have gotten stuck. Mix well, serve on toasted black bread and garnish as desired.

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