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COMMUNITY

The Minyan: LGBTQ Jews

In a roundtable discussion about the state of the American Jewish community, talking about progress, the barriers that remain, and the problem with 'inclusion'

BY ABIGAIL POGREBIN

This is the first installment of The Minyan, a series of moderated roundtable discussions about the state of the Jewish community in America from a variety of perspectives. By bringing together at least 10 people from a shared demographic or background—"everyday" people with personal opinions, not "experts" or titled professionals who earn their salaries by crafting statements on these issues—we hope to foster conversations that will illuminate how different kinds of Jews think about the larger community, and their own place in it.

Pride Month should not be the only time we check in on how the Jewish community has changed when it comes to LGBTQ Jews. But Pride Month is a nice excuse to gather 10 LGBTQ Jews and ask whether they've found a home in Jewish life—if they were seeking one.

The participants in this inaugural edition of The Minyan were found by reaching out to rabbis, LGBTQ leaders, and friends whom I trust around the country. I asked for recommendations on who might be thoughtful and candid about their Jewish reality right now, and I pre-interviewed every person before our June 9 conversation to get a sense of their story and assure a variety of background, age, identity, and geography. Every person in this group could warrant a fascinating and educating article on

his/her/their own, but the common denominator is this: They identify as LGBTQ, and they all care about being connected to Jewish community in some way.

The Participants

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

- Ari:** 47, New York City, gay man
- Shoshana:** 31, Brooklyn, trans nonbinary/transwoman
- Aviad:** 32, metro Detroit, bisexual man
- Jaime:** 53, upstate New York. "I am the T in LGBTQIA, and I am a gay guy."
- Esther:** 25, New York City area, nonbinary lesbian
- Rebecca:** 52, Atlanta, queer
- Daniel:** 30, Chicago, gay man
- Sarah:** 30, Ogden, Utah, lesbian
- Meg:** 36, Phoenix, queer woman
- Steve:** 63, Los Angeles, "old fashioned gay"

Tablet: How many of you think of the Jewish community as a welcoming place for LGBTQ Jews? Show of hands. I'm seeing nine wavering hands that suggest you're in between yes and no. *None* of you say the Jewish community is *fully* welcoming. Daniel answers no. Why?

Daniel: There definitely are many parts and places of the Jewish community that are welcoming. But so much of it is not. I was born and raised in an Orthodox community and affiliated with a lot of Orthodox communities. Because there's so much in the Orthodox community and outside it that is either not accepting of LGBT at all or only accepting of certain parts—like lesbian and gay but not trans people, for example—that it wouldn't be fair to say we're welcoming as a Jewish community while such a large chunk of people are stuck in communities where that is not the case.

Tablet: Steve, were you a maybe?

Steve: I know that in the greater Jewish community there's a lot of non-acceptance. But in my particular Jewish community, I feel completely accepted. And I think the LGBTQIA community at my shul feels completely accepted. From the top down, our founder and lead rabbi, Sharon Brous, has led a shul that is basically all about social justice and diversity. And our board is represented with people from our community, LGBTQIA+. There are several people of color also on the board.

Rebecca: I'm happy to share why I'm a halfway answer. I come from a synagogue in Atlanta that was founded by gays and lesbians. We collapse LGBT, gender, and sexual diversity all the time in our world, our society. And I think there's different experiences for people who are bisexual, gay, and lesbian versus somebody who is trans nonbinary, gender nonconforming in our Jewish community. I think denomination sometimes matters, but I have been at liberal or Reform synagogues where I've had more questions and responses that I was surprised by—that were quite negative. I grew up in a Conservative shul, my sister is Orthodox, so I had a wide range of experiences. I belonged to a Reconstructionist synagogue. And

I have seen good and supportive and inclusive responses in all.

Tablet: And how many lean more toward, "Yes, it is welcoming"? Two. Ari and Meg.

Ari: The Jewish community I'm responding to is the one that I'm a part of. It's similar to Steve's response. That's why I'm saying yes. I'm a member of a large, welcoming Reform synagogue, and it's never felt like an issue. If I zoom out and look at other parts of the Jewish community, sure: We could speak forever about the way in which those communities are exclusionary. So I chose yes because I was looking at it from my immediate community.

Meg: As someone who's converted to Judaism in the last five years, I come from a place that was not very welcoming. I was raised Catholic and I live in Arizona, which is often in the news for not so good political reasons. But I go to a synagogue that's closest to our house and feels very welcome. I'm on the board. There are other gay members on the board. For a long time we had a gay rabbi at our synagogue, and I think representation matters. It's a Reform synagogue, but we drew in Jews from all over town who identified as part of our community, I think in part because that representation was so important. And even though that gay rabbi is no longer here, like Steve's synagogue, ours is a really social justice-focused synagogue. I feel like I'm surrounded by peers.

Tablet: Can you raise your hands if it is important to you to be openly LGBTQ in Jewish spaces? [Eight raise hands.] I'm seeing everyone except for Ari and Daniel. Raise your hand if it is important to you to be identifiably Jewish in LGBTQ spaces? [Five say yes.] Aviad, Esther, Steve, Daniel, Rebecca. Can I hear from you, Jaime, as to why your answer is no?

Jaime: I don't go to the LGBT community, so to speak, to express my Jewishness. I go to express my queerness. And I go to the Jewish community to *unpack* my queerness somehow and figure out why God made me this way, am I part of all of this? And so, if the question was, do you feel like you need to be kind of out-Jewish among gay people? Not so

much, actually. I feel like I need to be out-Jewish among goyim generally.

Tablet: Can you say a little bit more about where the Judaism helps you understand the queerness?

Jaime: Because I'm trans and gay. And I came out and dealt with this in the late '80s, early '90s, before there was a whole panel of people I could potentially talk to about this. I felt very alone and I felt, "Why did God do this to me?" and "What is my place in the universe?" And I kind of came to the conclusion actually that it's a blessing, not a curse. I know that God exists, because God has been involved in my life and has smiled upon me in many ways.

Esther: I am in the first generation of nonbinary clergy people that are openly going through seminary. But being a person who, in the near future, will be clergy, a lot of my work is outreach, bringing people in who may not otherwise find community. I think people would often be surprised, when they show up at some sort of LGBT event, that there's a disproportionate number of people who are Jewish. I work in the suburbs of New York City every weekend, and I have been trying to find friends, posting on LGBT chat boards. And when I write that I work at the local synagogue, they say, "Wait, there's a gay-friendly synagogue in this area?" People have no idea. And I'm not in an Orthodox institution; I'm on the other side of that. People *still* don't feel like they're welcome in [a more liberal] synagogue. And I personally have had past experiences of not feeling welcome in synagogue. I have been fired from a job while I'm in seminary for being trans. I was rejected from a pulpit because they were afraid I was going to be a militant trans person in my first year. And so, creating a space in LGBT spaces where Jews and non-Jews alike can come together and feel welcome—specifically by somebody who is of the cloth—I think is critical. I think that transcends religion. You know, when I'm able to form connections with someone, it's important regardless of your religion. And so I feel it's really critical. I actually have had to leave activism spaces because of a hostility toward Judaism. And I refuse to back down on being

openly Jewish because people need to know that whatever place I am in, it's safe to be a Jewish person and it's safe to be a member of the LGBT community.

Tablet: You've mentioned moments of pain, moments of feeling the sting of assumptions and prejudice. Is anyone willing to share a moment that might give a window into the reality of exclusion, bigotry, insensitivity in a Jewish space?

Jaime: If I think about when I was really small—and this is not anything mean or ill-spirited by my community or anything—but I started to go to Hebrew school and I was preparing for my bat mitzvah, but I didn't want to be a *bat* mitzvah. I wanted to be a *bar* mitzvah. As a very small kid, to be gendered like that turned me off. Similarly, being in chorus in elementary school, we were separated out by gender. I mean, it's really being separated by voice-part, but you're separated out by your gender. I think that those things had a really profound impact. But there's nothing mean about the vocal divisions, there's nothing evil about them. They're just tradition. So you, Esther on this call, are, in a sense, going to change everything—not necessarily on purpose or being radical. It's a very simple thing: Is it a *bat* mitzvah? Is it a *bar* mitzvah? I called it my “*not* mitzvah,” actually.

Esther: You commented on two things that are a huge deal in my seminary program. I now call everything a “B-mitzvah” until otherwise specified. I even had two cisgender young ladies who wanted to call their ceremony a “b'nai mitzvah” or a “B-mitzvah,” but not “b'not mitzvah” [the traditional plural for girls] because they didn't want it to be so gendered. And I was like, “All right, ‘B-mitzvah,’ let's do it.” You don't have to be trans to use “B-mitzvah.” And as far as singing voice parts, we are moving toward pushing the ideas of treble and bass voice parts, because in our studies, we come across cantors who are very much trebles, but they are cisgender men, and we come across women who are contraltos, who are very much cis women. And then there's various combinations in between. I am often, when I am singing in a choir, a tenor, and have been

“My life has been about finding the right communities where I could be accepted and could be who I am without too much tension or friction.”

my whole life. That has nothing to do with my gender and everything to do with my voice part. So the big push in my seminary right now is to move away from “men's” and “women's” voices to treble, baritone, tenor, bass voices, that kind of thing.

Shoshana: Going back to moments of exclusion, there have definitely been a few times when I've been in a Jewish community that hasn't worked as I expected. I'm married to a rabbi. And while that rabbi was in school—they were at a very large, well-known liberal institution—and even then, the head rabbi was openly hostile to the idea of a nonbinary, AFAB [assigned female at birth] rabbinical student not wearing a more feminine outfit. This reaction to me was very common. Another experience I had was when I trained as a mikvah guide at the 92Y. Someone—a ciswoman—came up to me and asked how I could be trans and be in a space like this, how could I be in what they considered a safe space. This person was also concerned with the way I was dressing. I was dressing in my usual way, which is femme. And this person was like, “How can you dress that way in front of people, in front of children?” And I said, “Well, I'm not really a sex object; I'm a person.” That's kind of how that works.

Tablet: Has that kind of reaction improved? Have you seen an evolution?

Shoshana: I find myself choosing to be in very self-selective spaces. I tend to go to either queer-derived or queer-affirming spaces where I can just *be*. And I let the rest of the community do what they're doing. It's not because they're doing anything wrong; just because I want to live and let live.

Tablet: Aviad, you also have the added layer of being a Jew of color. When you are walking into a room, do you feel like you need to lead with your multiple identities, that you have to announce them in some way?

Aviad: I'll start with the bisexual part of my identity. Because I think for me—even though it's important for people to know my Jewish identity in LGBTQ+ spaces, it's a little bit *more* important for me that people know that I am part of the LGBTQ+ community in Jewish spaces. And I think that's because, in part anyway, I was raised mainline Protestant. I spent six years at a very conservative Protestant Christian school growing up, where if I came out as bi, I would have most likely been expelled. Since then I've been dealing with hang-ups about religion, being able to come to terms with my identity both in and out of religious spaces. And it's important for me that people understand. I don't start conversations with, “Hi, I'm Aviad and I'm bisexual.” But it's important that when the conversation arises, when it's appropriate, that I do talk about this part of my identity. Because in a way, it's me reclaiming a relationship with the divine that I did not have access to growing up. It's a relationship with the divine that looks very, very different than I had as a kid. That's a good thing. In terms of my identity as a Black Jew, I've had microaggressions toward me in the past, like people assuming that I'm not Jewish if I enter a Jewish space that I've never been in before, or people mistaking me for another Jew of color who doesn't even really look like me at all. And it hurts. But I also know that more often than not, it doesn't come from a place of hatred, it comes from a place of ignorance, and it's just a reminder of the work that still very much needs to be done.

Tablet: We all know—and probably it’s worthy of a yawn to you at this point—that there’s this tension between tradition and evolution. Core to Judaism, for many people, is the idea that it’s lasted, and it remains something recognizable, from generation to generation. How that gets balanced against reimagination and redefinition is part of what I think is alive here in this conversation. How do you respond to people who say, “Are you trying to change this thing so that it’s unrecognizable?” or “How do we hold on to this thing that I know and treasure from my ancestors?”

Daniel: Am I trying to change this thing? Yes, I am. And I’m also a member of the clergy. And I think trying to change this thing is very much within our tradition. Things have evolved so much from 50 years ago, 100 years ago, and certainly from 3,000 years ago when the Torah was first written. I think part of our tradition is that things evolve over time. So, yes, I want to change it; not to the extent that it’s unrecognizable, but in steps. When I was ordained as a rabbi, my teacher told me, “I don’t know all the answers to all the questions about how queer people can be a rabbi. And that’s one of the reasons I’m ordaining you—so that there can be people like you, and other people who are working on this and can do this work.” The work can be done. But if you’re constantly *not* creating spaces where LGBTQ people are affirmed and can feel safe and comfortable, then that’s not going to happen.

Tablet: Ari, you were raised in a family where some members have clear lines around tradition. How do you see some of this landscape changing?

Ari: My life has been about finding the right communities where I could be accepted and could be who I am without too much tension or friction. And for that reason, I have landed at the synagogue where I am now with my husband and our kids. I am proximate, because of family members, to more Orthodox and *frum* communities. And I know what their answers are and I know their point of view. And it’s not a place where I feel empowered to have an engaged discussion about halacha and Orthodox interpretation of these

issues. Because they would likely speak ad nauseam about the rabbinical interpretations for centuries. And I would have a few responses, and that would probably be it. I have a brother who’s a Breslov Hasid in Jerusalem who leads an extremely *frum*, observant life. So I just know that in his community, my family—who I am, how we live—are not accepted. I live my life on the other side of the planet. My parents are stuck navigating between their two kids, and my brother is on the other extreme.

Tablet: Because of your specific generation, you’ve seen quite an arc in your lifetime. Can you just give us a sense of just how much has changed?

Steve: It’s really evolved at warp speed. I didn’t see it coming necessarily. I mean, when I came out, we were in the AIDS epidemic and it was a really tough time to be gay, to be a gay man. And I can’t believe the things that I’ve seen in my lifetime. Now at IKAR a few years ago, I headed the LGBTQIA group where we were trying to make changes within IKAR and they mostly involved issues around trans members. Everything our task force suggested pretty much happened: We got a gender-neutral bathroom, some language was changed. But when I was working with this group, I was really aware of how I came from a place of total gratitude that we’ve come so far. And yes, we can do better, we can always do better. But at IKAR, as I said, I have no complaints. They’ve really addressed everything that’s been brought to them. But a lot of these people in this group—and a lot of them were straight allies in this group, but they were all younger than me—very much like this group, they were just my kids’ age or a little bit older, and they were very impatient with things. And I would say to them sometimes, “God, you guys, this is what it was like decades ago. We begged for scraps. There were ballot propositions in deep blue California to deny us marriage, to deny gay people from being schoolteachers.” I have to say, with this Supreme Court, I’m really terrified of everything that’s going to change, including gay issues. Privacy might be out the door, and I think they could easily revoke gay marriage because precedent doesn’t seem to matter.

Shoshana: I wanted to make two points. The first is that there are today halachic spaces where the tradition and the needs for change are wrestled with. My wife is a Conservative rabbi and I’m a Conservative Jew and that’s been a space, in addition to some traditional egalitarian spaces, where the tradition is already being wrestled with. And you can still be observant. I personally am *shomer Shabbat*, *shomer chag*, and *shomer kashrut*. That is an essential part of my life. And I can’t imagine not being those things any less than I can imagine not being trans.

The other point I think it’s important to mention is joy—the joy of being queer and Jewish. There are so many experiences I’ve had where I’ve been in queer Jewish spaces and it’s just felt magical. You know, the one quick example I’ll give is going to queer Talmud camp at SVARA. It was interesting—I found that even in SVARA, there were different pockets of people and I found a lot of really radical trans Torah happening among the trans and nonbinary clergy, but also just people who are very invested in these texts. There was, for example, a whole presentation on the trans Toldot [generations] of all the patriarchs. This has always been a queer story. It was transformational.

Tablet: I want to go to Rebecca and Sarah, particularly since you’re not on the coasts. Let’s start with Sarah: the fact that you have a Mormon dad—am I right about that?

Sarah: He would say that he’s not Mormon anymore, but he grew up Mormon, yes.

Tablet: And your life partner is Mormon?

Sarah: She’s also ex-Mormon.

Tablet: OK. But you certainly have a perspective on the religious spectrum in Utah. There’s not a lot of Jews where you are; you’ve really helped to create something of an outlier when it comes to Jewish community in your town. Can you give us a little bit of a sense of what it feels like to be living in a way that diverges from the majority so consistently?

Sarah: When Shoshana talked about joy in queer Jewish spaces, I had to think of the last time I was in a queer

Jewish space, and I can only think of one. So it's really nice to know that there are places out there for people like me where people find joy. And that's not to say that I don't have plenty of joy here, but it's kind of lonely with me being one of I would say maybe five "out" Jewish people in my congregation, and that's rounding up (and includes my girlfriend, who's not Jewish). It's definitely isolating. And my little congregation in Ogden is tiny. We have about 49 member units right now, and that's really big for us. So yeah, it's small. My synagogue is very much DIY; we don't have a rabbi, we don't have any staff. It's really what you make it. And when I moved back from college in Seattle to my hometown synagogue, which is really all I've ever known, and I started leading synagogue services and joined the board of trustees, I really wanted to make it fit me. And that meant coming out to the members and coming out to myself, which was harder. And really just saying, "Damn the consequences; I want to see if I can fit here." And I can. And I'm really glad I can.

Tablet: Rebecca, can you give us a sense of how things are going when it comes to LGBTQ Jews in the South?

Rebecca: Well, they're awful legislatively. It's not just the South. It's the Midwest. It's the Southwest. It's scary, it's terrifying here. And people need to be educated. I recently spoke to an influential civic group who wanted to know what to do and what not to do. But they gave me only 10 minutes to talk. They recognized they were short-changing the conversation, but it still happened, and they didn't have time for follow-up. You know, Atlanta is a very large city with a large Jewish community. I grew up in Boston, but I've been here for almost 30 years, and I have seen a tremendous amount of progress.

Tablet: Meg, since you're also a convert, can you talk about whether Judaism in some way was a window into thinking about your LGBTQ identity?

Meg: My wife is a rabbi and I do feel like Judaism opened some windows for me. I was drawn to the appreciation for otherness. When I was converting, I studied with a rabbi who really encouraged me to see the part of me—that

"It should be a shared space between people, and no one is 'including' anyone else, which implies a hierarchy."

has always been social justice-minded and that has worked professionally in civil rights law—to see that part of me as Jewish. That has been so transformational for me. In the Venn diagram of my life, my Jewish self and my queer self are the same. I don't feel like I have to be different people in different spaces. That has been really beautiful for me, coming from a Catholic background where growing up I was taught that people like me—their families and their love—was sort of conflated with sin, which was a confusing thing for a kid to learn. And so I do hear that we certainly have work to do. I hear you all saying that. But for me, the contrast is so stark, that in my particular spaces that I am in, it is *so beautiful* that we have come this far. I never imagined it for myself. And I think the fact that we have all these voices on this call ... And that I know so many in rabbinical school [who are] gay or nonbinary at this point. So I think there's going to be a ton of new leaders coming out, too, who are going to just keep helping to change the world, which is great. So I feel very welcome and I really love my community.

Tablet: How many of you have chosen either a synagogue or a spiritual community *because* it is LGBTQ-focused or friendly? Raise your hand if that is

how you chose your prayer community. I'm seeing five of you: Daniel, Rebecca, Shoshana, Aviad, and Steve. And for the others, is the answer no?

Esther: My prayer community is where I work as a student clergy person. I don't get a lot of choice in where I end up. We do a ranking system. I don't really have a choice. I might have more choice once I'm ordained, but I don't have it now.

Tablet: Ari, in terms of places like CBST [Congregation Beit Simchat Torah], which was known for years as "The Gay Synagogue" and was created essentially for LGBTQ Jews to have a home decades ago, is there a perspective that you have on why you didn't choose to belong there or to someplace similar?

Ari: I chose a community with my husband that felt comfortable for us and where being gay was a nonissue, I guess. So it wasn't the primary issue or the founding issue or a factor in the establishment of the congregation or one of the driving principles that led it. When we were discussing where to join, I also raised the question of the future of those communities that had been built as gay and lesbian, trans—(these synagogues probably called themselves gay and lesbian communities at the time). I questioned what the future of those synagogues and congregations might be when so many other parts of Reform Judaism and Conservative and other parts of Judaism have also opened their eyes and hearts and arms in a way that they hadn't in 1960 or '70 or '80.

Tablet: I want to get at what I know is this tension—everywhere, but in LGBTQ spaces for this discussion—about being out as a Zionist. For those who identify as pro-Israel, are you comfortable being pro-Israel in LGBTQ spaces? Raise your hand if you are. I see Daniel and Steve. That's it. For those who are not comfortable being pro-Israel in LGBTQ spaces, can you raise your hand? I see Rebecca, Sarah, Aviad, Esther, and Meg.

Esther: I am originally from the middle of the country and I did a lot of activist work when I was in college. And I actually had to stop doing activist work, regardless of my own views on Zionism, because at the coffee shop that we were

meeting at to do work, there were Zionist conspiracy books on the shelves that basically pinned most of the world's problems on the "cabal." Regardless of my own Zionism, it obviously was not a safe place for Jews. So I did not return to that.

Meg: This is what came up for me when you asked whether we were openly Jewish in LGBT spaces. And I do really feel like it's not necessarily one political party or the other, or Jews or non-Jews, when it comes to people who feel differently about Israel; we are incapable of talking about this topic in any kind of civilized way, with any kind of nuance. And because of that, it's just easier to avoid it.

Tablet: I learned in my research for this article that "inclusion" has become a very toxic word. Why is inclusion a problematic word when it comes to LGBTQ Jews?

Daniel: Because you have to *include* me. Right? Then you are welcoming me into *your* space. And I don't feel like that should be the case. I feel like it should be a shared space between people, and no one is *including* anyone else, which implies a hierarchy.

Tablet: What is the most important

thing that other Jews should know about LGBTQ Jews?

Jaime: God made us, and God loves us, too.

Esther: We have existed for all of recorded history and will continue to exist for the rest of the future of the Jewish people.

Shoshana: God is queer, and God is nonbinary. And that's part of faith in the Divine: coming to terms with that.

Daniel: We're not waiting for anyone. We're living our lives. And a lot of us are pretty happy. And we're not sitting around waiting for some panel of rabbis to decide if we're going to be happy or not.

Rebecca: If we want Jewish continuity, we have to stop shaming and shunning people. We are contributing to Jewish continuity.

Ari: We're sitting in synagogue for some of the same reasons you are. We're all brought to this experience and this tradition for the same reasons, regardless of where we are, who we come from, and what's driving our identity.

Sarah: I would say that just as you can look into the Torah, scripture, and just see infinity, the same thing is true with the Jewish people and with

LGBTQ Jews. Like Esther said today, we've always been here. Like Shoshana said, we're going to be around. And it's strange to say from my place here in Utah, surrounded by so much of another religion, not being part of the dominant religion, but we're here.

Steve: I would ask people who don't want to include us in Jewish life, if they stone their disrespectful children? I think the Torah is so much more expansive than their view of what the Torah is.

Aviad: Not only have we always been here, but our numbers are getting even higher. The number of people who are identifying as LGBTQ+ is growing and this trend is going to continue growing. So if you're not ready for us, get ready for us.

Meg: It's in everyone's best interest—if continuity is important—to get on board, because the next generations will be Jews of color, interfaith families, LGBT Jews. ... These are the people who the young Jews want to see in these spaces. And it's really only a matter of time. ■

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COMMUNITY

Whatever Happened to the 'Pro-Jewish' Left?

America's political divide has become a religious and communal divide

BY SAMUEL J. ABRAMS AND JACK WERTHEIMER

It is a truism among many observers of the current socio-political scene that politics has become a substitute religion for large numbers of Americans. Writing about the sacralization of politics, Shadi Hamid, for example,

stated that "on the left, the 'woke' take religious notions such as original sin, atonement, ritual, and excommunication and repurpose them for secular ends...; [while] on the right, adherents of a Trump-centric ethno-nationalism still drape themselves in some of the trappings of organized religion, but the

result is a movement that often looks like a tent revival stripped of Christian witness." All this has led, some claim, to the high levels of ideological intensity, social division, and demonization in the realm of politics that once were the preserve of religious zealots. And this intensification of passions and commitments—both political and religious—is an important dimension of social "sorting" and polarization, with more Americans taking more uniformly left-leaning or right-leaning positions in both politics and religion.

The relationship of politics and religion also has shifted in an additional way. Until sometime in the last third of the 20th century, adherents of certain religious denominations gravitated to the Republican party and others to the Democrats. But both parties—and their respective political camps—attracted

people seriously committed to their religion. That pattern has changed in recent decades with the opening of a “God gap” or “religiosity gap.” As early as the 1980s, many in the Bible Belt and those associated with the evangelical movement went from being relatively neutral on political matters to becoming highly engaged, generally with the Republican party and conservative political positions. Recent research indicates that partially in reaction, people who were less religious gravitated toward the left side of the political spectrum.

In brief, a revolution has transformed the political allegiances of large swaths of Americans: levels of religious conviction, denominational identities, worship service attendance, and other expressions and measures of religiosity correlate with how most Americans vote in elections and identify politically in surveys. Broadly speaking, “religious” people—however measured—tend to lean Republican politically and conservative in their ideology. Their opposite numbers—the “non-religious” or secular—often favor Democrats and are ideologically liberal. To take just one of many research studies, the Pew Religious Landscape Study finds numerous links between measures of religiosity and political ideology (conservative-moderate-liberal). As a general phenomenon, conservatives, far more than liberals, believe in God, see religions as important, attend religious services weekly, pray daily, see religion as a guide to morality, read scripture, and believe in heaven and in hell. Any way you slice it, conservatives today are more religious, liberals are more secular, and moderates are in-between.

This emerging political reality has occasioned debates about cause and effect: Have Americans changed their political views because of their religious outlook, or has political partisanship driven how American think about their religion? For years, conventional wisdom favored the former explanation: religion, it was widely assumed, is the driver of political allegiances. More recently, that assumption is being questioned.

Mounting evidence suggests that social networks—the people with whom a person associates—coupled with the

“Levels of religious conviction, denominational identities, worship service attendance, and other expressions of religiosity correlate with how most Americans vote in elections and identify politically in surveys.”

political outlook widely shared in those networks, influence how large numbers of Americans relate to religion. To take one piece of research that may well be indicative of larger trends, a recent Pew study found that white Americans who viewed Trump favorably and did not identify as evangelicals in 2016 were much more likely than white Trump skeptics to begin identifying as born-again or evangelical Protestants by 2020. Another straw in the wind is the drop in church membership and service attendance, alongside a decline in religious identity, due to several factors, though more concentrated on the left than the right: Over the last decade, another report found, “The decline in organized religion is indeed much bigger among Democrats (-17 points) than Republicans (-7 points).”

Given these seismic developments in the wider society, has there been a corresponding shift in how the politics of American Jews has aligned with their religious and ethnic commitments? Complicating this question is the knotty relationship between Jewish identity, religious commitment, and ethnic

solidarity. To be a Jew, after all, is not solely about identification with a religious tradition, but also with a people, its history, culture, and values, and, since 1948, with the Jewish State of Israel. Political identities may influence Jewish religiosity or Jewish collectivity or Israel commitments, or all three. Thus the typical, political cleavages present in American society in general may not necessarily tightly map on to the many variations of Jewish commitment.

To probe these relationships, we examined survey data from the most recent national study of American Jews produced by the Pew Research Center titled “Jewish Americans in 2020.” Respondents were asked to identify with a political label on a spectrum ranging from very conservative to very liberal. (Though Pew offers five ideological options, we have consolidated them into three for the sake of clarity.) It quickly emerged that the familiar sorting patterns evident in American politics at large characterize a good many Jews. Jewish political liberals and conservatives have moved into two camps with distinct and exclusive ideas, behaviors, and packages of attitudes and practices, resembling and reflecting the same socio-political phenomena in the larger society, a development with serious ramifications for American Jewish life.

Consider the relationship between political ideology and Jewish religious commitments. Consistent with the larger trends in American society, on measure after measure, politically conservative Jews as a group are far more engaged with their religion than political liberals. For example, Jewish political conservatives are more than three times as likely as liberals to say that religion is very important to them (41% vs. 12%), with moderates situated between them (at 23%). This “political gradient”—high-scoring conservatives, middle-range-scoring moderates, and low-scoring liberals recurs when we examine several other critical measures of religiosity. Almost twice as many conservatives as liberals are synagogue members (45% vs. 25%). More than three times as many attend religious services monthly (42% vs. 13%). Conservatives

are far more likely than liberals to “mark Shabbat in a way that makes it meaningful to you” (53% vs. 33%).

Political ideology also correlates with how Jews think about the role of faith in today’s society. In the 2022 American National Family Life survey, a significant gap emerged when Jews were asked whether religion causes more problems in society than it solves. Fully 69% of politically liberal Jews believe that religion is more problematic than helpful, compared to just 15% of Jewish political conservatives and 54% of political moderates. In that same survey, sharp differences emerged when respondents were asked about the role religion can play in teaching good values. Just one-third of liberal Jews (34%) believe that “it is important for children to be brought up in a religion so they can learn good values.” In sharp contrast, 59% of moderate Jews and 85% of politically conservative Jews feel the same way. The survey also asked if individuals must free their minds from old traditions and beliefs to understand the world today. A majority of Jewish liberals (68%) was open to rejecting tradition for the sake of modernity, compared to just a little more than one-third of Jewish conservatives (37%), with moderates once again situated in the middle at 46%.

Turning now to the other dimension of Jewishness, we will use the shorthand of “peoplehood” to denote the responsibility Jews feel to one another, meaning ethnic solidarity, a sense of family connection or some other form of collective identity and caring when Jews anywhere are facing adversity. That commitment to mutual responsibility, even more than religion, has been a glue binding Jews together, as we may infer from the fact that twice as many Jews say that being Jewish is very important to them compared to the importance they ascribe to religion (42% vs. 21%).

When asked whether being Jewish is very important to them, the majority of political conservatives answered yes, followed by a minority of moderates, and then even fewer liberals (59%, 42%, 36%). On other measures of Jewish “peoplehood” connections, we see even more pronounced patterns. About twice

as many conservatives as liberals have mostly Jewish close friends (48% vs. 20%). Almost twice as many conservatives as liberals regard Jewish community as essential to their being Jewish (49% vs. 26%). Far larger proportions of political conservatives as compared to liberals highly value belonging to the Jewish people (67% vs. 41%), and the gap between right and left is even more pronounced with respect to feeling a great deal of responsibility to help Jews in need (50% vs. 20%). Consistent with these patterns, conservatives also do more to enact their connections. They lead liberals in making donations to Jewish charitable causes (64% report having done so in the prior year, compared to only 41% of liberals). Conservatives also are more likely to consume Jewish news (62% vs. 35%).

Given all the differences in how these political factions relate to the Jewish people, it should come as no surprise that conservatives are considerably more attached to Israel than liberals are. They are twice as likely as liberals to regard caring about Israel as essential to their being Jewish (67% vs. 33%). And the gap is even larger when respondents indicated they felt *very* attached to Israel (45% of conservatives and just 14% of liberals claim such a strong attachment). An even larger ratio—more than four to one—separates conservatives and liberals when they are asked about whether they feel they have a lot in common with Israeli Jews (44% vs. 10%). Not only are conservative/liberal differences pronounced in regard to emotional connections to Israel and Israeli Jews, they surface also on questions of policy. Hardly any conservatives—or moderates for that matter—regard the U.S. as too supportive of Israel (6% and 8% respectively). But six times as many liberals do (40% find the U.S. too supportive of Israel).

These large gaps even appear when adherents of different political ideologies contemplate the future Jewishness of their own families. Asked about their hopes for their descendants, Jewish political conservatives are more than twice as likely as liberals to feel it’s very important that their current or future grandchildren identify as Jews (59% vs.

25%), and they are four times as likely to say it’s very important for their grandchildren to marry Jews (46% vs. 12%).

To be sure, ideology alone does not explain these pronounced patterns. Family circumstances also play a large role. Far more conservatives have Jewish family members than do liberals. More of them have two Jewish parents (77% vs. 65%). And the gap with respect to intermarriage is even wider: Just 25% of Jewish political conservatives are intermarried compared to 52% of liberals. To take one more related measure, conservatives have about three times as many Jewish children in their homes as liberals.

In sum, a large gap has opened between Jewish political conservatives and liberals (and even more so among those who identify as “very liberal”) on a broad range of questions measuring Jewish commitments. The question this raises is why are so many politically liberal Jews indifferent to Judaism and Jewish group solidarity?

By posing this question, it is not our intention to besmirch liberals as hopelessly lost to the Jewish people or to valorize conservatives as the saving remnant. For one thing, significant numbers of liberals continue to be committed to Judaism and Jewish collective life. For another, fully half of American Jews identify as liberals, with ever higher proportions of Jews identifying as liberal among the younger age cohorts. Writing them off makes little sense. Yet ignoring the widening chasm we have traced is counterproductive. For those concerned about the vitality of Jewish religious and communal life, the gap between adherents of the left and right is central to what we may describe as the great American Jewish resignation from identification and affiliation. And

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that resignation is far more prevalent on the liberal side of the spectrum than on the conservative one, hence our sharp focus on the former.

In point of fact, the liberal-conservative gap we have delineated can be traced back at least to the late 1980s, if not earlier, though it has grown steadily wider. The 1990 National Jewish Population Survey and Pew's "Jewish Americans in 2020" both show the same patterns in regard to varieties of Jewish involvement (as does the 2013 Pew study). Political conservatives out-score liberals on almost every measure of religious and peoplehood involvement appearing in these three surveys. Taking nine measures that appear in the 1990, 2013, and 2020 surveys, we find that levels of Jewish engagement among conservatives held steady at around 60%. In sharp contrast, the average score for liberals dropped over 30 years, going from 44% to 40% to 36% by 2020. To cite a few examples of declining participation by liberals, Yom Kippur fasting dropped from 50% in 1990 to 41% in 2020. Donating to Jewish causes went from 52% down to 41%. And when asked about having mostly Jewish close friends, nearly a third (31%) of liberals had them in 1990, whereas only one-fifth did in 2020. In other words, the conservative/liberal gap widened, not because conservatives become more Jewishly engaged—they held steady—but because liberals experienced notable drops in Jewish engagement over the years.

Consistent with this longer-term trend, the age of survey respondents in 2020 makes a great deal of difference. Among liberals 65 and over, 50% say they feel strongly about belonging to the Jewish people. The number drops with age, reaching a mere 27% among those 18-29. We see similar age-related declines among liberals on other measures, including donating to Jewish charities (57% vs. 21%), having mostly Jewish close friends (36% vs. 12%), feeling very attached to Israel (19% vs. 10%), and feeling that being Jewish is very important in one's life (42% vs. 26%). Today's older liberals are much more engaged in Jewish life than their younger ideological allies, consistent with our finding that liberals in our time

“The widening of the gap is not due to recent events, such as the Trump presidency or Israel’s decreasing popularity with Democrats and liberals.”

are less Jewishly engaged than those 30 years ago.

The data we have at present are insufficient to determine causal order. We do not know if liberals became more distant from Judaism and the Jewish people, or whether those who are Jewishly distant migrated to the liberal camp. But we do know that liberals identify less with Jewish religious and communal life than conservatives today—and that this process has been underway for over 30 years. The widening of the gap is not due to recent events, such as the Trump presidency or Israel's decreasing popularity with Democrats and liberals. Rather, other factors have been at work, undoubtedly resembling similar patterns in American society at large.

To shed some light on these developments, we turn to some of those broader trends and the fact that as Americans have “sorted” and polarized, political conservatives have tended to embrace religious and communal commitments, while liberals have increasingly shied away from religious institutions, with many proclaiming themselves to be agnostic or atheist. In a recent survey (2021), Pew found that three quarters (73%) of those in the GOP believe that religious institutions are good for society, compared to only 49%

of Democrats. In fact, looking at the trend data since 2010, we see stability in the positive attitudes of Republicans toward religious institutions, but a notable increase in negativity among those who identify as Democrats. Put somewhat differently, the Pew Research Center has found that the percentage of liberals who believe that churches and religious organizations positively contribute to society dropped from nearly half (49%) in 2010 to only one-third (33%) by 2019.

These current attitudes stand in marked contrast to the scene in the middle of the 20th century: America then had an abundance of religiously committed liberals and liberally inclined theologians, such as Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Luther King, William Sloane Coffin, and Abraham Joshua Heschel, to name but a few who typified the nexus of liberalism with religiosity. Certainly liberal churches still exist and some thrive, but many church-goers prefer ideological homogeneity. It's hard to think of more than a handful of national leaders in the politically liberal camp today who identify strongly with their religion. Senator Raphael Warnock of Georgia is an exception and both President Biden and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi are Catholic and take Communion but are less overtly religious than leaders in earlier generations. Here, then, is the broader context in which politically liberal American Jews find themselves, an ideological environment not warmly disposed to religion, to put it mildly, and one that regards particularistic allegiances to white ethnic groups as anachronistic, if not a form of white supremacy. Little wonder that many Jewish liberals are distancing themselves from Jewish religiosity and communal needs.

Beyond this context, we might ask whether there are aspects of *current* liberal attitudes that are undermining Jewish commitments. We identify four such elements that are considerably more characteristic of liberals and, by extension, Jewish liberals, than conservatives.

1. *The elevation of the autonomous self and its wants.* As Robert Bellah and associates richly explained nearly 40 years ago, Americans have a long history of

balancing rugged individualism with community commitments. Over the past decades, the latter have faded while the former has strengthened. Wherever one turns today, we are confronted with the assertion of individual autonomy, with *demands* that we attend to each individual's version of "truth." On the Jewish scene already two decades ago, Steven M. Cohen and Arnold Eisen in their book, *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America*, identified the impact of the "sovereign self" on the ways moderately engaged Jews enact their Jewishness. Since then, Jewish institutional life has contended with ever more insistence on the part of many that it must change to accommodate their needs—or else they will leave. Jewish institutions are widely decried as insufficiently nimble to satisfy the disparate—and *contradictory*—wants of the many autonomous selves now demanding that they get their way. And *pace The Jew Within*, much of Jewish life for many has become privatized, enacted only in the confines of people's minds, homes, and families. Liberals, it seems, are far more inclined than conservatives to favor unfettered autonomy.

2. *The triumph of the DIY lifestyle.* An outgrowth of radical autonomy, Do It Yourself Jewishness now adopts and abandons, mixes and matches. Jews are encouraged to create their own understanding of Jewishness, consistent with what they find personally meaningful. Inherited Jewish traditions are deemed outmoded. Not only is Judaism no longer seen as a package of obligations and commandments; it now is treated as endlessly plastic. While suitable for liberals, this approach does not work well for conservatives who continue to embrace tradition, law, and institutional norms. In general, conservatives (more than liberals) hold that faith and belief cannot be cherry-picked and followed

only when convenient or personally meaningful.

3. *The rise of identity politics.* Liberal culture has come to valorize group identities based on what may be called "victim status." Sexual orientation, minority group identity, gender, and disability are seen as legitimate bases for social identity and for claiming respect, if not privilege. In contrast, group identities based on ancestral cultures—such as being Jewish or of white European ethnicities—are not similarly valued. Undoing victimization and privileging the once marginalized are the primary goals of group identification, according to current liberal thinking. By contrast, maintaining religious communities, ethnic solidarity, and Jewish group continuity appeal to conservatives but not liberals. Not surprisingly, Israel, the nation state of the Jewish people, once lauded by Democrats (and Socialists), now finds far more favor among Republicans.

4. *The prioritization of universalism over particularism.* Perhaps, most famously expressed by John Lennon's famous song, the world is imagined to be a far better place without religion, countries, and possessions. Within American Jewry this orientation undergirds much of the talk about "repairing the world" (*tikkun olam*). For growing numbers of American Jews, especially those on the cultural and political left, social action is central to their self-understanding as Jews. In the Pew 2020 Pew study, just shy of two-thirds of liberals viewed social justice engagement as essential to their Jewishness, while only one-quarter viewed belonging to a Jewish community as equally important and only one-third said support of Israel is essential to their Jewishness. (Conservatives ranked belonging to a Jewish community and caring about Israel higher than social justice.) Differences in priorities are unmistakable but our point here is that many in the Jewish community today—especially among the rank-and-file—treat *tikkun olam* as the most important commandment of Judaism. The view is endorsed and encouraged by some rabbis to the near exclusion of other Jewish values, such as caring for fellow Jews, observing the

rituals of Judaism, and supporting Jewish communal institutions. For a significant sector of the liberal Jewish population, non-sectarian and global concerns take priority over Jewish needs.

The disengagement from Jewish life by some on the left is neither novel nor especially surprising. After all, there's a long history of Jews identified with the *far left* who have rejected religion and feeling responsible for the Jewish people. But the masses of American Jews who identified with political liberalism thought differently. They saw no tension between their commitments to aid fellow Jews while also supporting non-sectarian causes. Nor did they indict their religion as the source of human failings. Twentieth century Jewish liberals often were leaders of federations of Jewish philanthropy, defense organizations, social service agencies, and Jewish educational and religious institutions. During the 1960s, baby boomers seeking to make their mark on American Jewish life were committed to anti-war protests and the Civil Rights movement, as well as labor unions—even as they marched to free Soviet Jewry and defend the embattled State of Israel. While in our time it is not uncommon for Jewish progressives to ridicule efforts to ensure "Jewish continuity," youthful activists in the early 1970s critiqued Jewish organizations for investing *too little* in Jewish education and *too much* in Jewish health care facilities that no longer served a primarily Jewish clientele. In that era, too, the Jewish left produced the Havurah fellowships, the turn to neo-Hasidism, significant aliyah to Israel, Jewish feminism, and mass demonstrations in support of Jewish causes. Undoubtedly, some on today's Jewish left passionately share similar Jewish commitments. But the data we have cited point to the indifference of many Jewish liberals today—particularly younger adults—to most forms of Jewish particularism, religious life, and positive identification with Israel as a Jewish state.

How might this situation change in the direction of greater involvement

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by political liberals in Jewish life? It's possible that American society, including political liberals, will re-embrace religious commitment and a more positive approach to cultural heritage. The pendulum may swing back: Americans may come to place more value on association, cooperative work, and volunteering. Just as trends in the wider society have pushed liberal Jews in the past to distance themselves from their religious and collective needs, a broader shift in attitudes may make Jewish particularism more attractive. Not least, rising

levels of antisemitism may accelerate these changes.

There also are possibilities for some rebalancing of priorities within the American Jewish community. Reform, we expect, would have to come from inside the camp of Jewish liberals. Sobered by findings such as those we report, liberal-minded leaders may take up the challenge of rebuffing ideas and influencers undermining participation in Jewish religious and communal activities. In all likelihood, only highly respected and credible liberals committed

to Jewish life—and there still are tens of thousands of them—have a reasonable chance to reverse the Jewish commitment gap we have highlighted. They are best-positioned to make the case to their ideological allies for the compatibility of liberalism with active participation in Jewish communal and religious endeavors and reject those aspects of left-leaning thinking inimical to Jewish life. ■

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NEWS

Holocaust Survivors Welcome Ukrainian Refugees to Poland

The few remnants of Krakow's Jewish past are at the heart of its efforts to welcome those fleeing a new European war

BY ARMIN ROSEN

In the best of times, Krakow is a clash of civilization with its antithesis—or maybe of civilization with one of its inevitable outcomes. At Auschwitz, an hour and a half west, a visitor can see a display case filled with hair harvested from arriving prisoners, a small portion of the 15,000 pounds of stockpiled human hair discovered when the Red Army liberated the death camp in January of 1945. Like the intact concrete posts stringing the barbed wire at nearby Birkenau, this still-existing physical remnant of victims of the Holocaust testifies to how recently the Nazis brought Jews from Warsaw and Berlin and Salonika to eastern Poland for extermination. Auschwitz having been absorbed, though never quite processed, a visitor's

day might end with borscht and fried sheep's cheese under the mismatched towers of the 750-year-old Gothic church hulking over the tourist-glutted center of one of Europe's best-preserved medieval cities, a few blocks away from the Czartoryski Museum, which is home to a Leonardo da Vinci painting.

These are not the best of times in Central Europe. Today, someone arriving to Krakow by train in the evening might be greeted with the smell of cup noodles being distributed to crowds of refugees fleeing the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the least fortunate of whom haven't strayed far from the city's railway station, where much of the emergency assistance effort is still clustered. It is some of Ukraine's poorest who are arriving now, even if the mass migration

of February and March has largely ended. The newest of Krakow's refugees tend to be from more outlying or rural areas where much of the actual fighting is now taking place.

Poland's right-wing government has shocked its many detractors by treating the refugees as decently as it has. History suggests that the Poles wouldn't automatically be open to helping Ukrainians, especially in light of the country's supposed turn away from liberalism. Poles and Ukrainians fought a war in the late 1910s, and ethnically cleansed one another as the German hold on the region collapsed in the closing days of World War II. I was given at least a half-dozen explanations for the welcome the Ukrainians have received in Poland less than 80 years later. Perhaps it was because of a common experience of Russian oppression, which for Poland spans much of the modern era, dating from the 18th-century partition right up to the fall of the Soviet-supported communist regime in 1989. Perhaps it was a result of 1939, a shared ancestral memory, and for some a direct memory, of standing alone against the Nazis.

More cynically, the Ukrainians solved the country's emerging labor shortage, serving as a boost to an inflation-strapped economy. Jaroslaw Kaczynski, leader of the ruling Law and Justice party, suspects his twin brother was murdered on Vladimir Putin's orders when a plane of Polish dignitaries crashed outside of Smolensk in 2010. The European Union had been feuding

with Warsaw over the application of EU law in Poland and pressuring the country to curtail its coal mining industry; the worldwide energy pinch caused by the war, along with Poland's critical role in managing the refugee crisis, suddenly turned Kaczynski from a pariah into one of the more indispensable figures in Europe. Perhaps most pertinently, the vast majority of refugees, nearly 95% according to Polish government figures, are women and children. The young men, who might drift into drunkenness or violence if left idle in a foreign land for long enough, are back in Ukraine, fighting the war. As Krakow Jewish Community Center (JCC) Executive Director Jonathan Ornstein observed, three months into his unexpected career as coordinator of what's turned into a refugee center, "You don't always fully understand how individuals act during a crisis, and you don't fully understand how more complicated things like a society and a government react during a crisis."

Every evening, and sometimes twice a day, Ukrainians gather at the statue of the 19th-century poet Adam Mickiewicz in the middle of the city's main square to sing and wave flags, providing a frisson of picturesque, real-time historical tragedy for the stampede of visitors from Manchester or New York, which continues in spite of everything. By some accounts, Krakow, which is four hours from Lviv in peacetime, is hosting 150,000 refugees, making Poland's second-largest city close to 20% Ukrainian.

In Kazimierz, the neighborhood southeast of the old city that was home to Krakow's Jews for over 600 years, lines of refugees form each morning on Miodowa Street, in front of the JCC and across from a row of restaurants serving "traditional Jewish cuisine" to tourists. It's a bright four-story building, opened in 2008 on the initiative of Prince Charles, facing an alleyway behind the minimally functioning but splendidly restored 19th-century Temple Synagogue. A large room on the JCC's ground is now gridded with shelves of Similac, toys, diapers, baby carriers, clothing, and shoes organized by size. On the walls of the distribution center, cloaked behind the rows of shelves, are

colorful prints from a Polish-language graphic novel about the life of Sarah Schenirer, the Krakowian founder of the Bais Yaakov educational movement in the early 20th century—an exhibit left over from a time before Feb. 24, when the war in neighboring Ukraine began and the JCC reoriented its entire mission. A calendar in Ornstein's office lists the JCC's pre-COVID schedule of classes in Hebrew, Yiddish, basic Judaism, Israeli geography, yoga, and other areas of local Judaic interest, a relic of at least two crises ago.

The JCC is the leading institution of a Jewish community that numbered 60,000 in 1939, accounting for a quarter of Krakow's population. Today the JCC has 800 members in a city of 750,000, eligibility being limited to Krakowians who have one or more Jewish grandparent. The day Putin's army began its assault on Ukraine, Ornstein instructed that a banner be hoisted over the entry gate, reading "Welcome" in Ukrainian. It is still there. Ornstein says the downstairs distribution center sprang up overnight on the 24th. It now serves an average of 500-600 refugees a day.

In the early days of the conflict, as waves of Ukrainians poured into Poland, volunteers in neon yellow vests with the JCC's Magen David logo waited at the train station, directing newcomers of all faiths to a place where they could find food, shelter, and other help. The JCC has organized aid shipments deep into Ukraine, reaching as close as Lviv and as far away as the Donbas, in the especially war-affected East. The JCC is feeding 85 Ukrainian Roma, and housing 80 people in the Paszkowka Palace, a 19th-century Gothic revival mansion just outside of town. Unlikely as it seemed, there was in fact a spare palace in the Krakow area available for housing refugees. "I could look on its Wikipedia page," said Ornstein. "A guy reached out to us from Colorado and said he'd found an underused palace on Airbnb."

In the past three months, the JCC has tripled its budget and doubled its staff. It now spends an average of \$25,000 a day assisting Ukrainians. Because the JCC gets 95% of its funding from outside of Poland, the aid operation is a kind

of global Jewish project, a sign that Jews still have a presence, and a sense of moral responsibility, in a former Jewish heartland that is now more widely known as a site of genocide.

"We're very mindful of where we are," explained Ornstein, who was born in New York and served in the IDF before dating a Polish woman and relocating with her to Krakow in 2001. "This isn't a Jewish community somewhere in the world. This is a Jewish community next to Auschwitz ... We're in a part of the world where Jews have seen so much suffering, and we're in a position to help."

As with so much else in Poland, there is an added dimension to anything the Krakow JCC does, connected to an unavoidable and painful past, one whose contradictions are difficult or perhaps impossible to resolve in the abstract, but manageable—maybe even surmountable—out in the real world, where the pressures and realities of 2022 can make something positive out of the ever-present nightmares of the 1940s and after. "Even a community decimated by the Holocaust and which suffered under communism still can show empathy," Ornstein said. "It's good to be able to help ... You can feel a little powerless, given the history here."

"You quickly realize for us, the past is important—the past is far more important than the future," said Jakub Nowakowski, director of the Galicia Jewish Museum. "If you talk about Polish-Israeli relations, it's all about the Holocaust. It's all about the past." We met for dinner in the Rynek, medieval Krakow's frenetic main square. As if to prove Nowakowski's point, a trumpeter emerged from the star-shaped upper turret of the 14th-century Saint Mary's Basilica to announce the hour, a tradition dating back to the Mongol invasions of the 1200s. The call rang out as a pro-Ukraine demonstrator at the Mickiewicz statue played "Zombie," the Cranberries' 1994 antiwar anthem, on an acoustic guitar.

The dark obverse of being obsessed with the past is forgetting or distorting the past, a problem the Galicia Jewish Museum, founded by two British Jews in the mid-2000s, now attempts to

rectify. Poles, Nowakowski explained, are often not aware that they dwell in “post-Jewish spaces”—they don’t know that the furniture store in the middle of their town used to be a synagogue, or that half of the surrounding houses belonged to Jews before the killing and displacement of a minority group which accounted for most of the country’s lawyers, as well as most of its shoemakers, along with 10% of the total prewar population. Like Morocco, another former center of a vanished Jewish world, Poland is a country where non-Jews are now the keepers of Jewish culture and memory—which will inevitably be sustained in a way that reflects the current, almost Jew-less society’s hopes and needs, for better and worse. Unlike in Morocco, the Jews in Poland were slaughtered, often with either the tacit or active cooperation of many of their neighbors.

The fall of communism created a new opportunity to reckon with a recent past in which Poles had been, as Nowakowski put it, “a victim and perpetrator at the same time.” In the first two decades after Poland democratized, Nowakowski said, “we went from not discussing the Jewish past to the point where you could spend every weekend going from one Jewish culture festival to another.” The rupture in Polish existence brought on by the Holocaust, and then by the Communist Party’s anti-Jewish purges in 1968—the Jewish population’s rapid plunge from 3.4 million to just a few thousand—is incomprehensible, including to modern-day Jews and Poles of all backgrounds. But there is a Polish movement to try to comprehend it, in ways even more substantive than the occasional klezmer concert: In 2019, 40% of the museum’s 74,000 visitors were from Poland. Nowakowski, who is in his late 30s, isn’t Jewish.

The Ukraine war became an opportunity for the Galicia Jewish Museum to make its own contribution in combating the latest outburst of tragedy in Poland’s neighborhood. The museum had several Ukrainian employees before the war, and like many in Krakow, Nowakowski wondered what he could do to help the waves of newcomers. “As a museum, as a human being, where does the

responsibility end?” he said he asked himself. Nowakowski realized that refugee children had little to do during the day, and that the museum, which is built around a spacious former industrial mill across from the 15th-century Old Synagogue in the Kazimierz district, had a large room free. The museum hired teachers from among the refugees and set up a preschool.

On a Friday afternoon, a group of 12 girls and three boys were split between a table of art supplies and a corner filled with toys—the walls were covered with drawings of hearts patterned in Ukrainian and Polish national colors amid frequent depictions of busses, tanks, and dragons, a symbol of Krakow. “I don’t think they feel like they’re at home,” their teacher, a lanky and effortlessly focused woman named Valentina Merzhyievska told me. “Most of them have fathers that are still in Ukraine.” A young girl came over to show Merzhyievska a colorful drawing of a rabbit.

Before the war, Merzhyievska lived with her husband and two children in Hostomel, where Russia attempted to land special forces for an inevitably thwarted attack on Kyiv, kicking off the war. “We listened to the first explosions,” she said, speaking in English. “We can’t believe it’s so close to Kyiv. For hours I feel weakness, I can’t stand on my legs. I have wet hands. All of your fears, they happen.” Merzhyievska, who taught math, physics, and philosophy at an experimental private school in Kyiv, had the resources to get out quickly. She took her children to Berdychiv to stay with relatives. Then they tried to flee to Lviv. But their driver accidentally wound up at the Polish border, since most of the road signs had already been taken down to confuse the invading Russians. Her husband, a video game designer, now runs communications systems for a bomb disposal team in Kharkiv, focal point of a brutal Russian assault.

The children played around us. A boy and a girl whacked a styrofoam ball with a plastic racquet set, chasing it around the room. Merzhyievska showed me clay models the kids had made of floorplans of houses, crowded with tiny pieces of furniture—records of places they’d left

behind, or maybe of places where they would like to live. Many refugees are being hosted by Polish families, or live under cramped conditions. The preschoolers enjoyed stringing blankets between furniture, Merzhyievska said. “For them it’s like therapy, to make those forts,” she explained. “The ones that lost their houses, they can build, and they feel good in this *khalabuda*.” An American museum curator, a longtime collaborator with the Galicia Jewish Museum, chimed in from nearby. “In Ukrainian *khalabuda* is a kid fort, not a brick fort,” she clarified.

Merzhyievska says she wants to return to Kyiv in August, regardless of whether the war is still going on, to ensure that her school reopens. Maybe in a few years, she said, she would launch an organization committed to preserving memory of the war in Ukraine. Ukrainian adults born during the Soviet era, she said, were aware of how Russia and other powers “destroyed national identity for a long period.” For people the age of her preschool students, Ukrainian identity was much more of a given. “Kids who were born in Ukraine, they can’t understand how Ukraine can disappear. No—it’s impossible.” Ukraine would have to move forward with a mentality of national assertion and permanence. “Now we have many discussions about culture,” she said. For instance: “Why are so many Russians learned about in schools?”

It was late afternoon and raining as the preschool let out. I sipped tea with Merzhyievska and the American curator in the hallway near the museum’s courtyard, which is decorated with a mural of Marek Edelman, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising hero who stayed in Poland through the antisemitic purges of the 1960s and became both a pioneering heart surgeon and a leader of the movement against the communist regime. A serious-looking young girl in a bright blue pea coat walked by with her mother—many of the refugees in Krakow had fled in February and arrived with little more than heavy pants and winter jackets; the Krakowians and the aid community ensured they received new clothes. The girl was from the Donbas, site of some of the most intense fighting

of the war. At a glance she could have been any young girl from just about any country at peace. “That one was crying the first day she was here—remember?” the curator recalled.

The generosity of the JCC and the Galicia Jewish Museum is hardly unique. Poland as a country has been remarkably welcoming to Ukrainian refugees. Those escaping Putin’s onslaught could get an identity number upon arrival in Poland, entitling them to medical care and the opportunity to work. They could ride Krakow’s public transit system and visit the da Vinci at the Czartoryski free of charge. Signs in the Krakow train station still indicate where Ukrainians fleeing with their pets can get help. Only 10,000 of the Ukrainian refugees in Krakow are in public housing. The other 140,000 are being hosted in private homes, or put up in hotels or apartments by aid groups like the JCC.

There are people within the JCC community whose lives have been affected by the full slate of crises in modern Poland—the JCC members include 50 survivors of World War II, many of whom stayed in Poland through the upheavals of the communist era. Anna Bielecka, a mentally sharp and matronly 80-year-old, began volunteering at the JCC because she had the language skills needed to interview incoming refugees, screening them for their most immediate needs. She had learned Russian in school, back when it was mandatory under the communist regime, and described the language, through an interpreter, as “melodic, like French,” which she also speaks. “There weren’t many people who would be able to communicate with Ukrainians,” Bielecka said.

In the early days of the war she helped arrange housing and travel to Israel for those who wanted to move to the Jewish state. She didn’t learn much about what the refugees had seen, though she mentioned hearing stories of multiday train journeys where nights were spent in total darkness to avoid attracting a Russian attack. Of Bielecka’s story, the refugees heard nothing.

Bielecka was born in Krakow in 1942, the daughter of a Jewish mother and a Catholic father who was a prominent

“Kids who were born in Ukraine, they can’t understand how Ukraine can disappear. No—it’s impossible.”

Warsaw lawyer. Bielecka’s mother was Vienna-educated and highly assimilated. Her blond hair and native-level German—along with, Bielecka speculated, a well-placed bribe or two—enabled her to escape the Warsaw Ghetto during the summer of 1941 and reunite with her husband in Krakow, just months before deportations to the death camps began. She passed as non-Jewish, but life in wartime Poland was hard for nearly everyone. “My mother was just 44 kilograms [97 pounds] when I was born,” Bielecka said. “It’s difficult to even imagine it.” She survived giving birth with the help of Japanese medical students, who were in Poland on an academic exchange with Nazi Germany to study the effects of famine on women and children.

Like many Polish Jews who stayed after the war, Bielecka had an awareness of her identity but did not engage in any real religious practice. She was a graduate student in Warsaw in 1968, when the Polish communist party began expelling most of its Jewish members, disqualifying them from the bulk of the country’s social and professional life and driving most of them to emigrate. A close friend of hers was denounced by regime leadership when protests erupted on campus; Bielecka was subjected to an all-day police interrogation when

it turned out that a campus typewriter repairman was a regime spy. She was asked to sign an affidavit, but noted to her inquisitors that she couldn’t possibly have done any of what the document described because she had been in the hospital giving birth to her son at the exact same time. “And that’s a little advice for us,” she said. “The police were the weak link.”

Bielecka and her husband moved to France during Poland’s 1980s state of emergency, declared by the communists as the Solidarity-led movement against the regime gained momentum. In France she earned a Ph.D. in history. The family returned to Poland when the country democratized. Both she and her mother came to know Marek Edelman, who died in Warsaw in 2009. “He was a very direct, very straight person,” Bielecka recalled. “And this is why he survived.”

Bielecka said that her parents were married in a Warsaw church in June of 1941 by a priest who was a friend of her father’s family. At the wedding, a friend of her mother’s came to the church in a dress uniform of the vanquished Polish army. “He could be killed for wearing that. This is very Polish. This is one of our things, we like to risk.” Of her parents, she added: “Fortunately they were very lucky.”

The Ukraine war has the potential to change the demographics and overall character of Krakow for years and even decades to come. The same goes for the city’s Jewish community, and Poland’s in general. Sebastian Rudol, the JCC’s deputy director, said the official number of Jews in all of Poland is 6,000, “which is nonsense.” At least once a week, Rudol says, a Krakowian contacts the JCC, trying to make sense of documents or other hints that might indicate a rediscovered Jewish ancestry. The real number of Jews living in Krakow is now known only to *HaShem*. But it is sure to increase if the war drags on—as the children of refugees learn Polish, and as their home country becomes an unattractive or untenable place in comparison. There are now 60 Ukrainian refugees who are JCC members, said Ornstein. “If this continues, we’ll reach equal levels of Ukrainian and Polish Jews.”

Anastasia Lasna lived in Israel before moving to the southern Ukrainian city of Mykolaiv with her husband. She is an English, Russian, and Hebrew speaker in her mid-20s who looks like she could credibly front a punk rock band. Back in Mykolaiv, she had been one of only two professional vegan chefs in the entire city, specializing in a shawarma made of falafel and meat substitute. “There was another boy,” she said of her competition, “but he wasn’t working constantly.”

Today, Mykolaiv is the last major city before the frontline. Lasna’s husband is now in Odessa. Their apartment back in Mykolaiv is in a building recently hit by a cluster bomb, and she has no idea how badly their home was damaged. She arrived in Krakow with the couple’s young daughter in March, during the second week of the war. She saw the JCC volunteers at the train station, and being Jewish herself she came to the center in search of “food, socks, and underwear.” A few days later, she

also found employment at the JCC as a translator.

Lasna said she expects the war to go on for a while, and feels no particular urgency to return to a country in chaos. This, she admits, is not the mentality of many other Ukrainians in the city. “Already if there’s five hours in Kharkiv without bombing they say, we should go back,” she said. “Oh, there are no mines on our streets. In Kyiv there are mines. We should go home!” Not her: Lasna had sheltered underground with her daughter in Mykolaiv during Russian bombardments. “It’s not for kids,” she said.

In recent weeks, the Ukrainians have lost ground to the invaders, and are experiencing critical shortages of artillery and ammunition. With the failure of his initial move against Kyiv, Putin’s most plausible route toward battlefield victory might be a scorched-earth assault toward the blockaded port city of Odessa, which would effectively landlock the rest of Ukraine and join

Russian forces to an existing outpost of so-called “peacekeepers” in the break-away Moldovan region of Transnistria. A volunteer at the JCC likened the nearest Polish-Ukrainian border crossing, three hours east of Krakow, to a “living organism”—it is quiet at the moment, but the aid apparatus is still there, in the awareness that an attack on Odessa or any other escalation will bring new waves of displacement.

For the refugees already in Krakow, each day spent away from home is its own expansion of the tragedy. Lasna said that on video calls, her husband often expresses surprise at how quickly their daughter is growing up. These calls, she said, can be a bitter reminder that “a piece of time was taken from us, by crazy people.” Even in a place as comfortable and welcoming as Krakow, “you’re frozen in time, but life is going on.” ■

This article was originally published on June 16, 2022.

HISTORY

The Botched Hit That Sparked the First Lebanon War

Forty years ago this month, Israel greenlighted an ill-fated invasion of Lebanon after the wrong Palestinian terrorists tried to whack the wrong Zionist diplomat

BY ZACK ROTHBART

The Dorchester Hotel, London—one of the world’s swankiest. Owned for decades by modern-day sultans and Middle Eastern magnates, the Dorchester has been a favorite hangout for countless cultural icons from Hitchcock to Streisand. Prince Philip,

Duke of Edinburgh, held a legendary stag party there before marrying the future Queen Elizabeth II.

The Dorchester is about as far as it gets from the muddy forests of southern Lebanon, yet that’s where the First Lebanon War started. Kind of.

One night in June of 1982, dozens of diplomats gathered at the Dorchester for

an annual gala event. Before midnight, Shlomo Argov—the eloquent, Jerusalem-born, Georgetown and LSE-educated Israeli ambassador to the United Kingdom—left the hotel and headed toward his car.

Moments before, in the men’s bathroom of the nearby Hilton Hotel, a meeting had taken place that would change the history of the Middle East. There, Marwan al-Banna took out a brown bag he had retrieved from his car. He revealed a Polish W.Z.63 submachine gun accompanied by two magazines of ammunition and handed them to his comrade, Hussein Sa’id.

Sa’id left around 11:00 p.m. and waited nervously in front of a BMW showroom, popping out as Argov approached his Volvo, shooting him and fleeing the scene.

In *The Master Terrorist: The True Story Behind Abu Nidal*, journalist Yossi Melman, who covered the failed assassination and subsequent trials, includes a firsthand account of the events recalled by Colin Simpson,

the bodyguard assigned to Argov that night:

“He bent down somewhat and was about to enter the car. When he was about to put his head inside, I heard a noise behind me. The ambassador fell to the pavement. I looked down at him and saw what appeared then as an extremely serious wound.”

Simpson chased after Sa’id, shooting him just below the ear but not before being shot at himself, with one of the assailant’s bullets narrowly missing his head. According to Melman, “The police investigators later found that the submachine gun had been set for firing single rounds, otherwise Simpson would probably have been struck several times by the 24 bullets remaining in the magazine.”

Argov was less fortunate. A bullet went through his brain. He was comatose for months and would be paralyzed for the rest of his life, spending decades bedridden, primarily in Jerusalem’s Hadassah Hospital.

Ambassador Victor Harel, who worked closely with Argov, remembered him as a “diplomatic giant,” a seventh-generation Jerusalemite who continued fighting after being injured in Israel’s War of Independence, going on to become one of the foreign service’s most valued assets. Argov was reportedly handpicked for the London post by Prime Minister Menachem Begin, despite the fact that the two belonged to adversarial political camps. Such a decision, shortly after Begin’s historic rise to power after decades in the political wilderness, indicated the trust and respect Argov had earned as a man whose service to his country superseded his personal political ideology.

Within hours of the assassination attempt, an emergency Israeli cabinet meeting concluded with a decision to hit 11 PLO targets in Lebanon, two of them in Beirut. In the meeting, Begin very clearly emphasized the urgency of action. According to military historian Shimon Golan, author of the most comprehensive work to date detailing the high-level decision-making processes during the war, Begin determined that “Israel could not wait to receive a report

“Rafael Eitan famously quipped: ‘Abu Nidal, Abu Shmidal. We have to strike at the PLO!’”

from Scotland Yard [regarding the terrorists’ organizational affiliation]; it had to strike without delay, the very same day, at the center of international terror in Lebanon ...”

IDF Chief of Staff Rafael “Rafael” Eitan recommended the initial targets to hit. Begin accepted the recommendations and emphasized that Israel had to be careful to avoid civilian casualties, while being ready for the inevitable response, including PLO attacks on Israeli civilians.

According to accounts culled from official sources and documentation, including those relayed by Golan and Melman, no major pushback, arguments, or heated discussions took place in the meeting that morning.

Interestingly, even though then-Minister of Defense Ariel Sharon is largely credited with designing and pushing the plans for the Lebanon War, he was in Romania at the time and was not even present at this most critical juncture.

Retaliatory rockets came shortly after the initial air strikes, and the Israeli leadership’s discourse shifted from how to respond to deciding on the most advantageous time to launch a ground operation. The ensuing monthslong war, known as Operation Peace for the Galilee or the First Lebanon War, led, among other things, to the decimation of PLO

forces in Lebanon and their expulsion to Tunis.

Yet the PLO had nothing to do with the attack on Ambassador Shlomo Argov. The day after the assassination attempt, Shin Bet chief Avraham Shalom had already reported to the Israeli leadership that the perpetrators likely belonged to the so-called Abu Nidal Organization (ANO), a rival Palestinian terrorist faction bent on taking down the PLO.

Rafael Eitan famously quipped: “Abu Nidal, Abu Shmidal. We have to strike at the PLO!”

Founded by Sabri Khalil al-Banna, the Jaffa-born scion to one of Mandatory Palestine’s richest families better known as “Abu Nidal,” the ANO committed dozens of hijackings, murders, assassinations, and other terrorist attacks around the world beginning in the 1970s, largely at the whim of its tempestuous founder. Though the ANO did target Israeli and Jewish people and sites, most of their attacks were against Palestinians or other Arabs, particularly diplomats, journalists, and various public figures.

“He didn’t believe in religion or Ba’athism or Marxism or anything else,” an acquaintance of Abu Nidal’s once told Patrick Seale, author of a biography on the terrorist. “The gun was his ideology and his ideology was the gun.”

For nearly a year prior to the assassination attempt, the Israel-Lebanon border had been overwhelmingly quiet following a U.S.-brokered agreement between Israel and the PLO. Yet the latter continued perpetrating attacks against Israel and Israeli targets internationally. Israel’s political and defense establishment generally agreed that Lebanon could not continue to serve as the PLO’s home base, and, in fact, detailed plans for the invasion, known as “Operation Oranim,” were ready long before the failed assassination and subsequent ground incursion,



HOLIDAYS



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which was overwhelmingly approved by all parties in the Knesset except for one.

The exact reason Abu Nidal chose to attack Argov in London on that night in June 1982 remains elusive, but many theories have been suggested, including one peddled largely by Abu Nidal's Palestinian enemies that he himself worked for the Mossad and ordered the assassination attempt in order to give Israel a justification for attacking the PLO in Lebanon.

In a rare interview, Abu Nidal was once asked by *Der Spiegel* why he ordered the attack, especially in light of the fact that it ultimately—and somewhat predictably—led to Israel's invasion of Lebanon. In characteristically paranoid fashion, the terrorist leader responded, "The Zionist ambassador in London was one of the heads and founders of the Israeli secret service, the Mossad. We attacked the ambassador when he had just been assigned a major role by the Mossad in Europe. Our fighters acted scrupulously in terms of my strict orders not to harm any other ambassador."

He admitted that at the time, "Any blind man could see the Zionist plans to invade Lebanon," though he categorically denied the role the assassination attempt played in instigating the war: "... in my eyes, it has not been proven and it is not true that the attack on the life of the ambassador was the spark that ignited the war."

While the explanation that Abu Nidal was himself an Israeli puppet is almost certainly the invention of his political rivals, the motives behind the argument are probably not so far from the truth. According to many, including Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari, veteran Israeli military correspondents and co-authors of *Israel's Lebanon War*, the hit was ordered by Abu Nidal in close coordination with Iraqi authorities in order to serve a number of strategic objectives.



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“While the explanation that Abu Nidal was himself an Israeli puppet is almost certainly the invention of his political rivals, the motives behind the argument are probably not so far from the truth.”

First, they knew the assassination would likely lead to a significant Israeli attack on the PLO in Lebanon—something undoubtedly to Abu Nidal's liking and benefit. Iraq also had a clear interest in Israel attacking Lebanon, not least because it would weaken or at least divert Syrian forces away from the Iraqi border.

In *The Master Terrorist*, Melman dubs the Iraqi scenario "extremely credible." He adds that the Iraqis, then facing internal strife and mired in the long and bloody Iran-Iraq War—which they were losing—had another interest in provoking the Israeli attack:

"If the Israelis would indeed invade, Iraq could request a cease-fire or declare one unilaterally, while appealing to the need for Muslim and Arab solidarity against the Zionist enemy."

Iraq did just that, announcing: "We believe in the urgent need to direct all our energy and resources to a confrontation with the Zionist aggression against the Arab world, the Palestinian people, and Lebanon."

Unfortunately for Saddam Hussein, no one—including the Iranians—paid much attention to the proposal.

Though the would-be assassination

certainly served some of Abu Nidal's interests, he couldn't have known in advance what the impact would be on his own organization and particularly its activities in London.

The attackers, including Abu Nidal's cousin, Marwan al-Banna, were quickly apprehended, and later tried and convicted. During the investigations, some details about the planning and implementation of the attack came to light. The explicit order to carry out the attack that night did not come down until the afternoon of the same day, when Na'if Rosan, one of the assailants, answered a public telephone outside his apartment in the Kensington neighborhood of London and was given instructions by one "Comrade al-Sayf." Rosan instructed al-Banna and Hussein Sa'id to meet him at the Hilton Hotel, where he told them that Argov, who at that point was still mingling at the Dorchester, was their target that night. He gave the gun to Sa'id, who carried out the attack while Rosan and al-Banna loitered nearby.

All three were apprehended within hours.

The police found a list of some 300 names in al-Banna's hostel room—most of them Israeli and British Jewish figures and organizations, including Chief Rabbi of Great Britain Sir Immanuel Jacobowitz; the chairman of the board of the *Jewish Chronicle*; and a local Chabad school, including the license plate numbers of the vehicles used to transport its students. The addresses of the Jordanian, Moroccan, Saudi, Egyptian, Kuwaiti, and UAE embassies were also on the list.

According to an interrogation transcript cited by Melman, when asked about the purpose of the list and related information, al-Banna explained, "We wanted to strip the mask from these institutions and places. We know that many of them are actually fronts for the Mossad, the Israeli secret service, or are potential centers for Israeli intelligence. We only wanted to reveal their true identity and publish it, so as to warn the Arabs away from these people and places..."

Regarding the presence of Arab diplomatic and other institutions on the list, al-Banna said, "There are many

groups that are ostensibly on our side but are in reality against us, such as Saudi Arabia.”

The prosecutor in the case, who referred to the trial as “the Baghdad connection,” admitted that many questions remained, yet asserted that “we have managed to open a window—even if only a small one—into the secret world of this terrorist secret organization.”

The arrests and sentencings essentially marked the end of any major ANO activities on British soil, though the organization continued to sow terror and target primarily Jordanian, Palestinian, Israeli, Jewish, and other institutions and figures worldwide for another decade or so. In 1984, Abu Nidal even tried to assassinate Queen Elizabeth II during her visit to Amman.

Nonetheless, the aftermath of the Argov assassination attempt certainly had significant implications for Abu Nidal’s activities in the U.K. and internationally, which had nothing to do with the conflict in Lebanon and which will never be fully understood.

From a circumstantial historical perspective, it seems quite clear that sooner or later there would have been a Lebanon War even had Shlomo Argov never been shot. Perhaps that’s why the failed assassination’s historic role as the spark that ignited the war has largely been ignored over the past four decades.

The pointed event was also, of course, very quickly overshadowed by the war itself and its immediate and long-term ramifications, including thousands of deaths and lives disrupted and ruined.

Though overwhelmingly popular at first, the war would ultimately leave Israeli troops in Lebanon for nearly 20 years, create a vacuum that has since been filled by Hezbollah, and spark the most significant antiwar movement in Israel’s history. Some of that sentiment was magnified and parlayed by Begin’s

political enemies, yet the fact remains that the popular movements against the war and in favor of conscientious objection to military service had never been seen in Israel at that scale. The conflict splintered the country and, according to many, has severely tarnished trust in elected and military officials ever since.

About a year after the assassination attempt and the outbreak of the war, Argov himself—physically paralyzed but intellectually astute—publicly expressed his personal thoughts on the war for the first time, dictating a short letter to a close friend. Mourning the tremendous loss of life, and contrasting the war with the existentially imperative Six-Day War 15 years earlier, Argov presented a critique of Israel’s political and military leadership, while diplomatically refraining from naming names.

Had the war’s planners thought more about its potential consequences beforehand, Argov argued, “they would have saved the lives of hundreds of our best sons.”

From the hospital bed where he would languish for the next two decades, Argov argued:

“We are a nation short in human resources. We do not have the ability to run experiments in the hope that one of them comes out all right. Even if one of them does succeed—what’s the good of amputated arms and legs?”

Lamenting the fact that during its short history Israel constantly and justifiably had to live by the sword due to the choices of its neighbors, Argov emphasized the eternal desire for peace, which for Israel “more than any other nation is not a slogan void of content, but rather life’s foremost essence and a truth.”

Argov’s role in the outbreak of the Lebanon War was not determinative. Yet in retrospect, there was perhaps no more appropriate trigger to this tragic and confounding conflict than the “wrong” terrorist group botching a hit on a man who bridged a toxic political divide at a time when few others did. ■

This article was originally published on June 22, 2022.



Album of the Week

Dehd, *Blue Skies*

The perfect summer rock album slows things down, with a feeling of absorption, like a lizard soaking up the sun on a rock. A perfect summer album isn’t about dancing, but grooving. In the latter, you’re swaying, balancing between moving and saving your energy in the sticky heat. There will be hooks and a chorus to get lost in, but not quite the endless sprawl of a jam band.

The Chicago band Dehd has released such an album. It’s called *Blue Skies*. The band has a knack for indie rock that’s all killer and no filler. The drums are out of the early ’60s and the guitars have a dreamy shoegazey sound, but the vocals have a determination all their own. Maybe it’s a Chicago thing.

Dehd isn’t the only band with a slow, hooky sound that can explode at any time. There are elements of Kurt Vile, The War on Drugs, and Wavves present in their songs, and the longing of another great Chicago band, Whitney. But Dehd has a sound all its own, of effortless interplay, that lines up with their 2020 album *Flower of Devotion*.

The three-piece’s sound feels both large and intimate, which makes *Blue Skies* the perfect background for a small gathering. Among five or six people, max, cracking open some summer brews or lighting up a joint, Dehd suddenly sounds crystal clear.

— David Meir Grossman

SPORTS

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THE REST

→ Contradicting previous reports that officers had attempted to breach the locked door of the classroom where the **Uvalde school shooter** was holed up for over an hour, **law enforcement officials have now confirmed that officers never even attempted to open the door**, which was, in fact, unlocked. An “abject failure” is how Steven McCraw, the head of the Texas State Police, described the Uvalde Police Department’s response to last month’s massacre. Other reporting found that there was an opportunity for officers to stop the shooter before he entered the school in the first place: Police reached the school while the shooter was still outside firing his weapon in the parking lot, but **officers did not engage the shooter out of fear for the children playing in the vicinity**.

→ For the fifth time in three years, **Israelis will vote to elect a new government**, as the country’s current leader, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, announced on Monday that his fractious coalition of eight political parties would disband this week. **The coalition has collapsed due to infighting, defections, and pressure from Likud, the opposition party**, with the recent defection of two right-wing coalition members amounting to the final straw. The disbanding of Bennett’s coalition marks the end of an experiment in Israeli politics that brought together left-wing, right-wing, and centrist parties—including the first Arab Israeli party to belong to a governing coalition—in an arrangement bound together more by its opposition to Israel’s long-ruling former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu than to any common political program. With elections now scheduled for the fall, Netanyahu’s Likud Party is leading in the polls. It is unclear if Netanyahu, currently on trial for corruption charges, will be able to reemerge as his party’s leader.

→ In March of last year, **Axios offered a forecast for the Biden administration that seems remarkable today—if only as a historical snapshot of how wrong media analysis can sometimes be**. Following a White House session between President Biden and historians to discuss how “big is too big—and how fast is too fast—to jam through once-in-a-lifetime historic changes to America,” and using it to support the claim that the White House was poised to make “vast changes to voting, immigration and inequality,” Axios noted that Biden, “popular in polls,” also has “full party control of Congress, ... party activists egging him on, ... [and] strong gathering economic winds at his back.” Axios says that its trusted sources informed it that “Biden won’t hesitate” to pull the trigger on all the above but that during his victory lap “he won’t rub their noses in it. ... That’ll be the Biden touch to rolling the opposition—and getting that much closer to the status of latter-day FDR.”

→ The Food and Drug Administration will set a **maximum on how much nicotine can be in cigarettes and e-cigarettes in an effort to “to reduce youth use, addiction, and death,”** a policy based on FDA research that suggests lower nicotine levels in these products would help users to avoid addiction. This initiative—a central part of the Biden administration’s “cancer moonshot,” a stalled policy goal of cutting cancer deaths in the United States by 50% in the next 25 years that the administration relaunched this week—takes direct aim at tobacco companies, which are expected to lobby against the move. There is presently **broad support for the policy**, which the Obama and Trump administrations both supported.

FROM THE BACK PAGES

The technological crisis we are facing today is not about digital technology itself—we do not yet have the Frankenstein problem of our creations turning against us. The danger comes from our misguided faith that technology will save us. Our fallacious belief turns tools into sacred objects worthy of reverence and obedience and finds us kneeling before the idols of our own invention.

In *Technics and Civilization*, Lewis Mumford wrote that modern technological advancements required a “cultural preparation” involving the evaporation of religious beliefs and the emergence of a mechanical universe where man triumphs over nature. Yet Mumford’s image of the future—a place where humans covered great distances in cars and airplanes, and factories belched smoke—now strikes us as a vision of the past. A century ago, people fled the countryside to find their futures in industrial cities. Today we flee our own bodies looking for a “better life” in post-human technologies while entertaining the illusion that human perfectibility is possible through technological enhancement.

Ancient Romans saw bodies as the best representation of the human mind and soul, worthy of cultivation. Twenty-first-century Americans see their bodies as devices. Millennials have been conditioned to see their bodies as machines that need to be fed and taken care of but are no longer intimately connected to their identity.

—Zineb Riboua

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The Lost Synagogue of Aleppo

A new virtual reality exhibit at the Israel Museum brings to life the Great Synagogue, and the great collapse of multinational Jewish life

BY MATTI FRIEDMAN

One day in 2016 the end came, again, for the Great Synagogue of Aleppo. Fighting between the Assad government and rebels had ripped the ancient city apart and hundreds of thousands of people were already dead across Syria, so it doesn't seem right to dwell on the loss of a building—but this was, perhaps, the greatest building in the Jewish world. Prayers began at the site, scholars believe, around the fifth century CE, maybe earlier, and continued until the 1990s, when the last Jews left the city. There were breaks only for events like the Mongol invasion that leveled much of Aleppo in the 13th century, for the occasional devastating earthquake, and for the Arab riots and arson that accompanied the United Nations vote on Israel's creation in 1947. No other synagogue on earth embodied 15 continuous centuries of Jewish life and memory.

Since the community's final departure, the building had been empty but intact, guarded by the regime, upkeep covered discreetly by members of the Aleppo Jewish diaspora. But photos after the 2016 fighting showed pulverized stonework, a courtyard full of rubble, twisted iron railings, and Hebrew engravings blasted off the walls. The Great Synagogue was gone.

And yet last week I walked past the high bimah, 20 steps off the ground, illuminated by Syrian sunlight pouring through the colonnades. I saw a leaky pump in the courtyard surrounded by gleaming puddles, and took in the paint peeling on the columns and the deep

medieval windows. There was no damage. It was all so vivid I put out a hand to touch a wall, forgetting that it wasn't real. I paused by the famous "sealed ark," one of the synagogue's seven repositories for Torah scrolls, which was sealed at a time and for a reason that no one remembers. The ark was home, according to local legend, to a magical snake that appeared on occasion to save the community from its enemies. I read the plaque honoring a donor named Eli Bar Natan, inscribed sometime before the ninth century. I peeked into the Cave of Elijah, a nook that housed the Aleppo Codex, the most perfect copy of the Hebrew Bible, for 600 years.

It was while writing a book about the codex that I heard many hours of recollections of the Great Synagogue from elderly Aleppo Jews, and spent many more hours imagining the place. Many of the memories had nothing to do with ritual: One elderly woman remembered the eerie whispering sounds she heard in the building's corners as a little girl, and one spot where you could stand to feel a strange breath of air. The synagogue had seen so many human generations, had heard the name of God pronounced and the story of creation repeated so many times that at some point it seemed to have come alive itself.

I crossed from the old part of the building used by the original Arabic-speaking community, the *musta'arabin*, into the brighter "new" wing built for refugees from Spain after the expulsion of 1492—and then the simulation crashed. A Windows screen popped up and an apologetic technician took my headset; the exhibit wasn't open to the

public yet, and there were still a few glitches in the software. It took a few moments to remember where I was, and that the synagogue was still gone.

This gallery at the Israel Museum, the one called Jewish Art and Life, has several recreated synagogues, like the beautiful one from Vittorio Veneto circa 1700, and one from Suriname with a remarkable sand floor. But the new exhibit, which opened this month, marks the first time the museum has used virtual reality. The "exhibit" is little more than four chairs and four headsets. The curators, who hail from an earlier generation, seem a bit defensive about the technology, aware that it might be deemed frivolous. They make sure to explain that this simulation isn't a fictional recreation, but is based entirely on a remarkable series of 51 photographs shot in November 1947 by an Armenian photographer working for a Jewish woman, Sarah Shammah, whose family preserved the historical treasure in their Jerusalem home. This is not, in other words, hi-tech entertainment, but a display of photographic documentation using new means. "Sarah's photos are the original artifacts," said Rachel Zarfaty, one of the curators. "All we did was change the platform."

One day that month in 1947, just weeks before the outbreak of Israel's Independence War, Shammah had the ancient building recorded in its entirety by the photographer, whose name has been lost. She seems to have had a premonition. Only days later, on Nov. 29, the United Nations voted to partition the British Mandate territory of Palestine into Arab and Jewish states, upon which a mob in Aleppo rioted and torched Jewish homes, shops, and synagogues, including much of the Great Synagogue. Similar riots in other cities spelled the end for Jewish life in Arab countries. Most of Aleppo's Jews escaped immediately afterwards, though a remnant limped on for a few more decades under the boot of Syria's military dictatorship, praying in part of the building. After the 1947 riot, Shammah made it to Jerusalem via Beirut with the negatives. The borders were cut a few months later, and she never saw her city again.

The idea of a virtual-reality resurrec-

tion of the synagogue originated not with the museum but with a group of four creative partners, two in Israel and two in Berlin, with backgrounds in film, history, and tech. One of them is Avi Dabach, 50, an Israeli director whose great-grandfather Ezra Dabach was the sexton of the Great Synagogue. Avi's grandfather grew up in an adjacent apartment and used to tell him stories about the building: "He'd say, I can't describe how beautiful it is, and when Israel and Syria make peace I'll take you there on the first plane," he remembered. The first plane has yet to take off, but five years ago, Shammah's son Avraham, now 89, showed Avi his mother's photographs. The partners spent years turning them into a virtual reality simulation. When you put on the headset at the Israel Museum, you're visiting the synagogue on a specific day in November 1947, the last moment that the community was whole. One scenario allows you to take a tour with a ghostly simulation of Asher Baghdadi, the sexton who took over from Avi's great-grandfather in 1928. A second scenario is a dramatization of the events around Shammah's

visit to the synagogue as the Middle East imploded around her.

The precise details of what happened to the real building remain unclear, but it happened as Assad's army fought to regain control of Aleppo from rebel forces in 2016. The slightly younger Jobar Synagogue in Damascus had already been destroyed two years earlier. There's a blurry photo showing armed fighters in the Aleppo synagogue, and then there are other photos that show walls riddled with bullet holes and others reduced to rubble. Two years later, two 360-degree images on Google Street View show signs of a cleanup, but the building's a shell.

The recreated synagogues of the Israel Museum, including this one, are beautiful and memorable and deeply sad. The curatorial energy and creativity can't obscure what all of this tells us, which is that the Jewish world is contracting. The fact is that in the lifetime of our parents and grandparents, Jews were eradicated in much of the Christian world and erased from the world of Islam. It's not just the Great Synagogue of Aleppo—it's the houses of worship

in Tataouine or Oran, the synagogues of Galicia and Romania, the ones in grand Italian towns and obscure Polish hamlets. And what about Cochin, or Kaifeng, or, for that matter, Knoxville, the Carolinas, and the Caribbean? Much of the tenuous, beautiful, and strange variety of Jewish life that existed a century ago is gone. The vast majority of what remains plays out in the state of Israel and a few big cities in North America.

The new simulation had the effect of bringing the Aleppo synagogue to life for a moment. The impression of being in that building, even if it was only virtual, was so potent for me that it still hasn't quite worn off. Everyone who can visit the simulation at the Israel Museum should go. But tech has a way of showing us something and leaving us hollow. When the headset came off, I was left with the same feeling I've had when reconnecting online with a friend from the past—the knowledge of what existed not long ago, and how truly gone it is. ■

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COMMUNITY

Up in the Air

How a Hasidic wedding tradition became ubiquitous at Jewish celebrations of every kind

BY JENNA WEISSMAN JOSELIT

When Dvora Lapson, the celebrated dancer, choreographer, and Jewish educator, published *Dances of the Jewish People*, a spiral-backed compendium of steps and directions, in the mid-20th century, little did she imagine that, in America of the 21st, the Hasidic practice of lifting the happy couple aloft in the

air would become the thing to do at Jewish weddings, even among those celebrating what used to be called a "mixed marriage."

Perched precariously on a set of ballroom chairs, whose wobbly legs are held by equally wobbly well-wishers, their faces flush with drink and physical exertion, the newly married bob up and down. Sometimes, they clutch at either end of a hanky or a cloth napkin, waving it merrily about or bridging the

distance between the two chairs. And sometimes, they do both.

Like conquering heroes, or royalty, the newlyweds are also paraded around the dance floor, accompanied by singing, shouting, and clapping guests. Depending on the crowd, the music and the look on the couple's faces, which ranges from "I'm lovin' this," to "put me down NOW," staying aloft might last a tad longer than a New York minute or go on and on until the bearers' arms grow weary.

Limited at first to weddings, the "chairs," as the dance is called by those in the know, has become such an entrenched part of a *simcha*, a Jewish celebration, that is now customary at contemporary bar and bat mitzvah parties. On these occasions, parents and grandparents, as well as the adolescent celebrant, are hoisted upward, extending the movement's symbolic circumference.

Whatever the occasion, the heavy lifting doesn't follow any prescribed pattern.

Sometimes, it erupts spontaneously while a hora, or circle dance, is underway. At other times, especially within more ritually observant and knowledgeable settings like those among the modern Orthodox, the moment might follow on the heels of or precede a traditional dance known as *keytsad m'arakdim* in which the nuptial couple are seated on two chairs as guests perform all sorts of antics in front of them. Then again, it might not. The “chairs” move to their own beat. Meanwhile, when there’s little by way of Jewish dance literacy, a professional Jewish dance leader like Steven Lee Weintraub might step in to set things in motion.

If modern secular dance is about the self and the body, flirtation, and sexuality—cue the hips—the “chairs” dance and the larger circle in which it’s quite literally embedded—cue the arms—celebrate community. As Weintraub puts it, the dance is a “gift that elevates the newly married couple and amplifies their status while also bringing people together.” That you don’t have to be mindful of its significance or even know the steps to participate is an added bonus. An example of what Weintraub calls “dancing happily,” its fun, fast-paced, easy, and joyful nature draws you in.

A high point of the festivities and in more secular circles, the culmination of the Jewish segment of the evening, the “chairs” has become a hallmark of a Jewish wedding, distinguishing it from its non-Jewish counterparts. It also calls into being and heralds a contemporary Judaism that is fleet of foot, inclusive, and gestural rather than obligatory.

How this came to be—and why—is anyone’s guess. Like so much else associated with grassroots behavior, where several intangible factors—opportunity, motive, and taste—appear to converge all at once, giving rise to a new cultural phenomenon, pinpointing the history of the “chairs” dance in the United States is equally elusive.

To compound matters, documenting the history of dance is famously difficult. Photographs might freeze the moment, videos might capture its intensity, and participants able to recount with various degrees of glee and apprehension what it felt like to be elevated, but how and when this particular dance

came on the scene and whom to hold responsible—the caterer? The band? The increasingly indispensable and ubiquitous party planner? *Fiddler on the Roof?*—is murky and hard to pin down.

Dance ethnographers such as Jill Gellerman speak of the “ripple effect,” of the ways by which dances in one cultural arena spill over and take root in another, a process facilitated informally by popular culture, word of mouth or cultural sightseeing. The “chairs” dance, for instance, moved from a Hasidic context to a yeshivish one and onto modern Orthodox circles, from whence it radiated outward.

Often, passing familiarity with a dance or a song is obtained by being on the sidelines as a wedding guest who observes, and takes a shine to, the goings-on. Slightly more formal channels of circulation such as the internet and its self-appointed apostles also beat the drum for Jewish dance, while immersive Jewish arts festivals such as KlezKamp or KlezKanada expose audiences to an expanded repertoire of possibilities.

Klezmer, in fact, has much to do with setting the stage for the current appeal of the “chairs” dance. A phenomenon of the 1970s, which came into its own a decade later and stayed for several more, the revival of interest in a style of Old World music-making that had long been passé—and declassé—took youthful American Jewish audiences by storm. A literal blast from the past, with nothing mellow or subdued about it, klezmer provided a new generation of American Jews with an assertive, unrepentant Jewish identity.

At the same time that klezmer was tooting its horn (or, more to the point, its clarinet), another revival was underway: the Jewish renewal movement. Best understood as an “attitude,” it married several sensibilities that had hitherto lived far apart: the “socially progressive values of egalitarianism, the joy of Hasidism, the informed do-it-yourself spirit of the *havurah*.” The objective, explains Shaul Magid in *American Post-Judaism*, his deeply reasoned account of Jewish renewal’s evolution and development, was to “construct a radically new Torah emerging out of but not confined by the old.”

Tout ensemble, both klezmer and renewal challenged the status quo,

making room for and repositioning pre-war acoustic patterns and ritual behaviors in postmodern America. Floating free of the traditional anchors of Jewish communal life even while rooted in the pursuit of authenticity and the promise of continuity, these two instances of cultural efflorescence shook things up in every which way—sonically, performatively, structurally, emotionally. Ultimately, they seeded the ground for one of the most striking developments of our day: post-denominationalism.

You don’t have to cite chapter and verse from the Pew study on Jewish affiliation to know that aligning one’s Jewish self with any of the four American Jewish denominations, as our parents and grandparents did before us, no longer fits the bill. Rejecting institutional boundaries and its associated labels, millennials and their successors prefer a much looser, more freewheeling, pick-and-choose approach to modern Jewish life. With cultural fluidity and openness as their mantra, equal access to Jewish resources of all kinds, be it studying Talmud and Kabbalah, or dancing up a storm at a *simcha*, is also high on their list of priorities, challenging the claim of one group over another to maintain a monopoly.

Which brings us full circle. When joined together, klezmer + renewal begot post-denominationalism and post-denominationalism, in turn, begot the “chairs” dance, circa 2000-22, whose origins are Hasidic, whose expression is boisterous, and whose access is unguarded and open.

Am I making more of this phenomenon than it warrants? It could be. I’m under no illusion that, if asked about the rationale for or motivation behind the “chairs” dance, not one of its participants would prattle on about post-denominationalism or cultural fluidity. They’re too busy enjoying themselves to be overtly staking a claim for authenticity or making a bid for inclusion.

Still, there’s no getting around the fact that lifting the celebrants into the air as guests enfold them in a circle is a gesture that beckons, invitingly, even if you have two left feet. ■

This article was originally published on June 21, 2022.

Tchav Soup

BY JOAN NATHAN

INGREDIENTS

- 2** tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1** leek, white and light green parts only, diced
- 1** onion, diced
- 2** cloves garlic, minced
- ½** pound sorrel, tough stems removed and leaves roughly chopped
- ½** pound spinach, tough stems removed and leaves roughly chopped
- 1** cup assorted herbs such as tarragon, basil, parsley, thyme or chives, stems removed and leaves chopped
- 2** tablespoons freshly squeezed lemon juice
- 1** teaspoon sea salt, or to taste
- Freshly ground pepper
- 1** tablespoon sugar
- ½** cup sour cream, crème fraîche, or Greek yogurt
- 1** English cucumber, thinly sliced

PREPARATION

Step 1

Warm the butter in a large stockpot set over medium-high heat. Add the leek and onion, sautéing until the onion is transparent, about 10 minutes. Stir in the garlic and sauté a few minutes more. Pour in 4 cups of water and bring to a boil, then add the sorrel, spinach, herbs, lemon juice, and salt and pepper to taste. Simmer for 15 minutes, stirring occasionally, then remove from heat.

Step 2

Purée using an immersion blender or in a food processor or regular blender. You can purée it to be smooth and silky, or leave a bit of texture if you like. Taste and if too tart, stir in some sugar (although you may not need it if you are garnishing with crème fraîche). Chill for at least 2 hours in the refrigerator and serve cold, garnished with a dollop of crème fraîche or Greek yogurt and slices of the cucumber.

Yield: 4-6 servings

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