After Donald Trump’s surprisingly strong showing among Hispanic voters in the 2020 election, a media narrative arose of a possible realignment. Trump had picked up his fair share of Hispanic votes in 2016, but with further gains in 2020, the trend seemed worrying: Were Hispanic Americans ditching the long-predicted Emerging Democratic Majority?

The shift caught progressive media and activists by surprise. But as a Cuban American who lives in Miami, the more even split between Democrats and Republicans among Hispanic voters is old news, obvious to anyone who’s cared to look and listen since before 2015. In other words, this realignment, or shift, or whatever you want to call it, can’t be blamed on Trump.

Not that people haven’t tried. The few progressive pundits who even dared to acknowledge the reality of Hispanic voting patterns mostly blamed their failures of prognostication on ridiculous concepts like “multicultural whiteness,” hypothesizing that Hispanics and other people of color are under the spell of “whiteness” and act as its unwitting foot soldiers. This didn’t quite catch on, so a new blanket explanation that conveniently deflected blame from the woke movement was developed: Hispanics may not be afflicted by multicultural whiteness, but they are misinformed. According to the new logic, Hispanics are particularly vulnerable to “misinformation.”

This theory has had staying power, as it appears to explain the Democratic Party’s slide in Hispanic support while absolving Latinx-identifying “experts” who act as Hispanic whisperers. According to Democratic operatives, Spanish-language media in America, from talk radio to local news channels, is being flooded with ideas that deviate from the elite liberal consensus (i.e., ideas that aren’t “true”). The reason Hispanic listeners and viewers can’t distinguish between true and false information is presumably because most of them are working class, and thus “uneducated.”

The players pushing the misinformation angle within the Hispanic community are not the usual NatSec doofuses.
and former spooks grifting on MSNBC, but Latinx-identifying Hispanics with little connection to nonelite Hispanic culture, such as Paola Ramos, daughter of Jorge and author of the book *Finding Latinx: In Search of the Voices Redefining Latino Identity*. Because these expert pundits are mostly paid from somewhere within the Democratic political or media apparatus, they understand their job not as explaining Hispanic voters to white Democratic officials and national broadcasters, but as reassuring the latter that the emerging Democratic majority is nigh. When that narrative goes off the rails, “Hispanics are being targeted with misinformation” keeps the gravy train rolling; “Hispanics are like other Americans and trust Republicans more on taxes and immigration” doesn’t.

One reason the coastal elite Latinx haven’t made many inroads with Hispanic voters is because they are often afflicted with the racial neuroses of elite whites, which working-class Hispanics don’t share. An October article in HuffPost by Lautaro Grinspan titled “How Spanish Language Radio Helped Radicalize a Generation of Miami Abuelos” is the acme of this: Grinspan’s old timers aren’t human beings with agency, but confused and pitiful vessels for misinformation.

“Virginia, a 58-year-old Cuban immigrant who lives in Broward County, north of Miami, says that many of her mother’s radical views stem from the same source: misinformation on regional Spanish-language talk radio. To her growing dismay, Virginia says her mamá, 79, is an avid listener, with particularly strong allegiance to right-wing commentators on Radio Mambí, Miami’s leading Cuban-exile station.” The article is filled with many such misinformed abuelos (I can drop Spanish words for authenticity, too) to feed the fears of white Democrats while also allowing them to feel grave concern for the poor, the downtrodden, the people of color.

The key to reading reporting like Grinspan’s is to understand that the popularity of anti-communist radio among Cuban refugees in America is actually a very old story. These outlets have always trafficked in ideas that elite white audiences would consider “hard right” or even “radicalizing.” But they only became sources of “misinformation” once Democrats started losing Hispanic votes. Is that a coincidence?

Not according to Debbie Mucarsel-Powell, a South Florida Democrat who was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 2018 but lost re-election in 2020. Nearing the end of a competitive race, Mucarsel-Powell asked “the FBI for an immediate investigation into disinformation targeting Latinos before the 2020 election,” according to her website. After she lost, “a targeted disinformation campaign to Latinos” was among the reasons she cited. The Republican who beat her? Carlos Giménez, from Havana.

Evelyn Pérez-Verdía, a Florida-based “veteran senior advisor on Latino issues” (according to her Twitter bio), put her finger on the larger issue: “As I speak to more experts on #disinformation, I realize how so many do not grasp the massive challenge we have if we do not become more proactive in hiring people to research what is happening in Spanish speaking networks. This is not just about Florida. This is global.” Pérez-Verdía comes equipped with a solution worthy of her diagnosis:

I had a brainstorming session where I wrote as quickly as possible the connections with #disinformation #misinformation. The outcome: Latinos need information in Spanish from people they trust. When they do not have access to information, a space for manipulation opens up.

Here’s an accurate description of Radio Mambí and its fellow travelers in America’s Spanish-language radio universe: They have always been hyperpolitical, pandering to niche audiences that demand polarizing ideological fare delivered by charismatic personalities. The content is sometimes hysterical and even totally mad. I would venture to say that these stations became more emotionally charged during the Trump era. But please don’t confuse Radio Mambí with CNN, MSNBC, or Fox, notable for their politically tempered, nonideological content delivered by subtle personalities to highbrow audiences.

The actual difference with Radio Mambí and company is that their audiences tend to be older Cubans, Venezuelans, and other Hispanics with a deep disdain for communism who tune into shows that rail against it. As someone who’s grown up around this stuff and regularly associates with old-guard Cubans, I can guarantee that what you hear at any Cuban bakery or ventanita is even worse. This has been the case for decades, and is only a surprise to anyone who didn’t know until recently that Miami is teeming with communist haters.

Is it healthy for some of these old timers to call into talk radio and froth about “socialists” like Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and President Joe Biden? Maybe, maybe not; it’s not for me to say. What about their attacks on Vice President Kamala Harris, recently detailed in a Politico report titled “Democrats riled by Spanish-language radio attacks on Kamala Harris.” How ferocious are these attacks?

POLITICO did record and review segments of local programs independently via a radio station’s webcasts. In one, a male caller can be heard describing Harris as “inefficient” and “disappointing,” adding that the vice president “doesn’t do nothing at all.” The same caller jumped from one point to another before finally accusing the administration of poorly managing the economy. In recent days, a POLITICO reporter also heard callers on other Miami-based Spanish-language programs using similar phrases to describe Harris.

The man who sounded the alarm, a “Miami-based Democratic pollster” and “political strategist who helped Barack Obama win the state in 2008 and 2012” named Fernand Amandi, brought the detail:

“It’s not like you get 10 calls every day. It’s not like that. You get a couple of calls here, a couple of calls there,” Rodriguez said. “That’s how the phone banks begin that [have] worked,” he added, pointing to the way political operatives over the years have directed specific messages...
through callers on the radio programs. “But it’s a trend that you see that is growing by the day; is growing by the week.”

The larger point, of course, is that shadowy figures running phone banks don’t need to call into Spanish-language radio to “misinform” listeners into hating Harris; they hate her already. But that’s how you turn a ho-hum phenomenon—geriatric refugees from communist hellholes like listening to people talk smack about the left-wing party—into a supposed information operation requiring FBI investigations, the hiring of researchers, and complicated flow charts.

If Democratic operatives are interested in winning back the Hispanic voters they’ve lost, especially in swing states, they should focus less on grandpas drinking cafecito and screaming at each other than on the young, working-class Hispanics who have shifted rightward.

In the summer of 2021, as Cubans on the island took to the streets to protest the regime, Cuban Americans in Miami followed suit. I’ve seen countless demonstrations like these over the years and participated in my fair share, so I was skeptical: Not again, I thought. More pointless yelling and dancing and banging pots together. And to what end? Nothing ever changes on the island. Many Cuban Americans think this way, too, even if they won’t admit it, because the Cuban story, one of perpetual hope and disappointment, has frankly gotten old. Still, I watched the protests on the news and had a good laugh at the hysterical flag waving, the police having to close off all the usual streets—Miami at its most Miami.

But what struck me this time around was the age of the participants. In previous iterations, you would see the same old, beleaguered faces. Miguel Saavedra, whom I call the Cuban werewolf, is the leader of an anti-communist group called Vigilia Mambisa. The werewolf has been at the forefront of these protests for decades, always highly emotional and wearing out his voice, never losing his faith in the possibility of change on the island. The werewolf is typically flanked by his usual crew of similarly passionate—excuse me, misinformed—old timers, fellows who remind me of my dead grandfathers, or of my father, forever cursing out the communists as he listens to Radio Mambi. These are the Cubans who risked all so that I could live the good life, writing for sophisticated publications like Tablet in an ironically detached style for an intellectual readership, giving them a taste of urban Miami. I’m not a Latinx loser, but I’m still an embarrassment, what I’m trying to say. If there was any justice in the world, the werewolf would be the one writing this piece, not me, who never thinks about politics until the old timers are back out on the street screaming Libertad! Patria y Vida! again.

But last July was different. It wasn’t just the werewolf and his crew anymore—it was young Miamians: Fine Cubanitas you’d normally only catch out at the club, waving flags and shouting; dudes who look like dollar store reggaeton stars, who’d never uttered a political word in their lives, out in full force. “Patria y Vida, bro!” Now I was interested. This isn’t how millennials and zoomers are supposed to behave. The long-running Democratic narrative has been that, as younger Cuban and other Hispanic Americans assimilate, they’ll shift inexorably away from the right-leaning political and social views of their parents, and join the progressive coalition like good multicultural warriors. And younger Cuban Americans are typically less right wing than their parents. They just don’t think or act like Democratic consultants have decided they should.

About five years earlier, when Fidel died, I drove to La Carreta, a Cuban restaurant in the Cuban-heavy neighborhood of Westchester, where I was born and raised, and where the Cubans who don’t make the trek to Versailles Restaurant in Little Havana (the mecca of Cuban Miami) congregate during major happenings. There’s no other way to describe what I found there at La Carreta: It was a Fidel death party. The typical pots and pans, the chants and dancing. But this time around, in July of 2021, the vibe on the commandeered Palmetto Expressway near La Carreta—during peak traffic hours, no less—was different. It wasn’t just delirious partying, like it was when Fidel died. This time, there was anger, even rage. The young people were not out on the highway to party with their older relatives; they were out because they actually expected things to change on the island. Unburdened by decades of disappointment, they felt entitled to demand it. What was driving their anger, and their hope? Were they “misinformed”?

A few days after the highway incident, I visited La Carreta again, where a good friend of mine, a Cuban American named Willie, had been going everyday since the protests had kicked off. Like me, Willie lives in Westchester, but in a near-decade-long friendship, we’d barely ever spoken of Cuba. But now Willie, who’s disabled and gets around in a wheelchair, was pushing himself to La Carreta every morning and staying there until midnight—he’d caught the Patria y Vida bug. He’d meet up there not only with other young Cubans but Venezuelans and Nicaraguans, too. What brought all these young people from all over the Americas together at La Carreta for that beautiful summer? Was it ‘misinformation’?”
boomingly Spanish-language ecosystem geared toward younger Hispanics has emerged on social media platforms. While Latinx activists have been pushing wokeness on a mostly confused and uninterested audience, YouTube personalities like Alexander Otaola and other Hispanic influencers have been steadily attracting viewers in real numbers by speaking to their real concerns. Otaola is bombastic, willing to court controversy, and says inflammatory things like (in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd), “If we are going to fight racism, it is not by segregating or separating into races that we are going to achieve it.” But Otaola has not been given permission by Democrats to disseminate information to Hispanics; he is not Jorge Ramos or an elite talking head from Telemundo or Univision. No surprise, then, that Otaola was featured in The New Yorker’s October 2020 story, “How Pro-Trump Disinformation Is Swaying a New Generation of Cuban-American Voters.”

The painful reality for the Latinx set is that Hispanics are, as Ruy Teixeira recently wrote, “a patriotic, upwardly mobile, working-class group with quite practical and down to earth concerns.” Which means they have more in common with working-class Americans of all races than they do with Democratic Party elites. Anti-Americanism, violent riots, and pathological obsessions with racial and gender categorization cut no ice with them. They didn’t vote for Trump in surprisingly large numbers because they’re misinformed. They did it because Trump said wild shit, pissed off the prim and proper, only cared about the economy and jobs, spoke of his love for America, and had a hot wife. The Trumpian ethos, for all its stupid bullshit, is more relatable for many Hispanics (and non-Hispanics!) than the soulless progressive alternative.

If Democrats don’t want to lose any more Hispanics, they’re going to have to stop worrying and learn to love the Miami flotilla boys, with their fade haircuts and souped-up Honda Civics, more than the fourth-generation, non-Spanish-speaking dweebs who majored in Latinx studies at Oberlin. They should come down on to La Carreta, meet the werewolf and Willie, and smash some pots together at the next gathering: maybe for another round of Patria y Vida, or the Maduro death party. I hope to see them there.

This article was originally published on January 23, 2022.

NEWS

The Believer

Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch sees his unapologetic Zionism as the key to Reform Judaism’s survival and flourishing, while others see it as a betrayal of the movement’s universalist aims

BY ARMIN ROSEN

Here’s what I learned from decades of studying and embracing liberalism: The liberal mindset is one of openness and doubt,” Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch of the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue, a flagship of the Reform Movement, said during a Friday night sermon not long ago. “True liberals are never so sure of themselves. We acknowledge and embrace complexity. It’s why we rely on science and evidence. Every place where people live requires repair. One of the key insights of liberalism is that I could be wrong. And I am open to being convinced.”

On webcasts, the Stephen Wise synagogue’s ark and its curtains are a pleasant, hazy gold; in person, the eye cranes toward the soaring archways high above the bimah and the synagogue’s empty balcony. A few dozen Upper West Siders occupied the floor level on that Friday night in November, keeping a safe distance from the musical ensemble and a safe distance from each other. No one cheated on the mask front—not the cantor, who wore a duck-billed N95 as he finger-picked an amplified acoustic guitar. The only bare face belonged to Hirsch, a slim and vital middle-aged man who sat alone two rows in front of the bimah for much of the service, softly rocking back and forth and tapping his foot in time with the music. His mask only came off when he faced two video cameras and about 50 fanned-out congregants, a group whose size, he told me, was about a third of what the synagogue would get on a typical pre-pandemic Friday night.

A few weeks earlier, The New York Times Magazine had published a long feature article, titled “Inside the Unraveling of American Zionism: How a new generation of Jewish leaders began to rethink their support for Israel,” which explored the fallout from an open letter signed by 93 American rabbinic and cantorial students, 28 of them from the Reform Movement’s Hebrew Union College, during the May conflict between Israel and Palestinian terror groups based in the Gaza Strip. The letter charged Jewish institutions with being “silent when abuse of power and racist violence erupts in Israel and Palestine,” inveighed against “watered-down prayers for peace,” accused Israel of policies that “constitute an intentional removal of Palestinians,” and omitted reference to both Hamas and the hundreds of rockets the terrorist group was then firing on Israeli cities each day. The statement had been easy enough for
Hirsch to ignore, at least until it became an extended news item in the only publication that mattered in the Upper West Side. “Be honest,” Hirsch quipped to the gathered Manhattanites. “The learned staff of The New York Times tells you what constitutes Judaism.”

Reform rabbinic students had, in Hirsch’s mind, shown callousness toward their fellow Jews and flirted with a betrayal of their movement’s core principles. “How is it possible for current and future leaders of the Jewish people to write an open letter to the public in the middle of a war with missiles raining down on Israeli civilians—our people—without ever mentioning Hamas, the instigator of the war?” he asked. “How is it possible to write of ‘tears that flow’ without weeping for our own brothers and sisters, killed, maimed, and scrambling to underground shelters at all hours of the day and night?” Hirsch claimed. Perhaps Hebrew Union College had forgotten its purpose and grown overly tolerant of its own students. “We have a right to say go somewhere else if somebody doesn’t accept those values that we’ve defined for ourselves, and if we’re entitled to say go somewhere else to study rabbinics,” Hirsch had told me in an interview a few weeks before the sermon.

Hirsch’s public speaking style relies on strategic shifts in volume, emphasis, and mood. During sermons the 63-year-old rabbi will hypnotically stretch out the S’s at the end of words. His theatricality coexists with a rabbinic awareness of the tensions within his own ideas—in this case, of wanting some new assertion of communal limits in order to preserve what he sees as a fundamentally liberal project, the survival of Reform Judaism. On the bimah, and in private, a lawyerly sense of inquiry is in harmony with Hirsch’s inner certainties. “He’s able to say complicated and difficult things in a compassionate and impactful way,” said Diana Fersko, senior rabbi at the Village Temple, and both a rabbinic intern and an assistant rabbi under Hirsch at Stephen Wise for over seven years in the 2010s. “I used to say out of all the texts I study—Talmud, Torah—the text I studied most of all was him.”

That Friday night, a student of Reform rabbinics would have seen someone arguing with himself, while also clearly arguing for something. They would have observed an owlish patience, accentuated by a stolelike tallit and a wide pair of glasses. But at crucial moments he allowed his evenness to waver and break. “It isn’t that you are critical of Israel,” he said of the rabbinical students who’d signed the May letter. “Go ahead. We need critics. The issue is that you never seem to speak about Israel’s enemies or its threats against us,” he exclaimed, suddenly shouting on “never,” summoning a flash of almost-anger that subsided as soon as the next line arrived. It was an impressive performance, almost startlingly at odds with the determined banality and rote sloganeering of most non-Orthodox American rabbis—a speech by an actual adult living a passionate, examined, and proudly Jewish life. Less clear, in part because of the masks that hid anyone’s real-time reaction, was whether this 24 minutes of muscular Zionism, institutional criticism, and careful self-qualification, rooted in the once mainstream and now suddenly unfashionable heritage of 20th-century American liberalism, is getting across to anyone, and whether it would make that much of a difference if it did.

Ammiel Hirsch is the most prominent Reform rabbi who is willing to publicly challenge his colleagues’ alleged complacency toward the movement’s commitment to Israel. “The leaders of the movement, they’re passionate Zionists,” Hirsch told me when we met in his office off Central Park West a couple weeks before his sermon. “But it’s not only about what you say. It’s also about what you don’t say and what you let slide.”

Reform became a faith behemoth by capturing an identifiably American middle ground, one where social openness and personal choice can be used to help preserve older values and communal structures. The movement stood for the seemingly contradictory idea that religion doesn’t obligate anyone to do anything, even though it’s also personally and communally indispensable. Reform Judaism promotes a turning away from ethnocentrism, which is itself meant to reimagine a special mission and identity for the Jewish people within the context of what mid-20th-century American sociologists called “the American civic religion”—a phrase that today seems almost quaint in its assumption that Americans are a religious people, or a people at all. The Reform Movement’s compromises produced Shabbat services with grand pianos alongside a near-fulfillment of the principle of tikun olam, with ethical behavior and social action supplanting Messianic redemption, divine revelation, Talmudic study, and performance of the mitzvot as the essence of Judaism.

Today, Reform is the dominant Jewish denomination in America: Last year’s Pew survey indicates that 37% of American Jews identify with the movement, the largest share in the country by far (with 17% identifying as Conservative, and 9% as Orthodox). The movement has 850 affiliated synagogues in North America and a network of summer camps; some 40% of non-Orthodox
A Cure for Syphilis
From the archives of the Leo Baeck Institute

The Nobel-Prize winning scientist Paul Ehrlich (1854-1915) was born to Jewish tavern-keepers in Strehlen, Lower Silesia (now Poland). In 1909 he discovered a treatment for syphilis, which was at that time one of the most lethal and infectious diseases in Europe. In 1914, Ehrlich signed the Manifesto of the Ninety-Three, a defense of Germany’s World War I militarism. He is buried in Frankfurt’s Old Jewish Cemetery.

rabbinical students in the United States go to Hebrew Union College, according to HUC President Andrew Rehfeld. The movement’s relationship to Jewish peoplehood and the Jewish state goes a long way toward defining how these things are seen and felt by a plurality of American Jews.

One of the defining theorists and leaders of postwar Reform Judaism was Rabbi Richard Hirsch, Ammiel’s father, who died last August at the age of 95. The elder Hirsch, as Ammiel recalled, founded the movement’s Religious Action Center (RAC) in 1962. Martin Luther King Jr. invited him to speak at the Selma March; the RAC made its offices available to out-of-town activist leaders and became one of the civil rights movement’s nerve centers in Washington.

“That’s where liberals were,” Hirsch explained—they were doing everything they could to advance their era’s defining fight for justice. In the early ’70s the elder Hirsch became executive director of the World Union for Progressive Judaism and moved his family to Israel, where he oversaw the development of the Reform Movement’s Jerusalem campus and the relocation of its international headquarters to the city. “My father never saw a contradiction between social justice … and Zionism,” said Ammiel.

Jeffrey Salkin, an author and rabbi at Temple Israel of West Palm Beach, who also knew Richard Hirsch, echoed Ammiel: “[Richard Hirsch’s] decision to make aliyah was in some ways an extension of his social justice work here in the United States. He forcefully decided to export his social justice commitment to Israel, thereby building our movement and making it a bulwark of justice within the Israeli system itself.”

Richard Hirsch lived out his belief that American liberal Judaism and Israel could sustain and improve one another—perhaps liberal Judaism even required it. This idea, which brought the Hirsch family to the Middle East of the mid-1970s, would help determine the course of Ammiel’s life. “I only spent seven years in Israel, but you remember in the Bible Joseph interprets Pharaoh’s dreams and there are seven lean years followed by seven fat years?” Hirsch recalled. “They were only seven years, but they were seven fat years.” By the age of 15, maybe a year and a half after arriving in Israel, Hirsch’s Hebrew was good enough to fool a panel of judges on a To Tell the Truth-style radio show into thinking that he’d lived in the country his whole life.

Today Hirsch’s English-language accent is impecably American, and he speaks Hebrew with the sharp, rapid pronunciation of a native Israeli. One gets the sense that no Tel Aviv cabbie has ever cheated him. Instead of going back to America for college after graduating from the Gymnasia Rehavia high school in Jerusalem, Hirsch was drafted into the Israel Defense Forces, where he served for three years as a tank commander. His time in the country conceivably shaped his thinking about worst case scenarios and long-term dangers to Jewish survival, as well as the ways in which prevailing political fashions and inattentive or fearful leadership might seed future nightmares despite everyone’s best and most liberal intentions.

It wasn’t just the letter from Reform rabbinical students, or what he viewed as the movement’s disappointingly muted response, that worried Hirsch. “Nagging suspicions” about the movement’s direction began “about 10 years ago,” around the end of Barack Obama’s first term in office. The urgency accelerated when the Union for Reform Judaism, which is headed by Rabbi Rick Jacobs, opposed the 2017 decision to transfer the American Embassy to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv, a statement that seemed to prioritize party-line opposition to Donald Trump over what had been a longstanding and uncontroversial movement objective for half a century. The movement’s reaction to controversy over alleged antisemitism among leaders of the 2017 Women’s March also troubled Hirsch. “That we were not willing to critique our social justice allies ... began to really disturb me,” he explained, “in particular when we refused even to criticize, let alone pull out of those Women’s Marches where the leaders were all anti-Zionists and BDS supporters, and a couple were Farrakhan supporters.”

Other Reform rabbis in other cities voiced similar concern when I contacted them for this article. They claimed that both the URJ and the Religious Action Center, led by Rabbi Jonah Pesner, had turned into milquetoast liberal advocacy groups whose main public function appeared to be showing unqualified support for the Democratic Party. “There are a lot of congregations where it’s problematic to even send out emails and stuff from the RAC because they’re so politically partisan,” said David Kaufman, a Reform rabbi in Ohio and longtime pro-Israel activist. The RAC worked for the passage of President Joe Biden’s divisive election reform bill; its website homepage currently cheers on the House of Representatives’ passage of the Build Back Better act and asks Reform Jews to “Urge your elected...
officials to cosponsor the Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act (S. 1083/H.R. 40)."

“The theater of liberal American Zionism is all there,” as the leader of one large Reform congregation (which is, notably, not located on either U.S. coast) put it. The movement has an impressive campus a hill over from the Tower of David in Jerusalem, where nearly every American rabbinical student is required to study for a year, and which has ordained over 100 rabbis for Israel’s growing Reform movement. While the movement officially remains Zionist, and its leaders aren’t afraid to be seen alongside Israeli politicians, the rabbi wondered what it all really counted for. “I think I have felt that in recent years that sort of Zionist identity has become largely symbolic in ways that I feel nervous and uncomfortable about … Ultimately if we’re a Zionist movement, we should be producing Zionist rabbis.”

Tablet reached out to both Jacobs and Pesner for interviews. The URJ responded with a long statement attesting to its admiration for Hirsch’s work and leadership. “The Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) is a Zionist Movement,” the statement read: “Our Zionism is centered on fulfilling the aspirational vision of Israel’s Declaration of Independence and making sure that all Jews have a place in the Jewish State…. With the Religious Action Center (RAC) of Reform Judaism in Washington DC, we are often on the front lines combatting institutional anti-Zionism, BDS, and attempts to single out and vilify Israel. We use our influence to tirelessly advocate for a strong US-Israel relationship, for US leadership toward a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for foreign aid and security funding for Israel—including the vital Iron Dome—and for foreign aid to the Palestinians, which strengthens regional stability and fosters conditions for peace.”

Across from Hirsch’s desk, in his office a couple floors above the strikingly blank stone façade of the synagogue’s historic sanctuary on 68th Street and Central Park West, is a large aerial photograph of the Eshkol Reservoir in northern Israel. When the rabbi is stumped or blocked, he can look up and contemplate a critical piece of Israel’s national water carrier and the wonders of the modern Jewish state. The photograph is also a reminder of Israel’s thin margins for survival even in times of relative peace. As Hirsch explained, there is a word in Hebrew, miflas, that refers specifically to the water level of the Kinneret. (Because he spent most of his teenage years and his early 20s in Israel, Hirsch’s knowledge of the word miflas—and the hyperspecific yet untranslatable anxieties contained within it—is more than a piece of random trivia.)

Behind Hirsch’s desk, directly opposite the Eshkol and near eye level at the spot where the rabbi places the day’s stack of books, is a portrait of Stephen Wise, the synagogue’s founder. Wise, perhaps the most important Reform Jewish leader of the first half of the 20th century, embodies the uniquely American side of Hirsch’s work and self-image. Wise’s life’s work helps explain why Zionism has a significance beyond politics for Reform Judaism, and why belief in the Jewish national political project was at the heart of American liberal Judaism’s value proposition and even its very purpose. In our conversations, Hirsch also used Wise’s career to elucidate his own theory of the current dangers to the Reform Movement.

Born in Budapest in 1874, educated at City College and Columbia, Rabbi Stephen Wise was a labor activist, an acquaintance of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Albert Einstein, a leader of the American Jewish boycott against Nazi Germany in the 1930s, and a co-founder of both the American Jewish Congress and the NAACP. Wise founded the Free Synagogue in 1907 on the then-revolutionary principle that a synagogue board shouldn’t be allowed to censor a rabbi’s sermons, establishing freedom of the pulpit as one of the eventual pillars of Reform Judaism. Wealthy industrialists, for instance, wouldn’t be able to stop a liberal rabbi from denouncing abusive labor practices from the bimah. At Stephen Wise, and at the numerous Reform institutions modeled after it, rabbis would be the intellectual and moral voice of a congregation, even if it brought them into conflict with the people they led or the movement they worked within.

It was never easy for Wise to be a New Deal-supporting, pro-labor believer in racial equality. But some of the most bitter fights of his career were over Zionism, which the official Reform Movement didn’t endorse and often opposed throughout the ‘20s, ‘30s, and ‘40s (the movement had officially been non-Zionist since the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform). Wise had been a delegate to the Second Zionist Congress in Basel in 1898 and helped launch one of the forerunners of the Zionist Organization of America; he lobbied Woodrow Wilson for American recognition of the Balfour Declaration. Wise founded the Jewish Institute of Religion, a Zionist answer to the non- and often anti-Zionist Hebrew Union...
College, and oversaw the merging of the two institutions after the founding of the State of Israel settled much of the remaining debate among American liberal Jews in favor of the wisdom and necessity of supporting a Jewish state.

As Hirsch explains, Reform opposition to Zionism wasn't merely tactical, and it wasn't just a pragmatic or assimilationist response to American social pressures. Rejection of Jewish nationalism was philosophical— theological, even, rooted in the conviction, and perhaps the delusion, that Judaism could only survive if it shed all claims to petty Jewish particularism. “The 19th-century Reform theologians and leaders and rabbis and lay leaders, from what we now call the classical Reform period, believed that humanity had progressed so much since biblical and medieval times that the Enlightenment was the best guarantee to the redemption of humanity and the Jewish people,” said Hirsch. “In other words, German philosophy, Kantian ethics, Kantian categorical imperatives: They were the finest expression of Jewish prophetic values. All of the trappings of what we call Jewish peoplehood, ethnicity and so on, embarrassed them, and they thought we had outgrown that experience.”

The 20th century, a drama of national revival alongside a march of pogroms and genocides and attempted genocides, proved the classical Reform stance to have been disastrously wrong. No one had in fact outgrown anything—not the Jews, and certainly not their persecutors. In a time of the first successful Jewish state-building project in 2,000 years, a period during which perhaps a third of all Jews had been murdered for no reason other than their identity and millions more were banned under common restrictions in living out their culture and beliefs, it was no longer tenable, emotionally, morally, or practically, to treat Klal Yisrael—Jewish peoplehood—as a dispensable abstraction. Jews still reaped all the risks and wonders of being a distinct people, even in a post-Enlightenment world, and maybe especially in a post-Enlightenment world. For the next few generations, peoplehood was placed beyond the limits of what would embarrass even the most reformist parts of the Reform Movement.

And yet, as Hirsch explained, Reform Judaism had grown out of a rejection of the particular. “I think there is a risk in our movement that we will revert to the default position of liberalism, which is the elevation of universalism at the expense of Jewish peoplehood, not as an extension of Jewish peoplehood,” Hirsch said. He now fears that the movement could be in the course of a swing back to its original historical grounding, overlooking both the tragic and near-miraculous aspects of the Jewish experience of the 20th century. “It wasn't that the anti-Zionist period of classical Reform Judaism was the exception that had been relegated to history,” he theorized to me. “It was the 20th century that was the exception, that forced the Reform Movement back into the embrace of Jewish peoplehood.” Without peoplehood, and without commitment to a shared purpose and destiny, liberal Judaism risked losing its ability to stand for anything recognizably Jewish.

It is counterintuitive, in 2022—after over a decade of Benjamin Netanyahu, frequent wars in Gaza, an ever-retreating horizon for peace with the Palestinians, and the rise of an explicitly Jewish wing of the BDS movement—to claim that Israel is critical to the survival of liberal Judaism in the United States. If anything, it is more common for younger Jews, especially within the Reform Movement, to paint Israel as a threat to those values. But Hirsch believes that liberalism loses its motivation without some organizing purpose. The Zionist idea, as he sees it, is inseparable from Judaism itself.

“The very Amos who said, ‘let justice roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream,’ ended his book with, ‘I will restore my people Israel to their own soil and never more will I uproot them from the soil I will give them,’” the rabbi said. “So Judaism is this blend. It’s a mischaracterization to define prophetic values as having nothing to do with Jewish peoplehood, or not being rooted in Jewish peoplehood.”

The idea that liberal projects must sometimes be built atop seemingly atavistic foundations used to be easy for Americans to accept—until recently liberals never had much trouble connecting a yearning for social improvement to a sense of America’s inherent greatness and larger mission. But the United States is a weak market for even mild cognitive dissonance at the moment, and the Reform Movement, based as it is on the idea that both religion and peoplehood should be sustained through a kind of strategic deemphasis, is perhaps one of the most paradoxical institutions in American Jewish life. Reform was a vision of Judaism that millions of
Americans could live with, and it was attractive because it could harmonize its seemingly contradictory claims: You could have the spiritual and communal benefits of Judaism with few big claims or demands, no funny hats, nothing that put Jews too badly at odds with their neighbors. If joining a Reform congregation was a normalizing exercise for many Jews who might attend services once or twice a year, a smaller but still very significant number drew real inspiration from it and identified strongly with the movement's foundational ideals—and still do.

As Salkin put it, any debate over the future of the Reform Movement will determine the survival of “an ideology that freed women from behind the mechitzot, that encouraged women to become rabbis and cantors and leaders, that knocked down the walls that were keeping LGBTQ people out of the mainstream of Jewish life, and that had the audacity to introduce the idea that Jews can make up their minds about the extent and intensity of their Judaism.”

Many American Jews still want to be able to make up their own minds. But in order to bridge its own contradictions, the Reform Movement always needed to show that there were aspects of Judaism that it really did take seriously—that the whole thing wasn’t an elaborate justification for ditching practices and beliefs that congregants found onerous or embarrassing, but rather a positive justification for incorporating liberal values, which could have the spiritual and communal benefits of Judaism with few big claims or demands, no funny hats, nothing that put Jews too badly at odds with their neighbors. If joining a Reform congregation was a normalizing exercise for many Jews who might attend services once or twice a year, a smaller but still very significant number drew real inspiration from it and identified strongly with the movement's foundational ideals—and still do.

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After the IDF, Hirsch went to college in the U.K., studying law at the London School of Economics, where he met his future wife, who is now a leading real estate contract lawyer in New York. (The couple have one daughter, who is working toward a Ph.D. in theater in England. Hirsch also has three siblings, all of whom are medical doctors.) By the time he arrived in rabbinical school—a decision prompted by a chance meeting with an HUC dean at Hirsch’s wedding, who told him that he was wasting his time being anything other than a rabbi—Hirsch had lived, worked, and studied on three continents and given up a promising yet unfulfilling first career as a lawyer.

After three years as an assistant rabbi at the Upper East Side’s Temple Shaaray Tefila, he became executive director of the Association of Reform Zionists of America, effectively making him one of Reform’s chief points of contact with Israel and the Israeli government. Few people were more ideally positioned to convince Israelis of the importance of the Reform Movement, or to convince liberal American Jews that their existence depended on their connection to Israel. As ARZA’s leader between 1992 and 2004, Hirsch witnessed the rise and fall of the peace process, alongside an equally vexing development from the Reform Movement’s perspective: The Israeli government’s intermittently serious attempts—none of them successful, many of them deeply divisive—to liberalize state policies on Jewish conversion, practice, and identity.

Hirsch was active on both fronts. He obtained the blessing of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin to lead a groundbreaking rabbinic mission to Jordan, at a time before Israel’s former enemy had signed a peace treaty. But the Second Intifada, during which his colleagues in Israel narrowly avoided suicide bombings, undermined Hirsch’s belief in the feasibility of any peace plan that depended on a side for whom “it’s a war aim to kill innocent people wherever you can find them.” Hirsch still vividly remembers meeting an Ethiopian Israeli security guard, newly awakened from a coma, who had stopped a suicide bomber from blowing up a hospital maternity ward.

Things remained just as ambiguous on the pluralism front. In 1997, during Netanyahu’s first term, Hirsch organized an emergency rabbinic delegation to lobby the prime minister against a law that would have stopped the Israeli government from recognizing foreign non-Orthodox conversions to Judaism. The delegation’s flight landed several hours late; in a typically Biblical political flourish, the prime minister met with the group anyway at 1 o’clock in the morning, and then immediately put out word of how positively the meeting had gone—Hirsch remembers listening to an Israeli news bulletin about the sit-down on the early morning bus ride to the hotel. Israel continued recognizing the conversions. But a government commission, launched perhaps with its eventual failure in mind, reached no real compromises on the status of non-Orthodox conversions performed within Israel or a host of other related topics, thus giving the appearance of progress while threatening no one’s hold on religious or political power. “That is Israel,” Hirsch noted. “But the same dynamic fell apart here, too.”

A few years after that trip to Jerusalem, Hirsch would have an even more intimate sense of how difficult it would be to convince conservatively minded Jews that it was in their communities’ best interest, and in Klal Yisrael’s interest, to take progressive Judaism seriously. A literary agent connected Hirsch to Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Reiman, a respected Lakewood-based author of halachic texts that are widely studied in yeshivas. The resulting co-authored book, titled One People, Two Worlds: A Reform Rabbi and an Orthodox Rabbi Explore the Issues That Divide Them, was structured as a dialogue between two thinkers at opposite poles of the Jewish religious spectrum, with each of them making the case for their radically different vision of how to live within the same tradition and people. No book like it had ever been written before, and it had the promising yet destabilizing potential of softening both Haredi and Reform views toward the type of Jew each defined themselves against. The backlash came only from the Haredi side.

The pair planned an 18-city tour around the time of the book’s 2003 publication.
publication. After a well-received kick-off at the 92nd Street Y and a second event, a group of major Haredi rabbis issued an edict, effectively threatening to ban Reinman’s religious scholarship in their institutions and communities if he didn’t end the tour. The threat worked—Reinman dropped off the bill, though the book sold well online in traditional Orthodox ZIP codes. “We may not treat our perfect Torah on par with others’ casual speculations,” the rabbis’ injunction stated. “Light cannot coexist with darkness nor can falsehood be pedaled along with truth.”

Hirsch laughed as he read from the now 20-year-old document, which he says he never took as a personal insult. It might be harder to have a sense of humor about divisions within one’s own side, though—about the fissures that can emerge even among people who mostly agree with one another.

The student letter incident of May 2021 really does look different to, say, the leadership of HUC than it might to the leader of a flagship Reform congregation a few miles north in Manhattan. The letter “is a sign that our students are not yet formed,” Andrew Rehfeld, the HUC president, explained to me. “It’s a sign that we are looking to transform and reshape the commitments of students. I would hope that students in the pulpit wouldn’t send a letter like that in a moment of crisis and conflict. But it’s also a reflection that our students care deeply and passionately about Israel.” Rehfeld added, “I think it’s dangerous to view the letter as anti-Israel,” though he said it also “shows a grave insensitivity to innocents being targeted.”

Rehfeld says that HUC issued an official reaction to the student letter 10 days after its publication and believes Hirsh “mischaracterized us … to say that the movement didn’t respond is simply factually incorrect. And I think it speaks to a desire to treat the world as black and white, as good guys and bad guys rather than noticing the complexity.”

A more wait-and-see approach carries the assumption that time is on the movement’s side—the unruly children will eventually grow up and take their place in the pulpits, while learning to be more sensitive to their Israeli brethren as well as to Palestinians. Yet there are increasing signs that the pace of change is advancing with alarming speed for the Reform Movement, and not only on the Israel front. “This is hardly the first time that the movement has gone through ideological growing pains or spasms,” says Salkin. “But what drives it home in its intensity is that synagogues are shrinking. Everyone knows that … This has created an anxiety among synagogue leaders and among clergy,” Salkin continued. “It has also spawned a parallel question: Is our current program enough to sustain our members?”

In 2022, Reform congregations that had drawn 1,500 families pre-pandemic might now be down to 500. Reform summer camps have missed one or even two seasons’ worth of revenue. In the months before the pandemic, the website for the World Union for Progressive Judaism claimed that the group served “1,200 congregations with 1.8 million members in more than 50 countries.” Today, the number is down to 1.2 million. Reinman and Hirsch are still friends. While the Talmudic scholar told me that he has great respect for liberal Judaism as a basis for Jewish identity and ethical action, he wonders how viable it really is. “The problem with the liberal stream is that they’re struggling against apathy and they’re trying not to shrink. On the other hand, the Orthodox world is exploding—high birthrate, strong retention. You know, it’s a study in contrasts.”

Still, Hirsch is the sort of leader who could forge a way forward, Reinman said. “He’s an idealist. And that’s a big thing.”

In the short term, the State of Israel seems more like a source of future division within the Reform Movement than like a source of positive direction.

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This article was originally published on January 26, 2022.
The oldest member of the United States Supreme Court and senior member of the three-judge liberal minority, Justice Stephen Breyer, will retire from the bench. The vacancy would allow President Biden to fulfill his campaign pledge that if given the opportunity he’d nominate the first Black woman to ever serve the nation’s highest court. Pressure mounted on Justice Breyer, who’s 83, to step down after fellow justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died in 2020 and Trump successfully swung the court to a conservative majority with his appointment of Justice Amy Coney Barrett. Getting another liberal judge onto the court won’t affect the hold the conservative majority has now on the bench—it will only shore up the liberal wing.

After reviewing some 1,000 cases of those suffering from so-called Havana Syndrome, the Central Intelligence Agency said in a new report that the mysterious condition was not the result of an adversarial foreign power using microwaves or other energy devices as weapons against members of the U.S. intelligence, diplomatic, and military communities.

Four lawsuits filed Monday accuse Google of deceiving its users by recording their location even after they had turned off the “location history” option, which indicates the phone is being tracked. The suits were brought by the attorneys general from Washington, D.C., Indiana, Texas, and Washington. “Simply put, even when a user’s mobile device is set to deny Google access to location data, the company finds a way to continue to ascertain the user’s location.”

All 100 of the monkeys destined for a testing lab were accounted for after a truck hauling the animals overturned this weekend on a Pennsylvania highway. Several of the crates holding the cynomolgus monkeys cracked open, leaving motorists confused as the animals scattered around the crash site. State law enforcement put out bulletins urging locals “not to approach, attempt to catch, or come in contact” with the at-large primates, three of whom, state police said in a statement, had to be euthanized. It’s unclear why the monkeys had to be put down or what exactly they were being tested for once they reached their destination at a lab site often used by the CDC.

What kind of inflammatory remark would cause President Biden to call a journalist a “stupid son of a bitch”? The offending question—cover your children’s ears!—was about inflation. “Do you think inflation is a political liability ahead of the midterms?” Fox News White House reporter Peter Doocy asked the president Monday, triggering the kind of needlessly personal insult—“More inflation. What a stupid son of a bitch.” Doocy reported afterward that the president had called him and apologized.

The global shortage of semiconductor chips, a crucial component in modern cars, and computers, has left the United States vulnerable to sudden disruptions in the supply chain. In 2019, manufacturers around the world had an average of 40 days’ supply of chips on hand, but that was down to five days as of late last year. “This tells you how fragile this supply chain is,” U.S. Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said on Tuesday. “A COVID outbreak, storm, a natural disaster, political instability, a problem with equipment—really anything that disrupts a facility anywhere in the world—we will feel the ramifications here in the United States.”

“It seems crazy to me now, in retrospect, just how active Slate Slack was. People were just chatting with each other across all these different channels, all day, all night, about everything.” Leon Neyfakh, a former Slate magazine writer who launched the Slow Burn podcast series while on staff, told me. Much like Twitter, Slack polarized Slate staff around news and politics, and with the option to reward each other with +1’s and emoji endorsements that could be seen by all, it gamified a conversation that never stopped. At Slate, where being sardonic and scathing was the coin of the realm, there was an additional incentive for staffers to prove their mettle by turning against each other.

“People felt like they were on opposite sides of some high stakes, moral issue and people would do all the normal stuff that they do when they feel attacked on something that feels personal to them,” Neyfakh said, as he himself would “dig in on something or be performatively acerbic in a way, to perform for the people who I knew agreed with me.” Less a friendly or productive editorial conversation, Slack mirrored the ongoing politicization of nearly every issue in the wider culture. Conversations quickly became arguments that cannibalized collegial goodwill, and as Neyfakh observed, “genuinely [made] them distrust each other or confirm their worst suspicions about each other.”

—Sean Cooper
Tempting the Evil Eye

I grew up believing it was dangerous to share good news, but today, social media pushes us to do just that

BY RANDI MAZZELLA

My oldest daughter, Allie, recently got engaged. It’s good news. Actually, it’s great news. Her fiancé is a wonderful guy, they are a fabulous couple, and we are excited to welcome him into our family.

My best friend Andrea asked me what a mutual friend of ours said when I told her the big news. “Not much,” I replied, “because I haven’t told her yet.”

“This is great news!” she said, “Why didn’t you tell her yet?”

I get uncomfortable sharing good news. Inside, I am thrilled, I am ecstatic, I want to shout it from my roof using a megaphone. But I have told only a few close friends and relatives about the engagement. I’m kvelling, but silently.

I told Andrea that with so much terrible stuff going on right now, it feels off-putting to brag that something good has happened to me. Andrea wasn’t buying it. First of all, she said, “it’s not bragging” to share good news with people who are “craving something to be joyful about.” Besides, she added, “This is not because of the pandemic. It is how you always are. You have trouble embracing when good things happen to you or allowing others to be excited for you. It’s you and your kinehora!”

She was right. I’m afraid of a kinehora—the evil spirit that lurks, waiting to steal my happiness.

The Yiddish word kinehora is a phrase made up of the words “kein ayin bara,” which translates to “no evil eye.” As explained by Elizabeth Alpern in an article for Jewniverse: “The origin of the phrase is the superstition that talking about one’s good fortune attracts the attention of the evil eye, which loves to mess things up.”

When I was a child, we visited my grandmother weekly. She punctuated almost every sentence by saying kinehora, which for her was a five-syllable word. “The baby is getting so big, ke-NAIN-uh HUH-ruh,” she would say. Or she’d look at me and say, “How beautiful do you look in that blue dress, ke-NAIN-uh HUH-ruh.”

For extra safety, my grandmother would add, “poo, poo, poo” (illustrating the sound of spitting but without the actual saliva leaving her mouth). The reasoning was the same as locking the door and then shaking the knob a few times before you leave the house. Saying kinehora was to lock out the evil spirits and the poo, poo, poos were her checking to make sure they couldn’t get in.

After my grandmother died when I was 9, the word kinehora took on a different context for me. My grandmother had used it lightly, with the same urgency as you would say gesundheit after someone sneezes or amen after a prayer. She wanted to make sure that the evil spirits stayed away from us, but she didn’t seem to fear them.

But my other relatives, especially my grandfather, used kinehora as a dire warning. When he said it, the tone was ominous. My grandfather’s take was that evil was lurking around every corner, itching to steal your good fortune. The only way to hold on to something good was to hide it, keep it to yourself, and avoid taunting the evil eye.

Even though I knew how my grandfather felt about sharing good news, I was still surprised by his reaction when I told him I was pregnant. I had been married for several years and was thrilled. After waiting the standard three months, I was figuratively and literally bursting at the seams (of my pants) to tell people I was expecting.

For some reason I thought he would be ecstatic, too. After all, this was his first great-grandchild. But when I told him, he didn’t smile or start crying. He simply said, “Don’t tell anyone.” I laughed and pointed at my already rounded belly. I explained that it wasn’t an option to keep this news a secret much longer. He shook his head adamantly and sternly said, “Don’t say anything. You’ll give yourself a kinehora.”

His response upset me. Part of the fun of being pregnant was supposed to be telling people, “I’m pregnant!” and them being excited, too. I was annoyed. I thought: Other people embraced happiness and the opportunity to share it. Enough already with the kinehoras! There was no such thing as an evil eye. This was good news, my good news. I wanted to share it. So I did.

Two weeks after that conversation with my grandfather, I developed a fever. At first, my obstetrician wasn’t concerned. But a few days later, he sent me, still feverish, to an infectious disease specialist. Testing determined I had a virus known as CMV, benign for most of the general population but dangerous for pregnant women. I had to have an emergency amniocentesis. Luckily the virus hadn’t crossed into the placenta. The baby was fine. The rest of my pregnancy proceeded normally, ending with the birth of a healthy baby girl.

Physically I recovered completely but emotionally, I remained haunted. Even though every doctor said the virus was a fluke and assured me I had done nothing wrong, I felt responsible. I had leaned into my happiness, boasted about my good fortune. I had dared the evil eye to get me—and it did. Lesson learned.

From that point on, I didn’t just believe in the power of kinehora, I feared it and I gave it the power to govern my actions and reactions.

If good things happened to my family or me, I intrinsically wanted to keep them hush-hush. If we were lucky enough to partake in life’s buffet of good fortune, I’d insist we enjoy these morsels tucked in a cupboard, hidden from anyone’s view, especially those with evil eyes.
When Facebook launched in 2004, friends urged me to join, but I resisted. A public space to share every good thing, from intimate birthday celebrations to children's achievements or exotic vacations? The thought sounded downright frightening, like waving a large red cape in front of an angry bull. My friends insisted that posting on Facebook was fun and a great way to stay connected. But to me, it seemed like a well-crafted trap set by the ingenious evil spirits to solicit information and then: whammo! Way too scary an endeavor just to see pictures of Jane from-high-school's new puppy.

Eventually, when I had to enter the world of social media for work, I did so tentively. I rarely posted personal stories or photos. But even just using it to promote an article I had written, it felt like I was tempting fate. The likes and shares, though well-intentioned, made me anxious.

Being stingy about the good news I shared gave me a false sense of protection. Part of me believed that by keeping good news to myself, I was keeping my family safe from harm. But sometimes bad things happened anyway. No one is truly able to totally ward off evil spirits, I learned, even if you bolt the door shut and check it several times.

In addition, living in fear of kinohoras was stealing something from me.

On the website Psychology in Action, writer Mona Moieni explains that sharing good news can positively impact relationships. Known as capitalization, the sharing of both important and trivial happy events creates closeness between people. Beyond enjoying the happy event itself, Moieni explains, “Sharing positive news with others is associated with benefits such as feeling more positive and more satisfied with life, greater self-esteem, and decreases in feeling lonely.”

After my conversation with Andrea, I decided to tell a few more people about my daughter's engagement. Phone calls were met with joyful responses of “Mazel Tov!” and “Congratulations!” followed by questions about the proposal and wedding plans. Texts announcing the engagement were answered with replies of “So Exciting!” with heart, ring, and champagne glasses emojis.

Everyone said hearing about my happiness made them feel happy, too. These people are not evil spirits, I finally understood; they are kind, loving spirits that welcome me sharing good news with them. And this is good news!

And yet, I still can’t completely shake that gnawing feeling. It’s like a friend of mine who was told as a child that cola was made of crushed ants so that it wouldn’t appeal to her. Now an adult, she knows logically this is not true but she still can’t drink it. I want to believe the evil spirits are made up and have no place in my life. But still, sharing good news feels scary to me, like I am tempting fate and risking losing it all.

I am trying to push past the negativity to find a middle ground between secrecy and bragging where I feel safe to share. That place seems to lie in my memories of grandmother. She said the good stuff, smiling with pride when she did. And then she protected it with some magic words, like verbal bubble wrap, just to keep those evil spirits away.

My daughter is getting married, ke-NAIN-uh HUH-ruh. (And just to be safe, poo poo poo.)

This article was originally published on January 25, 2022.

COMMUNITY

The Engineer of Philanthropy

Jacob Schiff helped shape the American Jewish landscape, and used his influence to promote the notion of Jews becoming unhyphenated Americans.

BY JENNA WEISSMAN JOSELIT

These days, philanthropists are more apt to be pilloried then praised, their actions scrutinized for tell-tale hints of ill-gotten gains rather than instances of goodwill. Earlier generations of philanthropists, especially those who moved within the orbit of the American Jewish community of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, had it much easier. Glory rather than “gotcha” covered their tracks.

Jacob Henry Schiff was arguably the most celebrated and certainly the best known of the lot. Upon learning of his demise in 1920, at the age of 73, people wept in the streets; stores on the Lower East Side, “plunged in gloom,” banded mourning banners and closed their doors on the Tuesday morning of his funeral, while thousands thronged the streets outside of New York’s Temple Emanu-Ei, where it was held.

Another 2,000 in the pews—those fortunate enough to secure an “admission card”—sat reverently throughout the tightly scripted service, touched by its dignity and restraint. “No one present at that Temple funeral will ever forget it,” recalled one of their number.

The press made sure of it. Front-page news as well as the stuff of editorials, Schiff’s passing was amply covered by newspapers as varied as The New York Times and the Jewish Daily Forward. The paper of record highlighted the “magnitude of his achievements” in both the financial and philanthropic sectors of...
the modern world, before concluding that “Mr. Schiff will be remembered as a great banker, but we think most of all he will be remembered and loved as a great and wise philanthropist.”

The Yiddish paper, in turn, ran true to form. A tad grudging in its assessment, the left-wing daily insisted that it wasn’t the deceased’s philanthropy, the “size of his checks,” that was worthy of praise—all, it duly noted, “philanthropy is nothing more than a way to refund pennies on the dollar”—but his personality: that of a true “idealist” who took great pride in his Jewish identity.

Schiff’s financial acumen, his perspicacity, fueled his enormous success at the helm of Kuhn, Loeb, an internationally renowned investment banking firm. A believer in the importance of connecting the East Coast with the West Coast, the Atlantic with the Pacific, Schiff financed most of America’s railroads as well as the American Telephone & Telegraph Co., and United States Rubber Co., which placed him within the company of and in league with plutocrats such as J.P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, and Andrew Carnegie. The financier’s reach extended overseas as well, enabling him to float a series of loans to Japan when, early in the 20th century, it was at war with Russia, and to enjoy audiences, and on occasion even sup, with kings, emperors, and their consorts, a who’s who of notabilities.

For all his hobnobbing, Schiff never lost sight of, or cut himself off, from the common man, in whose well-being he took a personal interest. Clad in his customary attire—a frock coat and top hat, a flower affixed to his lapel—he made it a point every Sunday morning to visit with the residents of the Montefiore Home and Hospital in the Bronx; to greet the many supplicants who found their way to his home or office; to attend and participate actively in an unending series of meetings; and to respond to the thousands of letters that claimed his attention.

Thanks to his fiscal success and his deep-seated concerns for the welfare of his coreligionists, this “engineer of philanthropy,” as one of his admirers put it, went on to shape the modern American Jewish landscape, which would have looked entirely different—less comprehensive, custodial, and stable—had it not been for his benefactions. Name a contemporary Jewish organization—the American Jewish Committee, say, or the Hebrew Free Loan Society, the Jewish Theological Seminary, or the Jewish Publication Society—and chances are that Schiff had a hand in its formation and maintenance.

Secular institutions, especially those that disseminated knowledge, among them Harvard’s Semitic Museum, the Library of Congress, and the New York Public Library, were also the recipients of his largesse, as was the Tuskegee Institute, the Red Cross, and the Henry Street Settlement, whose efforts at bettering the welfare of the poor had a “stronghold on his heart and mind.”

Despite the many claims on his time and resources, Schiff lived a full life, balancing the responsibilities of philanthropy with the press of business and reconciling both enterprises with his personal affinity for walking, which he did daily, and bicycling, which he took to when spending time at his country home. Though said to prefer “old things,” especially carriages to automobiles—“his horses slowly made way for the swifter motor,” a bemused colleague recalled—Schiff had an adventurous spirit, prompting him to ascend in a zeppelin on one occasion and to travel to Europe on 20 others. He also crossed the American continent five times, and visited Palestine, Egypt, Algeria, and Japan, where he and his wife, Theresa, spent eight weeks in 1907.

While in motion in the Far East, Schiff wrote vivid, detailed, and often amusing letters back home, which his wife subsequently compiled into a book and presented to her husband as a “surprise” on his 60th birthday. Printed on “Japan paper,” its title page rendered in faux Japanese letters, a copy of Our Journey to Japan now resides at the American Jewish Archives, along with a hefty complement of Schiff’s papers.

In his travelogue, Schiff brings to life the people he and his wife encountered along the way, including the mikado, who, in appreciation of the financier’s support, bestowed on him the Order of the Rising Sun; the food they consumed, distinguishing between “occidental” cuisine, which Schiff and the members of his party favored, and “foreign style” fare, which they did not; the sites they took in, the “curios” they purchased, and the fine points of etiquette. In one instance, while seated on the floor atop low cushions during a ceremonial luncheon that went on and on, Schiff told of leaping to the opportunity (and his feet) to propose a toast to his hosts, “ostensibly to reply, but in reality, to stretch a bit.”

How was the man able to do and absorb so much? Perhaps the key resided in some deep-seated concerns for the welfare of his coreligionists, which would, after all, it duly noted, “philanthropy is nothing more than a way to refund pennies on the dollar”—but his personality: that of a true “idealist” who took great pride in his Jewish identity.

“From where Schiff sat, there was only one path forward for America’s Jews: that of being unhyphenated Americans.”
in the to-do lists he compiled on a “little tablet,” which, his family recalled, he “methodologically went through until the slate was wiped clean.”

Though not on the Sabbath.

Schiff had grown up in an Orthodox Jewish home in Frankfurt, Germany, but once in the New World, became a member of New York’s two leading Reform synagogues, Temple Emanu-EI and Temple Beth-El. “No Jew,” he liked to say, perhaps thinking of himself, “could be a good Reform Jew unless he had once been an Orthodox Jew.” Synthesizing the ideology of the first with many of the ritual practices of the second, Schiff reserved Friday evenings for his family and refrained from working on Saturday, spending his mornings instead at Temple Beth-El, to which he walked from his “palatial” home at the corner of 78th Street and Fifth Avenue.

During the rest of the week, Schiff was said to have recited his morning prayers as well as grace after meals and to have kept kosher. For the most part. His grandson, Edward M.M. Warburg, noting that Schiff had his own “ground rules,” related that there were some “glaring exceptions” to his grandfather’s dietary practices: “lobster and bacon somehow sneaked in under the wire!”

A model citizen and a good Jew, Schiff was not without his flaws, of which the most publicly remarked upon was his short fuse. Even Cyrus Adler, Schiff’s longtime friend and future biographer, acknowledged his subject’s “quickness of temper [and] momentary insistence upon his own judgment,” in an otherwise laudatory “sketch” he published shortly after his death.

Over the years, Schiff locked horns with many Jewish luminaries, from Israel Zangwill, who recalled having “been more than once in collision with [Schiff’s] conceptions or pre-conceptions,” to Solomon Schechter, president of the Jewish Theological Seminary. “These two strong natures … occasionally clashed,” Adler related, referring to Schiff and Schechter, “but they were both big men, and their differences ended in a laugh, Mr. Schiff saying ‘we are both Cohanim (priests) and priests traditionally have high tempers.’” The philanthropist-cum-priest, his biographer was quick to add, never held a grudge for long and would, after some contemplation, often come round to another’s point of view, conceding that, yes, he could be “hasty.”

Sometimes, though, America’s “foremost Jew” stuck to his guns. In 1916, after reading in The New York Times of an inflammatory commencement address given at the Jewish Theological Seminary by Mordecai Kaplan, then coming into his own as one of American Jewry’s leading lights, Schiff took considerable offense. What made him see red was Kaplan’s denunciation of the perspective that held that “it is more important to be a good American than to be a good Jew, or that we should be Americans in public, Jews in private,” a posture he witheringly dismissed as “tawdry music-hall patriotism.” Although Kaplan claimed that his intention was not to single out the philanthropist, who was known publicly to have endorsed this position, the latter refused to be mollified.

It wasn’t just that Kaplan’s remarks rubbed Schiff the wrong way, wounds his amour propre. No ordinary tiff,

Ancient Spouses
A poem for Noel Corngold, 1929–2022

We are, if nothing more, witnesses to one another
that we exist,
that we lived once without tubes,
without spoon feeding
with teeth,
our wits intact.
We remember how each other’s names should be pronounced
that you earned a PhD
that you were kind.
—Emily Adelsohn Corngold

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January 21 – 27, 2022 • 20 – 26 Shevat, 5782
We See Exits and Entrances

A poetry correspondence between the acclaimed novelist Herbert Gold and his sons

BY ARI GOLD, HERBERT GOLD, AND ETHAN GOLD

In the early days of lockdown, while staring at mating dragonflies outside my window in Los Angeles, I became concerned that up in San Francisco, my 97-year-old novelist father was dangerously detached from the things that sustain him: the human carnival, and his own writing. His poor eyesight had made it hard for him to type, so I sent a poem to his apartment in San Francisco via U.S. Mail, 24-point font, with a self-addressed stamped envelope requesting a poem in return.

Soon my father and I were mailing poems back and forth, talking about a future book of poems, and sharing ideas about love, romance, death, and all the other fun stuff. My twin brother, Ethan, soon joined with poems of his own, and since he’s a musician, my father is a novelist, and I’m a filmmaker, we could compete without killing each other.

We and the poems will be included in “Helicopter,” my new film which was inspired by an assignment from Alejandro Jodorowsky to heal my family’s spiritual wounds. This first selection of our poems, “We See Exits and Entrances,” captures a season in the dreams of father and sons.

—ARI GOLD

SCRIBBLE ME A POEM

Scribble me a poem, I tell my dad, because he’s making excuses for not writing. He can’t see the cranes of the typewriter now gathering dust.

The tomato soup is empty, the prunes hard. He mixed them for me at breakfast this winter, in a glass bowl glazed with last week’s soup, but I drew the line at eating that crap, microwaved with loving ingenuity, by a child of the first Great Depression.

At this moment he must be facing the view from his window looking south, over his couch piled with the New York Times, to the golden mist of San Francisco at dawn, where the spire of Grace Cathedral pokes the air, doing his North Korean marching steps. Scribble me a poem, I say, but it must be me I’m commanding, dreaming of the Baltics, facing a Los Angeles garden, a palm tree, waiting for hummingbirds to meditate along with me. —ARI

MAN OF MANY CERTAINTIES

This one thing I know for sure: I’ll not die yesterday. Tomorrow? Is that a question?

Yesterday and all those yesterdays of forever endless times when she smiled winsomely, showed a leg or looked gravely into my eyes, our eyes locked together, or merely winked for notice—in my dreams—even when I think I’m awake, Writing these words.

The trees outside my window shake and bow and shrug in the wind even when the trees across the road are still and unperturbed, no breath of wind or words. As I will never be. As surely I will be. —HERB

BROKEN GLASS MEN

My brother stares at the window with broken glass. I’m not really into sliding doors, I say. Why not get French doors that open to the night, if you’re going to the trouble to fix it? But my brother likes a quiet room. Yesterday he made fun of dudes who dangle their arm out the car window. But I’m one of those dudes, I told him. My friend Elouisa, whom I was in love with a long time ago, offered to diagnose me. I opened her bungalow windows, and she pegged me for restless.

The train in Glendale just blew its horn. I don’t like to remember it’s only a commuter train in Glendale. I don’t like to remember our dad’s in the hospital, the unfulfilled promise of adventure with him, a promise between father and sons that windows will always be open.

In the Ballona Wetlands Nature Park, on a sculpture of cement blocks, I am a kid again, on smooth warm concrete. A frail woman walks by, hunched, nature smile on her face, dog marching ahead. I hope my dad has at least one cute nurse.

A shaft of light the width of a house shoots from the earth to the sky, from the sky to the earth.
THE MEMORY FIRE DANCE
Nobody gets out alive
Not from life
So we rush to escape
And we have but one safe exit:
Memories, those of others.

Not our own, of course,
But those of those
Who also will not get out alive
Into the final silence.

Does Time March On?
No, sir or madam,
It limps, it staggers, it falls.

Let’s agree, then
That’s music we make and hear
When we limp, stagger, and fall.
It dances!
Not virtually, not digitally,
But into the fire of love, love everlasting.
Even if temporary, burning, burning.

—HERB

SONNET FOR MY FATHER
(ON BEING JILTED)
“Fickle dancer of mine pumped
up my thighs
with helium,” I say. Helium, strange

—HERB

word to use for love, but it can
disguise
my teen heartbeat, and
maybe rearrange
Dad’s stuck memories of his paradise,

out of words
and sounds,
Man-made. —ETHAN

HERBERT GOLD, POEM,
97TH BIRTHDAY
That photographer, who with his lens
had chronicled so much decay,
I last saw at a funeral.
He waved to me, I waved to him.
I said, “How you doing, Jim?”
Death was written on his face.

When my heart stops
Or my brain explodes,
Oh please,
May death come to me
Before grayness, lostness, and despair
Are inscribed on my face.
Oh please,
Give me time to say to sons
and daughters
“It’s okay, it happens to everyone.
You can make a song, or even not,”
Go onward keep on going on.
Lift your knees and your spirits
(My knees, my spirits)
On this exercise in disorientation
(a fancy way to say
I didn’t know extreme old age
would happen to me.)

My metabolism gives me time to
consider it
Decide about it

STONE COLD TRUTH

you think... Harry Potter is better in Yiddish... College is pointless... No one’s having babies, and it’s a problem... The vaccine-hesitant are not who you think... Harry Potter is better in Yiddish... College is pointless... No one’s having babies, and it’s a problem... The vaccine-hesitant are not who you think... Harry Potter is better in Yiddish... College is pointless... No one’s having babies, and it’s a problem... The vaccine-hesitant are not who you think... Harry Potter is better in Yiddish... College is pointless... No one’s having babies, and it’s a problem... The vaccine-hesitant are not who you think... Harry Potter is better in Yiddish... College is pointless... The vaccin...
And finally forget about it
Like everyone.

I’ll not miss the commotion
The commotion will not miss me
Yet, yet, I’m still here.
Sing it, please: “I yam what I yam,
I’m Four Eyes the Writer Man.”

—HERB

KUPYN, RUSSIAN EMPIRE, 1905
The boy bathes by the creek
dreaming of faraway girls.
Goats peek over the bushes, horns first,
and then scatter.
Sweat tastes good to him—
lip sweat—
work sweat—
America sweat.
But he is not American.
He is not Russian,
not Belarusian.
Not Ukrainian,
not Polish.
He is all and none.
The goats, his last friends, are
long gone.
The stiff wool uniforms of the Cossacks
look sharp.
They take this 12-year-old man
—he is a man—
and laughing, lift him,
throw him to the water.
Now the taste is saltier,
sweeter.
Blood and springtime.
They are only playing with an animal,
practicing hockey with batons hitting a
puck, a face, softer than a puck.
Later my grandfather stands,
spits,
returns to father and mother,
says
I am not like you,
will not live like you,
will not die like you.

There is gold in the streets of
New York,
or maybe Cleveland.

—ARI

LET US NOW PRAISE
UNFAMOUS DENTISTS
What to do when singing a song is
like pulling teeth
When hearing from friends is like
being bitten by gnats
When sex is like a stroll through
a minefield?
When love is like a life sentence?
Is it time, then, to run to a swamp,
Let the body be devoured by the
little buggers
Wander out of the swamp over a
Demilitarized Zone
And stop at the dentist on the way home?

Get in the body, somehow
It hurts
It’s a terror to be alive
But I still prefer it to the alternative
Let us now praise unfamous dentists,
And bus drivers
And uncouth companions
And jealous lovers
And war
We humans are always looking for
pain to remind us.

—ETHAN

OTHER NEWS ON PAGE 24
Someone famous will die that day,
My day,
And the newspaper will report:
“More obituaries on page 24.”

For the curiosity of some,
the regret of several,
and the grief of a few.

Those few, they matter,
So they have a nice walk
in the Marin headlands
Shadowed by a weary and
worn mountain
(still green! still fragrant!
with pine and transplanted eucalyptus,
and most important: Still there!),
where I’m proud that the few
gather trash,
But drop my ashes downwind,
And remember as I fly away.

—HERB

This article was originally published on
January 24, 2022.

—David Meir Grossman
**Tamarind Rice**

**BY PAOLA GAVIN**

**PREPARATION**

**TO MAKE THE RICE:**

Wash the rice under cold running water and drain. Heat 1 tablespoon coconut oil in a saucepan and when it is hot, add the rice. Stir well so each grain is covered in oil, then cook for 2 or 3 minutes until the rice is opaque. Add the water and salt bring to the boil. Cover and cook over a very low heat for 15 minutes or until the liquid is absorbed and small craters have appeared over the surface of the rice. Turn off the heat and leave to steam for 5 to 10 minutes.

**TO MAKE THE SAUCE:**

While the rice is cooking, heat the coconut oil in a saucepan pan and when it is hot, add the mustard seeds. When they start to sputter, add the curry leaves and nuts and stir fry for 1 or 2 minutes until the nuts start to turn golden. Add the shallots and cook over a moderate heat until they are very soft. Stir in the coriander, chili powder, and black pepper, then add the tamarind paste and muscovado sugar, if desired. Fold in the cooked rice and heat through. Remove from the heat and serve.

**Yield:** Serves 4 to 6

**INGREDIENTS**

**FOR THE RICE:**

1 ½ cups basmati rice  
2 teaspoons coconut oil or ghee  
2 ¼ cups hot water  
½ teaspoon salt

**FOR THE SAUCE:**

3 tablespoons coconut oil or ghee  
1 teaspoon mustard seeds  
6 to 8 fresh curry leaves  
¼ cup unsalted peanuts or cashews, split  
4 or 5 shallots, finely chopped  
1 teaspoon ground coriander  
½ teaspoon chili powder, or to taste  
¼ teaspoon ground black pepper  
1 tablespoon tamarind paste, or more, to taste  
1 teaspoon muscovado sugar or jaggery (optional)

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