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NEWS

Antisemitism With Chinese Characteristics

Influencer Lu Kewen puts Jews in the crosshairs of 'Xi Jinping Thought'

BY TUVIA GERING

If you ask Chinese diplomats stationed in Israel, they will tell you that “there is no antisemitism in China.” Their Israeli counterparts in Beijing will likely tell you the same: that an observant Jew can stroll down any main street in Shanghai with a yarmulke on his head without fear of verbal or physical harassment—which cannot be said for a growing number of European and American cities—and that the only swastikas he is likely to see are in Buddhist temples.

But this oversimplification is contradicted by other Chinese realities. Since the most recent conflict in Gaza in May 2021, antisemitic tropes and sentiments have been propagated on Chinese state media, encouraged by top Chinese diplomats, and rehashed by well-known Chinese political commentators. Not that China was unique in this respect: Antisemitism masquerading as legitimate criticism of Israeli policy pops up all over the world when Israeli-Palestinian hostilities flare; according to the World Zionist Organization and Jewish Agency annual report, antisemitic incidents soared in dozens of countries as a result of the 2021 Gaza crisis, not just in the People's Republic of China.

The key difference in China's case

is that it is a country where speech is heavily regulated, monitored, filtered, and self-censored, and so a new wave of Jew-hatred there must be seen as not only tolerated, but openly promoted. Indeed, a new generation of Chinese cyber nationalists, well-connected pundits, and media-savvy “influencers” have been granted carte blanche to make careers out of poisoning the minds of China's billion-plus active internet users with paranoid clickbait, including about “the Jews.”

Consider the case of Lu Kewen.

The 39-year-old Lu is the owner and founder of Lu Kewen Studio, a Beijing-based “self-media” online news channel that produces videos and original commentary on a wide range of military, historical, political, and economic issues. Since its establishment only three years ago, Lu's enterprise has reportedly amassed a following of 15 million subscribers across several mainland social media platforms; in September 2021, Lu was appointed as the spokesperson for Chinese automaker behemoth BYD, which likened him to the revolutionary literary hero Lu Xun. The meteoric rise of Lu, an ex-assembly line worker turned media sensation, has sparked envy, admiration, and derision among some Chinese academics and

journalists: One typical critic attributes his success not only to his colloquial and user-friendly content, but his willingness “to completely disregard the facts and sensationalize reports for the sake of traffic.”

On May 29, 2021, about a week after the Gaza ceasefire went into effect, Lu posted an 8,000-character screed in five parts titled “What Should We Make of the Jews?” The manifesto is not an original work; it combines antisemitic tropes from medieval Europe with more recent libels from the Middle East in a way that would strike most Western readers as almost pitifully familiar. Entire sections of the work, in fact, appear to be plagiarized or directly translated into Chinese from the darkest corners of the English-language internet. In certain parts, Lu adds his own musings to the mix; in others, he just quotes at length from *Mein Kampf* and the *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Long after last year’s Gaza conflict had subsided, Lu continued to publish articles arguing that even if “beaten to death,” he “will never agree that Jews are a good partner to the Chinese people.”

But if Lu’s work is as hoary and derivative as any standard-issue Stormfront post, he has nevertheless been effective at making such hate speech more relatable to an otherwise unfamiliar Chinese audience.

According to Lu’s videos and commentary, Jews are manipulators, penny-pinchers, loan sharks, and drug dealers. More than an ethnic group bound by blood and history, they operate like a private club, an elitist cabal whose members are linked by a web of common interests, “especially the American Jews.” It is through these social connections that Jews have infiltrated key global positions and “took control of the three cornerstones of American society, namely finance, media, and culture.” The Jewish penetration of American power is so far advanced that the Bush, Obama, and Biden families and administrations have all fallen prey to Jewish influence. Because Jews control the anti-China U.S. media and hold key positions in Biden’s anti-China cabinet, they are the “ideological voice” of the United States,

“Why has Lu’s antisemitic content found an audience among a people with very little historical experience or even present concern with Jews?”

the spearhead of the West’s accelerating crusade against the Chinese government and people.

One of the conspiracies outlined by Lu (itself a product of foreign neo-Nazi forums from the late 1990s, around the time of the handover of Hong Kong) accuses Jews of being “the world’s most powerful drug barons” and therefore of being responsible for the eruption of the mid-19th-century Opium Wars, which to this day represent the nadir of contemporary Chinese history. Impressed on every Chinese boy and girl from a young age, the official historical narrative of the Opium Wars is of an Imperial China that was utterly humiliated by foreign, Western powers and forced to sign unequal treaties that violated its sovereignty and left its people drugged, backward, and exploited. And in Lu Kewen’s fantasy, the Jews are to blame for everything.

Why has Lu’s antisemitic content found an audience among a people with very little historical experience or even present concern with Jews? Racist remarks about Jews mixed with admiration for the Zionist movement is an old story, and not uncommon among Chinese reformers, intellectuals, and visionaries such as Liang Qichao, Hu Shi, and Sun Yat-sen. But the widespread adoption

of social media by China’s 1 billion internet users over the past two decades has done something different, turning Chinese extremism and cyber-nationalism into a cross-cultural, cross-national phenomenon that feeds antisemitic discourse online.

There are two opposing trends at play: On the one hand, China is an open, globalized superpower connected to the outside world more than ever before; on the other, the fragile Chinese state has turned inward in the face of perceived external threats, including COVID and ongoing strategic competition with the United States. By pitting themselves against the “otherness” of foreign groups, Chinese nationalists hope to rally round the flag and unite disparate Chinese social groups behind President Xi Jinping’s vision of an integrated, civilizational “Chinese” identity.

While Chinese media scholars are divided on whether nationalism is on the rise under Xi, multiple studies and news reports have documented rising rates of racism, chauvinism, populism, homophobia, xenophobia, and Islamophobia in the country. This is no accident: Xi has been personally involved in fostering “patriotic education” designed to imbue Chinese people with “cultural confidence” in their civilization’s “excellent traditional culture,” which is often contrasted with the insidious corruption and evil of various “others” that have put “China under threat.” To the average party official or state censor, even if Lu’s antisemitic content seems a little peculiar, his ideas are seamlessly couched in state-sanctioned nationalistic narratives that warn against foreign encirclement and influence. His calls for stronger government control to safeguard China’s “media sovereignty” from the Jews are likewise more welcome than not.

Furthermore, given the hypersensitivity of Chinese state media to internal criticism, as well as its consistent portrayal of Western countries and political systems as failing and inferior to China’s “matchless superior socialist system,” provocative content on outsiders and international affairs is always a safer bet than anything that touches domestic politics. Something as foreign

and faraway as “the Jews” also ensures that there will be no demand for further knowledge or context from the average Chinese internet user, who does not bother with illegally sidestepping the Great Firewall.

Nor is Lu Kewen the only prominent antisemite in contemporary China. A list compiled by the author includes a large number of mainstream antisemitic influencers, celebrated academics, state-affiliated scholars, and renowned strategists with access to elite policy circles. In a recent study, communication

scholars Yang Tian and Fang Kecheng from the Chinese University of Hong Kong show how many of these figures collaborate and coordinate content. This network of toxic nationalists—as well as deep-seated philosemitic stereotypes that paint Jews as educated, naturally smart, and good with money—overshadows the many Chinese journalists and academics who have tried to engage the general public on Judaism, Jews, and Israel in good faith.

Unless challenged by Chinese authorities, antisemitism in China is certain to

grow. Bigots like Lu Kewen, who believe they speak for the entire population, are emboldened by the ability of Chinese policymakers to whitewash any trace of local racism. Israeli and Chinese officials should begin by acknowledging the existence of this problem, no matter how small it seems now, and utilize current and future platforms on Holocaust education and Jewish history to nip the poison of antisemitism in the bud. ■

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SCIENCE

The Mask Debacle

How partisan warfare over mandates became a central feature of the pandemic

BY JACOB HALE RUSSELL AND DENNIS PATTERSON

Recent days have witnessed the emergence of a new rift in our pandemic debate. Strikingly, this time the dispute is not just partisan, but also splitting the Democratic Party. While Democratic governors appear to see where political winds are blowing, some blue cities are moving in the opposite direction. And many states that are dropping adult mask mandates are retaining them for kids, resulting in the absurd prospect of indefinite masking for a less vulnerable population for whom masks have more significant downsides.

How did partisan warfare over mask mandates become such a central feature of the pandemic? The familiar answer is that the mask wars are just another symptom of national polarization. When Donald Trump casually denigrated cloth masks as president, the stage was set for a Democratic backlash—turning masks into not just a public health measure, but also a talismanic symbol of virtue signaling on one side

and a rallying cry about freedom for the other. But polarization is only part of the story. Mask mandates are a microcosm of a key failure of our pandemic response: the poor climate for public discourse fostered by an elite culture whose overconfidence led to a prolonged strategy of undermining open discussion in a vain attempt to prove that complex questions could have only one universal and immutable answer.

From the beginning of the pandemic, technocratic elites have offered us a dubious bill of goods. Aided and abetted by the media and by many academics, politicians proffered—indeed, likely believed—the idea that the pandemic would go away if everyone just did as they were told. “If everyone wore a mask for two weeks...” became a telltale refrain, a claim that was neither true nor possible. Pundits celebrated President Joe Biden’s ill-fated “hundred days of masking,” which promised “just 100 days to mask, not forever.” This habit of exaggeration and blind optimism among elites helps explain gaffes like Biden’s bizarre claim during his campaign that

every single pandemic death could have been averted by better leadership.

Choices needed to be made, and leaders got some right (accelerating vaccine research) and others wrong (failing to protect the elderly). In other instances, they missed opportunities, failing to strengthen policies like sick leave that would improve our resilience—a topic almost entirely avoided by political elites, who prefer to blame the pandemic’s consequences on a handful of dissenters. But in acting as if their policy choices came from scientific omniscience, elites minimized the messiness of the real world—in which chance, trust, and voluntary decisions all play a crucial role.

Today, the plerophory of elites—born of hubris and unbridled self confidence—is bearing bitter fruit. For some, the overselling of policy has led them to religiouslike zeal and dogmatism about particular interventions. For others, it has led to a complete loss of faith in institutions like the CDC, the FDA, and the NIH, which depend on public trust in order to fulfill their missions. Masking was simultaneously described as a panacea—better than a vaccine, in the memorable words of the former CDC director—yet it wasn’t good enough to quickly reopen many closed schools, even given that an unvaccinated child faced lower risk than a vaccinated grandparent. The arbitrariness of the resulting policy recommendations and mandates is etched into the many photographs of masked kids, sometimes

posed with unmasked politicians, that will likely come to represent much of our badly flawed pandemic response.

Indeed, toddlers and small children have borne the brunt of our illogic, while mask-mandating politicians go maskless and crowds gather around bars. The covering of toddlers' faces—a policy that has always made the United States an international outlier, and in outright defiance of WHO guidance—stands in stark contrast to the lives of many elites who never stopped partying anyway. Perhaps nothing illustrates the absurdity of lockdown culture more than the performative spectacle of diners donning masks as they enter a restaurant, only to remove them at their table as they sit for several hours shoulder to shoulder with other patrons.

Mask mandates are just one of many pandemic policies; a similar disregard for curiosity and open debate have pervaded other areas, like lockdowns and booster policy. But they offer an object lesson in how overconfident, unnuanced messaging conditioned us to assume that all dissenting opinions are misinformation rather than reflections of good faith disagreement or differing priorities. In doing so, elites drove out scientific research that might have separated valuable interventions from the less valuable, and corroded much needed public trust.

The overselling of policies began in the early days of the pandemic with the problematic #masks4all movement, which overstated evidence while promoting ineffectual masks made from old T-shirts and kitchen towels. Today, most experts are starting to concede the inadequacy of the cloth face coverings they promoted until a few months ago—an unsurprising development given what researchers have known since 2020.

Our purpose is not to rehash arguments about the efficacy of mask mandates, though. However one evaluates the evidence on masking effectiveness, the policies were presented and mandated with little nuance, with each subsequent flip-flop being oversold in a way that inevitably undermined public trust. That flip-flopping included the reversal from no masks to masks; the view

that protesters, as long as they had the right cause, did not need masks while others outdoors did; the belated recognition that outdoor masking was not logical; the CDC's famous flip-flop after widespread vaccination from dropping masks recommendations to reinstating them; and now the about-face on the (lack of) effectiveness of cloth masks. It took almost a year after the media began to accept the absurdity of outdoor masking for outdoor mandates to begin fading away, in fits and starts.

The ability of masks to impact the outcome of a pandemic, like the effect of most interventions, is in fact a complex question. Yet the discourse has been framed unhelpfully as a meaningless oversimplification: "masks work" versus "masks don't work." The theoretical value of an intervention in a vacuum is not the same as its real-world effect. While studies of aerosols on masked mannequins may tell us something about fabric quality, they do not tell us much about the effect of a *mask mandate*—the actual policy—in reality.

The earliest push for cloth face-coverings came from a citizen-activist group called #masks4all, spearheaded by an artificial intelligence entrepreneur named Jeremy Howard. The group published a narrative review that offered no original evidence, but came to a different conclusion from existing reviews. Thus, at a minimum, the scene should have been set for an active debate. Instead, Howard and others confidently proclaimed the science to be clear and settled—a claim that was picked up by Democratic pundits and was used to drown out any real discussion. Howard pushed back against anyone who questioned his results, going so far as to email demands to the boss of one virologist who raised issues with his analysis. Even Michael Osterholm, later a Biden adviser and very much a COVID hawk, reported backlash and mischaracterization of his views by Howard.

Early mask proponents made little effort to distinguish situations in which masks would be helpful from ones where they would not. Thus, we wound up with scenes like a lawyer dressed up as the grim reaper walking the beaches of Miami, garnering extensive media

coverage, even as there was no particular reason to think masks would be helpful on beaches—and lots of reasons to think that mask-shaming would be ineffective. No attempt was ever made to have nuanced masking policies that accounted for density, transmission, and community spread. This would have been particularly important given the inevitability of policy fatigue.

Most people would probably be surprised by the weakness of evidence for community cloth masking. While the famous Danish mask study, one of only two randomized control trials that have been conducted, was not a death knell for the arguments of pro-maskers, it was also absurd to see tendentious headlines describing a study finding no effect: "Face mask trial didn't stop coronavirus spread, but it shows why more mask-wearing is needed." Aspects of another randomized control trial in Bangladesh that did not comport with the pro-mask argument were minimized. One scientist commented that a much-criticized study was "well-conducted using appropriate methods" and lent support to her pro-mask message, only to later recant and say, "we cannot confidently conclude anything from this paper." The manifest illogic, motivated reasoning, and flip-flopping by some limelight-hungry scientists and doctors was compounded by the media's tendency to choose experts who would parrot the party line. Many mainstream media outlets repeatedly amplified questionable voices on one side, exaggerated the negative over the positive, obscured nuance, and failed for too long to tell the stories of students and others who were hurt by our pandemic policies.

It rapidly became conventional wisdom in liberal circles that masks needed no further consideration, in part because they had "no downsides whatsoever." If anyone questioned that conventional wisdom, it was interpreted quite literally and then dismissed—as if the only potential downside to mask-wearing could be oxygen deprivation. This no-downsides framing made it nearly impossible for masks to ever go away: If they had no downsides whatsoever, why not wear them permanently to protect against other respiratory viruses?

In fact, while there were some mask opponents who pushed nonsense ideas, the vast majority of mask skeptics had more nuanced points about the balance of costs and benefits than masking advocates like Howard.

The argument advocates *should* have made was that the benefits of masking outweighed the costs, in particular situations and in particular periods of the pandemic. But by dismissing the possibility of *any* costs to policies like masking small children in schools for eight hours a day, it is now difficult to discuss masking offramps intelligently.

Moreover, the idea that there were ever “no costs” to masking is dubious. For one, little was known about the effects of masking on childhood development, which is part of the reason why the WHO and most European countries recommended against masking 2-year-olds. On this topic, there was an extreme imbalance in how the mainstream narrative treated the absence of clear evidence. On the one hand, it was said, if there was no evidence of downsides to children, masks had no downsides—to the point that even asking about downsides was “misinformation.” On the other hand, those same individuals said that even if there was little real-world evidence for the effectiveness of masks, they should still be worn given the precautionary principle. But how about taking the same precautions to avoid harm to small children?

Beyond potential downsides to children, the no-downsides rhetoric failed to account for the social impact of masks. For many, seeing faces was important, and the normalization of a forever masking regime was, in fact, a real cost. For others, seeing faces was essential, and insisting otherwise was magical thinking. Or, it was the product of the same kind of technocratic mind that conceives of children as “mosquitos” who should “circulate less or will become vectors,” in one telling analogy adopted by a top Biden COVID adviser.

The mask wars have polarized American society and undermined the possibility of reasonable compromises on masking in mask-wary states. For

“We have learned very little about when, how, or which masking policies are beneficial to help us respond to a future respiratory disease outbreak.”

one, zealotry around cloth face coverings has actually undermined the potential effectiveness of masking by drowning out consideration of better masking. Only once omicron arrived did experts begin acknowledging what had always been known about N95s in comparison to cloth masks. Likewise, the “my mask protects you” language, which insisted that masks provided almost no self-protection, has made it very hard to sell the fact that N95s *do* protect the wearer. This has inhibited conversation about one-way masking, which offers a compromise position between those who want additional protection and those who no longer want to wear masks.

Many liberal elites can cite examples of misbehavior by anti-mask protesters, but fail to recognize similar hubris on their side. This is not just in extreme examples like the local politician who used her “Masks Save Lives” sign to hit a woman on the head. It was also seen in the pervasive—and untrue—sentiment held by many that if only more people wore masks we would reach zero COVID. This led to moral panic and demonization—perhaps part of the same rising tide of illiberalism that apparently led more than a quarter of Democrats in a recent Rasmussen poll to support temporarily removing parents’ custody

of their children if parents refuse to take the vaccine.

In what may be the longest-lasting ramification of our flawed national discussion about masks, the opportunity to do good science was lost. Indeed, Stanford scientist and Tablet contributor John Ioannidis’ much-misrepresented warning that our response to COVID might be a fiasco because of insufficient data may prove one of the few accurate predictions of the pandemic. There was no appetite to do randomized control trials of masking, the gold standard for evidence and which were badly needed to evaluate when and how masks should be used. Unfortunately, proponents of masking proclaimed almost immediately that masks were so obviously useful that it would be unethical to study masking. Even if it were ethical, there was no room in academia for discussions. Who, after all, would study something that was known to be a panacea—and who would want to come to a “pro-Trump” finding? As a consequence, we have learned very little about when, how, or which masking policies are beneficial to help us respond to a future respiratory disease outbreak.

Some say it is unfair to criticize public health for messaging flip-flops—whether about cloth masks, herd immunity, natural immunity, or the vaccines’ effects on transmissibility—because they were just “following the science” as it changed. But in many cases, what evolved was politics, not science. The critics of public health messaging do not begrudge scientific progress—indeed, most of them want more research. Rather, people are upset by unjustified dogmatic certainty in one direction, followed by an immediate swoop to utter confidence in the opposite course of action. The pandemic produced a headfirst leap into a series of unprecedented interventions, from masks to lockdowns to school closures. In the first weeks of the pandemic, speed was necessary, and mistakes were inevitable. What was not necessary or inevitable was the suppression of healthy skepticism and discussion.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, when doctors Vinay Prasad and Jeff Flier presciently warned about the

toxic climate within the scientific community, debate, nuance, open-mindedness, and curiosity have been driven underground. Now, the same ham-fisted responses that badly damaged our ability to respond intelligently to the pandemic hamper our return to normal. Elites—even those who now want to convince us to “live with” COVID—now find themselves stuck. They inspire little trust. They’ve locked some into a “forever pandemic,” others into conspiratorial thinking, with the sensible middle in a place of frustration and distrust.

Why did they do this? Some of the explanation is institutional: The media and politicians are most likely to amplify the most exaggerated views. Moreover, elites may underestimate the cost of interventions—in part because

so often the rules seemed not to apply to them. There was a seeming lack of empathy throughout the pandemic with how others might be differently affected by lockdowns or masks.

But perhaps even more salient is an elite belief in technocracy and perfectionism. The “follow the science” mentality wrongly framed issues that involved complex judgments, suggesting the existence of a singular, oracular science that could dispassionately decide complex policy issues which invoked nonscientific domains. Even more fundamental than suggesting elites had all the answers, it also suggested that all problems were solvable, which was never going to be true in a pandemic. And by leaving decisions to an elite few, and by labeling even good-faith backlash as disinformation, it inhibited the

development of much-needed public trust—a resource whose value elites seemingly discounted.

Just as elites led us into this mess, the way out is unlikely to come from “experts” or the elite institutions that have fostered a climate of close-minded authoritarian disregard for the nuances of scientific work and openly show their contempt for people who hold opposing points of view. Instead, we see hope in the voices of dissent. The growing backlash by parents against school masking is often framed primarily as a political issue, and as a looming one for Democrats, which it may well be. But it is also a lesson in how public discourse can be reclaimed by the people. ■

This article was originally published on February 16, 2022.

COMMUNITY

Oslo’s Jewish Sewing Circle

A small group of women in Norway are keeping tradition alive by sewing traditional shrouds for the dead

BY NINA LICHTENSTEIN

Jenny Wulff called them “the sewing girls”—the Jewish women in Oslo who regularly got together under her leadership to sew *tachrechim*, the traditional garments used for Jewish burials. A Holocaust survivor, she was the matriarch of the group and sewed well into her 80s, teaching the craft to scores of new volunteer recruits until she died in 2009.

One of those recruits was Liv London, who was a relatively young woman in her early 40s when she was first introduced to the sewing circle. “I understood this was something important

that I wanted to be part of,” said London, now 70. Today, she is the organizer of the group of eight Norwegian Jewish women who carry on the ancient tradition of sewing the shrouds by hand. Normally, the sewing circle meets about six times a year. But getting the group together to sew has been more challenging than usual during the COVID-19 pandemic—and just as restrictions on social gatherings were lifted in Norway in the early fall 2021 and the sewing circle was getting ready to begin meeting regularly again, the omicron variant put a stop to the plans.

On a rainy November afternoon in Oslo, London stood at her expansive

dining room table where she has served Shabbat and Yom Tov dinners for 47 years. She gently opened a large Ziploc bag where white cotton fabrics were neatly folded in a pile. “We inherited a large roll of brown wrapping paper and twine, but we have decided to modernize a little,” said London with a wink. Before she began to unfold the content, she removed a yellow Post-it note that said “Set for Woman” in neat, cursive writing. “I try to write it the way they used to, in the olden days,” she added in a soft voice. They try to have at least two completed sets of shrouds for each gender ready on hand at all times, because “there is nothing worse than having to sew *tachrechim* on 24 hours’ notice.”

The tradition of sewing *tachrechim* has been handed down from generation to generation. “They used to sit in silence and sew,” London said. “The air was solemn and respectful, with no frivolous chit-chat.” Though times have changed—the women now talk freely enjoying each other’s company—in the early days of her volunteering, London was chided when she tried to play soft music in the background. “That was too much,” she said, smiling. “So I never did that again.” Before “the war”—WWII—the sewing took place in secrecy. One

of the oldest living (but now former) members of the circle, Ruth Goldstein, once told London that when she was a girl, there were times when her grandmother would not allow her and her siblings to play inside: This is how Goldstein learned that “the ladies are sewing.” It was quiet in their apartment; only hushed voices could be discerned through the crack in the door.

According to Rabbi Joav Melchior of congregation Det Mosaiske Trossamfund, or DMT, Norway may be one of the few countries in Europe—if not the only one—that still sews its own *tachrechim*. “The value of keeping the tradition going in a small community like ours cannot be underestimated,” he said. “It’s so intimate: We know who we sew for. We prepare *tachrechim* for our aunts, friends, mothers, and fathers. Sometimes we even sew for ourselves...” Though it’s easier to buy ready-made sets, Melchior points out that when a community transitions to modernity and outsources, despite the obvious convenience, something unique is lost. He gave the example of how everybody used to have their own utensils and set-up to kosher meat at home. Now that butchering and kashering is done industrially, the shared communal *doing* of the mitzvah is lost. “We are few enough that we are able to maintain self-sufficiency in caring for our own in death as well as in life,” Melchior said. “And this strengthens us as a community.”

Jews in Norway currently number somewhere between 1,500 and 1,700, and the organized Jewish community is a relatively recent development with a fraught history. Though a few Sephardic merchants and bankers from Spain and Portugal were permitted to enter Norway in the 1500s and 1600s, a constitutional ban was instituted in 1687, lasting until 1851, when it was repealed after much public debate. DMT was founded in 1893, and with it the Jewish cemetery in Oslo. When Germany occupied Norway from 1940-45, there were about 2,173 Jews living there, but at least 765 were deported and murdered by the Nazis. Today, Oslo has the country’s only operating synagogue with about 700 active members,

“Modest with no frills, these simple shrouds have reaffirmed a fundamental belief in human equality for generations of Jews.”

and there are also smaller, loosely organized Jewish communities in Bergen, Stavanger, and Trondheim, numbering between 50 and 135 members each.

From the beginning, the sewing of *tachrechim* took place privately in someone’s home, but in 1960 the Jewish community center was built adjacent to the synagogue, and the sewing women—who were all homemakers at the time—would meet there during the day. Not until 1988 did the first among them say she could no longer sew during the day because she had to be at work. Today, it is mostly older, retired women who make up the circle and they have continued their regular daytime meetings, since most of them prefer to not venture out in the evening.

The rules for making *tachrechim* are very specific: Only unbleached cotton fabric, cotton thread, and basic basting stitches should be used—long and loose, the stitches are intended to just temporarily join the fabric. To demonstrate how the garments are put together, London spreads out two miniature sets, often used to educate school children and museum curators in Jewish traditions. One set for women and one for men, but regardless of gender, they include a tunic, pants, hood or bonnet, and belt. Modest with no frills, these simple shrouds have reaffirmed a fundamental

belief in human equality for generations of Jews, as the universal use of *tachrechim* has historically protected the poor from embarrassment at not being able to afford lavish burial clothes. Furthermore, since the shrouds have no pockets, wealth or status cannot be expressed or acknowledged in death.

When the women meet to sew, they put on white aprons to prevent the white shrouds from getting stained by their own clothing. Each session starts at 11 a.m. and they sew diligently until 3:30 p.m. with a short break for lunch. “When we put down our projects, we enjoy a tasty lunch, and we breathe and use our voices differently,” said London. Usually they are able to finish one set for each gender in one sitting, if at least six or seven seamstresses show up. “And the work is not done until everyone has completed their part,” she added, “which means most stay put until everyone has finished their sewing.”

Anne Cath Fischer agreed to join the circle when her father, a tailor, died in 1997. She said it was meaningful for her to continue the family’s tradition of being involved in preparing the shrouds. Her father who was born in 1917 ran his own tailor shop in Oslo for more than 50 years, and was in charge of cutting the material for the *tachrechim* during his long professional career. Fischer enjoys recalling when her dad celebrated a big birthday late in life and the president of the synagogue toasted him and his skills, adding, “All the work you do for the dead must be good, because you never get any complaints!” Fischer lost her husband suddenly about two years ago, and said she gets quite emotional thinking about the fact that she contributed to sewing the *tachrechim* in which he was buried, although she didn’t know it at the time.

London’s close friend Katrine Jutrem Cohen, 60, is a longtime active member of the Jewish community in Oslo, and the youngest and newest member of the sewing club. She just returned from living for five years in Israel and said that after she observed what she felt was a conveyor belt approach to burial there, and the roughness with which corpses were handled, she was shocked. “I understand that it’s more complicated in Israel,” she said, “since it is such

a crowded country,” but the experience made her decide she definitely does not want to be buried there. When she and her husband moved back to Norway, she agreed to join London and the other sewing women. She had a new appreciation of how a small Jewish community like theirs shares in the commitment to care for their own, every individual, “from cradle to grave.”

London pointed out that in recent years, the sewing circle has begun to consider more acutely their preparedness. For example, how to deal with crisis situations such as potential terrorist events, major accidents, or disasters. She said that if COVID-19 infections were to

occur in the Jewish home for the aged, it may not be sufficient having only two sets of *tachrechim* for each gender on hand. At the onset of the pandemic, Melchior reached out to contacts abroad to make sure they had a backup plan in case there should be a sudden need for many sets. However, during the most severe government mandated COVID-19 shutdowns, it was no longer the Jewish community that prepared their dead for burial, as it was relegated by the state to take place in official funeral homes. “We had three burials during that period when we were unable to prepare our dead, and that was difficult for us,” London said.

Waiting out the latest surge in COVID-19 infections, the women of the sewing circle have yet again to sew by themselves in their own homes, separated for a task that is especially meaningful to perform together. “Whether we do it together or individually, it’s a truly special experience to be part of creating something so important for our community,” London said. Meanwhile, until they can gather again around her inviting dining room table, London dutifully drives around Oslo delivering the necessary materials to each seamstress. ■

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COMMUNITY

It’s Not Church. It’s HBO.

Beneath the family drama and absurdist comedy, ‘The Righteous Gemstones’ brings a megachurch to prime time—with a measure of respect for its faith

BY MAGGIE PHILLIPS

Television dramas about flawed dynasties are having a moment. *Succession*. *Yellowstone*. *Monarch*, a forthcoming series about a multigenerational country music clan. *Righteous Gemstones*—currently in its second season on HBO—is at once part of this trend and a thing apart. Focusing on the first family of a fictional Southern megachurch, *Gemstones* is an action comedy with the tribal violence and factional intrigue of *The Godfather* by way of the absurd, privileged narcissism of *Arrested Development*’s Bluth family. It also features a surprising amount of heart, and a sincere respect for the Christian faith of the deeply flawed Gemstone family.

“Any type of response I’ve gotten

from the religious community has been supportive of it,” said show creator and star Danny McBride in a recent interview. “They’ve been of the mindset that they like that the show doesn’t take pot shots at religion.” At the same time, however, those viewers don’t mind that “these assholes”—the not-always-virtuous Gemstones—“are the butt of the joke,” McBride explains: “I think if you’re a religious person, you don’t like to see a megachurch pastor profit off of the good word.”

McBride plays Jesse Gemstone, the status-conscious oldest son of patriarch Eli Gemstone, played with complex grandeur by John Goodman. Eli’s other two children are Judy, a spoiled woman-child played by Edi Patterson, and Kelvin, *Workaholics* and *Pitch Perfect*’s Adam Devine as a tragically hip,

strangely asexual youth pastor with a passion for Jesus and personal fitness.

Popular social media accounts like PreachersNSneakers and *Christianity Today*’s The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill podcast have attracted both criticism and praise—from practicing Christians of all stripes, as well as from outsiders and from deconstructing evangelicals—for taking aim at Christian megachurch celebrity culture and the hypocrisy of its leaders. It would have been easy for *Gemstones* to mine the same vein for laughs, tapping into the current elite-skeptical zeitgeist without much consideration for whether or not these people actually, on some level, really mean what they’re saying.

The genuine, positive spiritual impact these megachurches can have on their members can be easy to miss. Mark Cospers, producer of The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill, though reporting in-depth on the rot and hypocrisy that pervaded the inner circle of Pastor Mark Driscoll, is careful to note that the rank-and-file church membership often had experiences that they believe benefited their lives. A former megachurch member speaking on background said that while a lot of the stereotypes about megachurches definitely ring true for them experientially, the nuance that gets lost is in some ways unfortunate.

For instance, *Gemstones* features plenty of sociopathic behavior, such

as arson, elder abuse, and cycle ninjas (who, while not technically ninjas, are still quite menacing) in the second season alone. McBride and his creative partner Jody Hill also follow Eli Gemstone's efforts to poach smaller local churches' congregations, and the saga of Zion's Landing, a proposed Christian timeshare and pleasure dome. But the show also takes pains to show members of the Gemstone family in sincere private prayer, and extending to each other genuine forgiveness for what are sometimes extremely serious offenses. The content of their sermons is never outlandish or inauthentic, even if the trappings often are.

The show's serious treatment of religious faith pervades the show, with aptly chosen episode titles drawn from scripture. "Now the sons of Eli were worthless men" is one such title in the first season. Like his namesake in *Gemstones*, Eli, the Temple priest in the book of Samuel, doesn't always get the most flattering treatment in the Bible, and his sons even less so. The biblical Eli is rarely portrayed in action: He's either sitting by the doorpost of the Temple, or sleeping elsewhere while his protégé, Samuel, remains in the Temple near the Ark of the Covenant. With poor eyesight during a time when "the word of the Lord was withheld" and "vision had not broken through," Eli is a sort of Fisher King, his personal malaise and ailments manifesting in the conditions around him. Eli Gemstone, while formidable, is clearly past his prime, overseeing a large house of worship where his sons are selfish stewards of the lives and needs of the people of whom they are ostensibly shepherds, cynically manipulating their religion to suit their temporal purposes.

The Gemstones are perhaps less Corleone than Medici: a family of steely-eyed, social climbing businesspeople who commingle faith and commerce to achieve cultural and ecclesiastical power.

Nevertheless, for all their flaws, both Elis are true believers. In the Bible, Eli recognizes God is calling Samuel as the younger man lies in the Temple before the Ark. His heart trembles for the fate of the Ark of the Covenant as his

"There aren't many places in America today where people from different persuasions, walks of life, and generations gather on such a scale to hear the same message."

sons go out to battle against the Philistines. But while the biblical Eli is a genuine man of faith in God, the show suggests Eli Gemstone's faith is rooted primarily in his love for his late wife, the deceased family matriarch Aimee Lee, who sang in a Carter Family-like brother/sister duo with her brother, Baby Billy (played with bizarre energy and pathos by Walton Goggins, and who still goes by his stage name despite being somewhere in his 60s).

The late Aimee Lee is portrayed in flashbacks as all sweetness, part Dolly Parton, part Amy Grant. Her apparent faith in the Gemstone calling to ministry anchors her family, even as their children's shortcomings, already manifest, are met with either indulgence or seeming obliviousness by Gemstones *père et mère*. No one is perfect in *The Righteous Gemstones*.

Today, stories about younger white evangelicals leaving megachurches under painful and difficult circumstances abound. Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker cast long shadows in the American popular memory. But there are other stories and experiences that add complexity to the megachurch phenomenon.

For one thing, there is the word

"megachurch" itself. The websites for these large, usually nondenominational Protestant churches—replete with state-of-the-art campuses, thousands of members, and amenities like bookstores, coffee shops, and epic tree forts—don't tend to embrace the term to refer to themselves. "Megachurch" is, however, frequently used pejoratively in the broader cultural context; even the Christian *Babylon Bee* couldn't resist using the term when poking fun. But not everything in a "megachurch" is quite so "mega": Like Gemstone Ministries, real-life Abundant Life Christian Fellowship church offers breakout groups for young people and various smaller faith-sharing groups where believers "face trials, and hold each other accountable," although the language is probably (much) less colorful than the one Jesse Gemstone facilitates.

The circle that surrounds the show's eponymous clan is diverse, which may strike outsiders as inaccurate, given the stereotype of megachurches being overwhelmingly white and Southern. However, according to a recent study, the majority of U.S. megachurches are now multiethnic. Over 30 years old, Abundant Life expanded in the early '00s to a renovated former plastic wares factory in order to accommodate what was then a growing congregation of 6,000. Its website proudly proclaims its multiethnic congregation, and describes itself as being located "right in the heart of Silicon Valley," not Dallas or Atlanta.

Because of popular perceptions of megachurches, the benefits of their diversity can be overlooked. There aren't many places in America today where people from different persuasions, walks of life, and generations gather on such a scale to hear the same message and work together to build something larger than themselves. People who attend megachurches are making a rare,

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even vulnerable, commitment to be surrounded by people who are potentially very different from them. They are taking a chance on an institution that may not be totally aligned with their original beliefs—a countercultural choice as more people are disaffiliating from institutions altogether.

In 2009, Abundant Life had a pastor step down after a self-professed, ambiguous “moral failure.” The person with whom I spoke on background says the lack of denominational hierarchy may pose some of the difficulty when it comes to holding megachurch leaders accountable (Abundant Life, for example, is autonomous). As to why the leaders go astray in the first place? Even a pastor with a “huge heart” for their congregation, the former megachurch member said, “never necessarily imagined leading such a big enterprise.” Accordingly, things can spiral out of control, even as the church expands. They said there can exist a “really tough and nuanced line between when expansion feels like this colonial project,” and when “it’s intended to be something that is like a managed growth of good change, and religious communities wanting to exert an influence over the development of communities that they want to champion and advocate for and work with and empower.” While doing this in a way that keeps their Christian beliefs front and center, the temptation is to “go big.”

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“Medieval people often did not see, as I think modern people of faith don’t either, conflict where an outsider may see conflict,” said medieval scholar

David Perry. “Medieval Venetians get a bad rap because they’re also making lots of money, and so they’ll do things that are religious and then, people say, ‘Oh well, those Venetians, they didn’t really mean it, they didn’t really mean the faith,’ and I can tell you that’s just not how they wrote about their own world.”

Perry describes a “great tension” that exists within both medieval Venetians and modern people of faith. “They’re aware that they’re living a secular life, but they also believe something that may be in conflict with it, and they’re wracked with doubt and guilt or fear, and they again respond to that in all the different ways you might expect: some by doubling down on the hedonism, and other people by building great churches, or trying to do both at the same time.”

Similar to his biblical analog, Eli Gemstone’s metaphorical vision is clouded by personal and familial ambition. To quote a Bible verse with which the Gemstones would no doubt be familiar, “Whoever loves son or daughter more than me,” Christ says to his followers, “Is not worthy of me.” He puts it more strongly elsewhere: “If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” Auxiliary bishop of Los Angeles Bishop Robert Barron often explains this difficult passage this way: “Well yes, hate them in the measure that they have become gods to you. For precisely in that measure are they dangerous.”

Each member of the Gemstones is depicted as idolizing some mixture of family pride, fame, wealth, and status over the God they profess to serve. And both intentionally and unintentionally, to themselves and to the people in their orbit, they are indeed dangerous. ■

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Album of the Week

Spoon, *Lucifer on the Sofa*

For Spoon’s tenth album, *Lucifer on the Sofa*, Britt Daniel, Jim Eno, Gerardo Larios, and Ben Trokan went into the recording booth with the intention of capturing the band’s live sound. This can be heard in the shaggy and joyful “On The Radio,” a straightforward song by Spoon standards. A little like Pavement’s “Stereo,” Daniel recounts the joys of listening late at night as a kid. “They’re talking to me!” he says with delight.

The opener, “Held,” is a cover of “Held” by the band Smog. Spoon and Smog are similar in several ways, beyond the obvious fact that their names are one-word nondescript nouns starting with s. They embrace mystery and clarity in equal measure. Spoon’s “Held” starts out with heavy blues-rock riffs, a sense of swagger. “For the first time in my life / I let myself be held, yeah, like a big old baby.” And then he continues as the guitars blare: “For the first time in my life / I am moving away.” Moving from where? From what? There’s no suggestion. Moving away from toxic masculinity? From an older version of the band? From the road, which the band did as they recorded in their rapidly changing hometown of Austin, Texas, only to get stalled out by the sudden spread of COVID-19 in March 2020?

—David Meir Grossman



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THE REST

→ When Emmanuel Macron and Vladimir Putin sat to discuss Russian hostilities on the Russia-Ukraine border, they did so from opposite ends of a 13-foot table. **Some interpreted this as a power play from Putin, the Russian leader seeking to demonstrate the distance between his position and Macron's. The distance, however, was in fact social—the result of Macron refusing to take a Russian PCR test, forcing the leaders to adhere to stringent social distancing guidelines.** Macron refused to take a test, fearing that the pleasure of shaking Putin's hand and sitting by his side would come at the expense of having his DNA stolen by the Russian government.

→ In a new interview published Monday, Art Spiegelman tells New York Magazine that he believes a Tennessee school board's recent decision to ban his graphic novel about the Holocaust was motivated by the book's lack of a redemptive arc, not antisemitism. **"I never wanted Maus to be for children," Spiegelman tells his interviewer.** "I wasn't doing it in the context of, I'm going to teach people to be better; I'm going to teach people that they should learn about the Holocaust because 'Never again.'"

→ **A local Black Lives Matter activist in Louisville, Kentucky, Quintez Brown, has been charged with attempted murder for allegedly entering the office of Craig Greenberg on Monday and firing multiple shots at the Jewish Democrat running for mayor.** There were no injuries in the shooting, but Greenberg says that one bullet grazed his shirt. No motive has yet been established for the shooting, but Brown's friends and his lawyer note that he has mental health issues. Brown's social media posts express his endorsement of "Pan-Africanism: the total liberation and unification of Africa under scientific socialism." A day after the shooting, an organizer for Black Lives Matter Louisville said that a community bail fund would pay Brown's \$100,000 bond.

→ **The first woman ever has been cured of HIV,** by scientists using a stem-cell transplant from a donor with a rare genetic condition that makes the immune cells targeted by HIV naturally resistant to the virus that causes AIDS, scientists reported on Tuesday.

→ Picking up on the "freedom convoy" demonstrations in Canada, **thousands of French truckers are gathering in Paris under the banner "Convoi de la Liberté" to protest vaccine mandates.** On Friday, 7,000 French police officers were dispatched throughout the city to break up potential protests

→ Don't get it twisted, folks. Disinformation is not the vibe! While down in Texas endorsing Greg Casar, a progressive candidate running for congress in Texas' 35th Congressional District, **Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) was heckled by pro-Palestinian protesters opposing Casar's support for Israel.** "I want to be unequivocal," AOC said as the protesters were ushered out. "We are here to stand up for the rights of Palestinians and Palestinian children. One hundred percent. Don't get it twisted. Because disinformation is not the vibe." Casar's support for American military assistance to Israel and his opposition to BDS are out of step with progressive orthodoxy, but in a letter to an Austin-area rabbi, he called for a foreign policy that respects the "right of Israelis to live in their own democratic state [in] peace, free from violent attacks" as well as "the right of the Palestinian people to live in peace, security, and democracy."

FROM THE BACK PAGES

In his latest Kol Nidre sermon at Tzedek Chicago, Rabbi Brant Rosen reaffirmed his congregation's hostility to Zionism. "When we openly state that our congregation is not Zionist, that's more than mere semantics. It is a statement that the Judaism we lift up will not and cannot include apartheid, settler-colonialism, and militarism. This is not mainly a political position. It's a spiritual statement of conscience about what it means to be Jewish."

On the one hand, this could be seen as more proof of the popular narrative being asserted in general-interest media—of "a generational divide over Israel among American Jews that is driving some of Judaism's most delicate internal debates," as *The New York Times* recently put it. Except for one fact: Rabbi Rosen is pushing 60.

In fact, the *Times* and others are right about a growing split between Zionist and anti-Zionist Jews. They're just not right about what's dividing the two sides—because it's not age: It has to do with compromises. One group believes that the mission of the Jew is to remain morally unblemished, that he may be an example of sublime innocence come what may. The other Jew knows that every tribe has dirt under its nails, that every people that desires safety through power, the dignity that accompanies self-defense, and the flourishing that only a secure people can achieve has to be willing to compromise something.

—Clayton Fox

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The Vanishing of the Strashun Library

YIVO and the legacy of the Jews of Vilna

BY DAN RABINOWITZ

Earlier this month, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research announced that it had completed the digitization of a massive archive, consisting of over 4 million documents, from its holdings. The materials contained in the archive are encyclopedic in their coverage of Eastern European Jewish life and culture. From broadsheets to manuscripts of Yiddish plays and hundreds of autobiographical essays, to records of museums and yeshivot, it is a nearly endless cache attesting to hundreds of years of Jewish existence. While the archive has always been an indispensable repository of materials for any serious research into Eastern European Jewish history, digitization transformed this important ephemera into a permanent record of that history. At the same time, YIVO missed an opportunity to sustain the memory of an extraordinary institution whose works are part of this project.

In the city of Vilna, at No. 4 German Street, one of the most prosperous streets where Jews were permitted to live, stood an impressive three-story house equipped with its own wine cellar, wherein resided Mattityahu Strashun and his wife, Sara. During the mid-19th century, when the house was built, they lived among 30,000 Jews, over 50% of Vilna's overall population. By 1940, there were 60,000 Jews in Vilna; by 1945 there would be less than 5,000. Most of the 95% of Vilna's Jews who were murdered by the Nazis were shot and left in pits, which would eventually be dug up by conscripted Jews so

that the bones of their dead parents and siblings and cousins could be crushed into powder, in a vain attempt to hide the scale of the atrocities.

By war's end, only one of Vilna's estimated 160 synagogues and *kloyz* (combination of study hall and synagogue) remained in operation. Most of the old Jewish quarter stood in ruins; whatever was left was razed by the Soviets, who obliterated the headstones of the two Jewish cemeteries and used the pieces for building materials. Mattityahu's building was also demolished in an aborted attempt to create a highway through the center of the Old City.

Mattityahu Strashun could not be erased from history so easily. His father, Rabbi Samuel Strashun (known by his acronym as RaShaSh), studied with an elite circle of scholars and wrote Talmudic commentaries that cover nearly every one of the over 2,700 pages of Talmud; he also spoke Polish. Mattityahu, born in 1817, too was a scholar, a communal leader, an award-winning Bank Chair, as well as a major philanthropist. Yet, most of these accomplishments might well be lost to history if not for the passion that made him world-famous: his book collecting. He ultimately housed his collection in the famous library to which he lent his name—the Strashun Library. Located in the center of Vilna, the “Jerusalem of Lithuania,” the library was an egalitarian space whose broad and deep holdings served as an intellectual meeting place and scholarly resource for every segment of Jewish society—political, religious, economic, and nationalistic.

Mattityahu had received a traditional

Jewish education including Tanakh (Bible), Talmud, and rabbinic literature, with an emphasis on Midrash, in addition to Hebrew grammar, mathematics, and geography; he was fluent in Polish, Russian, Greek, Latin. From a young age, Mattityahu's appreciation of scholarship fed his book collecting. When he died at the age of 68 in 1885, he had amassed over 7,000 books and manuscripts.

The composition of the Strashun library was deliberately diverse and multilingual. Unlike nearly all his peer scholars, Mattityahu collected a broad range of books, ranging from traditional texts including over 500 responsa books to German Jewish academic works by Leopold Zunz and others to Christian Latin translations of the Bible. His collection included five incunabula (books printed in the infancy of the movable type press until 1500), approximately 300, 16th-century Hebrew books, and manuscripts authored by his father and the Vilna Gaon. It also included works on poetry, grammar, cemetery histories, Spinoza's books, satires, world history, translations of Hebrew texts into Spanish, Latin, Greek, German, Arabic, math, and the multiple editions of the New Testament. His oldest book, *Ha-Kanon Ha-Godol*, Naples (1491?), is a Hebrew translation of the complete Arabic text of the Persian writer and philosopher Avicenna's medical compendium, *Canon medicinae*. Additionally, his library contained, according to some estimates, as many as 2,500 books entirely in foreign languages.

In the summer of 1885, Mattityahu Strashun suffered a fall and his health quickly deteriorated. On Nov. 27, he drew up his last will and testament. According to his niece Deborah Romm, he was most concerned with the fate of his library and works still in manuscript, and his will included explicit instructions regarding their disposition.

Mattityahu's will is written in Russian in his own hand, (an indication of his fluency) and is preserved in the Lithuanian State Historical Archives. According to its terms, the library's contents were to be accessible to anyone

and everyone “who desires them for reading or prayer,” and stipulates that the bequest is “without the right of alienation”—irrevocable. To fulfill those conditions, it stipulated that the entire Jewish community of Vilna would own, operate, and be allowed free access to the library. Another portion of his will made it clear that he saw the library as a living thing; he designated funds for the formation of an endowment that would assist in continuously augmenting the collection to address the ever-changing needs of its patrons.

On Saturday night, Dec. 13, Mattityahu called members of the Burial Society and the Tzedakah Gedolah (the community board) to his bedside and requested a cemetery plot next to his father. He died the next day. Mattityahu’s funeral occurred on the morning of Tuesday, Dec. 16. The stores were closed by the order of the community, and the streets around his house were overflowing with mourners. According to one report, an estimated 23,000 people attended his funeral.

Since Mattityahu Strashun died without an heir, a special board was established on behalf of the library which adopted resolutions regarding its future and the community’s ownership, ensuring its status as a public institution and asserting that the library would remain the property of the community in perpetuity. The library was to be open to all, seven days a week (although writing was forbidden on the Sabbath). Only three days a year, during the High Holidays, was it closed. This was especially important because, in keeping with the egalitarian nature of the institution, the Sabbath and holidays were the only days that many, especially the poor, might have the time to visit.

Initially, the Strashun Library shared space with another institution. In 1902, Strashun’s vision of a separate building

“From the day that the Strashun Library opened, women were welcome ‘even young women, bare-armed sometimes on warm days, studying *their* texts.’”

to house his collection was brought to fruition. The two-story Strashun Library building was officially opened to great fanfare on April 27, 1902, on the fourth day of Chol HaMoed—the intermediate days of Passover. The library was prominently located in the Shulhoif—the Great Synagogue courtyard, home to many of Vilna’s most important intellectual and spiritual organizations, which served as the effective town square of Jewish Vilna. The library was situated to the right of the main entrance, opposite the Vilna Gagon’s *kloyz*, and directly in front of the Great Synagogue—the library being of such importance that it was permitted to partially block the view of the synagogue’s impressive façade.

The Strashun Library’s main reading room could seat up to 100 patrons at a time. From its establishment, reports are nearly uniform in singling out the diversity of its users who included “rabbi and Talmudic scholars who were studying responsa and halakhic works” who sat side-by-side with the “younger generation who were reading maskilic works.” From the day that the Strashun Library opened, women were welcome “even young women, bare-armed sometimes on warm days, studying *their*

texts.” Portraits of Mattityahu Strashun and Isaac Leib Peretz, the Yiddish author and playwright, were displayed on the wall; the two unique personalities from different generations, holding different ideological positions, were both figures of veneration within the pantheon of Jewish intellectuals associated with the Library.

In anticipation of the Zionist leader Theodor Herzl’s visit in 1903, the library commissioned a special guest book, *Sefer Ha-Zahav*, the Golden Book, to inscribe the names and comments of visitors. Herzl would be the first to sign. But, either due to safety concerns or because the Russian government refused permission, Herzl never reached the Strashun Library. Yet the book eventually held hundreds of signatures and notes that attest to the wide usage of the library among Jews and non-Jews alike; the Vilna poetry group *Yung Vilne* created by the Yiddish scholar, Zalman Reyzen, and whose members include Chaim Grade and Avraham Sutzkever, used the library; Baron David Gunzburg; the philosopher Hermann Cohen; the scions of Yiddish literature Mendele Mokher-Seforim (Sholem Yankev Abramovitch) and Sholem Aleichem (Shalom Rabinovitch); the Hebrew poet, the father of academic Talmud, professor Jacob Nahum Epstein; the historian Simon Dubnow; Chaim Nachman Bialik; in addition to staunch traditionalists Rabbi Hayim Ozer Grodzenski and Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan (the Chofetz Chaim), all visited and signed the book.

The Strashun Library ultimately became the largest Jewish public library in Eastern Europe, visited by an estimated 100,000 patrons yearly. By 1940, Mattityahu’s library had expanded to almost 10 times its original size to 50,172 books, covering subjects as diverse as Hebrew grammar, homiletics, history, letters, math, geography, anthropology, eulogies, German, Russian, English, and French language primers, ethics, bibliography, philosophy, Zionism, Kabbalah, medicine, poems, songs. Books from nearly every Western language were represented including German, Russian, Latin, French, Italian, English, Polish, Spanish, Lithuanian, Hungarian, and Arabic.

 NEWSLETTER

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On Aug. 3, 1940, Lithuania officially became the 16th republic of the USSR, and on Nov. 1, 1940, all of Vilna's major libraries, including the Strashun Library, were nationalized. The Strashun Library was renamed Public Library Number Four. Though its doors were closed, the library's collection remained intact. The Nazi invasion in 1941 signaled the end of the Strashun Library in its original incarnation.

Without a doubt, the perverse Nazi campaign of looting and plundering Jewish treasures while torturing, shooting, and gassing Jewish bodies protected large parts of the Jewish patrimony in Europe from the destruction of war. Indeed, the Nazis proved to be especially good caretakers of Jewish cultural artifacts, including books. Toward the end of WWII, when the Jewish books that had been transported to Germany came within the zone of Allied bombing, the Nazis transported the manuscripts to salt mines and the deep basements of castles. While preparing to make their final stand, facing the likely prospect of their own demise, the Nazis allocated precious resources to ensure the longevity of Jewish cultural property while similarly diverting resources for another Jewish project—sending as many Jews as possible to death camps.

Arriving in Vilna in July 1941, the Nazis began to systematically loot its Jewish treasures and immediately turned their attention to the Strashun Library, conscripting Jews, including the poet Abraham Sutzkever, to select the best books for shipment to Germany. Jews, at risk of their lives, smuggled books out of the library and hid them in underground bunkers, or *malinas*. By September 1944, when the Red Army reentered Vilna, the Germans had shipped at least 26,000 books from the Strashun Library to Frankfurt, while at least 2,500 books remained hidden in bunkers.

By 1945, only two of the Strashun Library's walls remained standing. The interior was entirely gutted with the exception of a small side-room containing a single metal book cabinet open and bereft of its precious treasures. When the Yiddish poet and author Chaim

Grade returned to Vilna in 1945, he described the remnants of the Strashun Library building, which had previously shone forth as a beacon of light, as “an entire row of shattered windows” that “casts an enormous black shadow, like a black-covered cloth hung over the mirror in a house where there has been a death.” In the 1950s, the Soviets dynamited the remaining buildings in the Great Synagogue courtyard, the *shulhoyf*, erasing the last vestiges of the building. Today, at that site, all that remains of this formerly magnificent testament to the intellectual power of the Vilna Jewish community is a sign across the street, in English, Russian, and Lithuanian, offering a brief description, and a photo of the Great Synagogue. The sign does not mention the Strashun Library. A small plaque at the end of Zemaitijos street reads, in Lithuanian, “This street was previously named after the Jewish scholar, philanthropist, and bibliographer, M. Strashun (1817-1885) whose name was attached to the collection of one of the largest Judaica libraries in Europe.”

Yet despite the destruction of Vilna's buildings, and the extermination of its Jewish inhabitants, most of the Vilna-owned Strashun Library survived the war in Germany, within what became the American Zone. The United States government was faced with the quandary of what to do with hundreds of thousands of heirless Jewish books. Among the books recovered were those belonging to YIVO (the Yiddish Scientific Institute), a leading institution “for scholarship in Yiddish and about the history and culture of East European Jews and their emigrant communities.” YIVO successfully petitioned the United States government for those books and materials, and they were sent out to its New York location. But not only did YIVO claim its own books; it also claimed the Strashun Library.

Over the past seven decades, YIVO has provided a shifting narrative regarding its legal claim to the Strashun Library books. The current version offered by YIVO describes a full transfer of ownership that supposedly occurred in October 1939 between the committee

responsible for the Strashun Library and YIVO's executive board. Yet this transfer demonstrably never occurred, and YIVO has pointed only to a variety of ex post facto internally generated “letters and sworn testimonies” and an analysis by the U.S. government that was based on those documents, none of which are corroborated by any independent contemporaneous evidence. To the contrary, the contemporaneous evidence indicates that the institutions remained independent. Until the Soviet Union nationalized the Strashun Library in 1940, it remained under the community control and ownership, as was stipulated in the original will and testament and confirmed by the trustees at the library's establishment. The sign on the side of the library continued to read, “The Library of the Vilna Community.”

Archival materials also confirm that YIVO and the Strashun Library always remained separate and were never formally or informally merged. For example, the 1941 Nazi inventory of Jewish cultural institutions separates the two institutions. In 1946, the director of YIVO, and a member of the executive board, Max Weinreich, for purposes of any potential restitution of looted property, describes both YIVO and the Strashun Library in detail. He fails to mention any connection between the two institutions, let alone a merger. When reached for comment, YIVO conceded that “the 1939 agreement referred to above was not able to be fully realized given the chaos of the war at that time. Since the postwar period YIVO has maintained the Strashun collection as a separate entity within the larger YIVO collection.”

Nonetheless, YIVO convinced the United States government of its narrative. On June 18, 1947, both the Strashun Library's books and YIVO's left Germany, heading for New York. There were 34,204 books, in 270 crates. According to the document, 205 of those crates containing 23,709 Strashun Library books were part of that shipment. These books had been rescued from an uncertain future at best and, in the worst case, their destruction.

Nearly half of the pre-WWII Strashun Library had survived the greatest Jewish

tragedy in human history by hiding out in Germany. The YIVO Library did not fare as well. Of the estimated 40,000 volumes in YIVO's Library, only 8,842 YIVO books, in 61 crates, were accounted for. The Strashun Library books comprised nearly half of *all* the 420 crates of both books and archival materials, 75% of all books, and almost three times more books than YIVO's. Eventually YIVO would receive, including its own books and those through other distributions (that were among those to many American Jewish institutions), a total of 40,000 books, over half of which came from the Strashun Library.

For the next 16 years, YIVO did not divulge that it held the Strashun Library books. In 1962, YIVO finally disclosed it held a significant number of books from the Strashun Library. Yet, in doing so, it diminished the impact of this disclosure. Rather than treating the Strashun Library as a unique vestige of Vilna history, the books were described as part of YIVO's own Vilna Collection—that is YIVO's prewar Vilna collection—now located at YIVO in New York. This, despite the fact that, by any accounting, the Strashun Library books comprised over half of YIVO's Vilna collection, with YIVO's own prewar collection containing less than 10,000 books.

In order to cement its prewar ownership of the Strashun Library books, YIVO duplicated its prewar *ex libris* and affixed it to the books. Copying pre-World War II YIVO stamps and applying them to the Strashun Library books was something more than hiding crates of books that arguably didn't belong to YIVO; it was a deliberate falsification of the provenance of thousands of books, some of which had singular historical

“Why out of the nearly 400,000 books that YIVO had at its disposal, these books were selected for sale, despite—or because of—their unique history, remains unclear.”

importance. When asked for comment, YIVO responded that the books have both the Strashun stamp as well as the original numbering system designated by Strashun, which is still preserved. But this is not in dispute; the *ex libris* do not obliterate the ones before it as much as pervert the history. They are not overwriting history, just materially altering it.

The assertion that the books were held in the YIVO library *prior* to the Nazi expropriation and looting of the Strashun Library was a violation of the historical record and of the material history of each Strashun book. It was also an act of destruction, committed in secret, of the collection as a whole, as the Strashun Library books were swallowed up into YIVO's larger collection of Vilna material and the books' unique identity as part of a singular library was dissolved among thousands of other books. The Strashun Library books survived, ripped from the jaws of destruction, but the memory of the Strashun Library was lost.

On Thursday, Sept. 9, 2009, some of the Strashun Library books, including dozens from Mattityahu's personal collection, were sold at a Kestenbaum & Company auction. These items represented but a small portion of YIVO's Strashun

Library holdings. Nonetheless why out of the nearly 400,000 books that YIVO had at its disposal, these books were selected for sale, despite—or because of—their unique history, remains unclear. It certainly was not for their astronomical value, the proceeds amounted to less than \$25,000.

For decades, YIVO's catalog did maintain a record, if incomplete, of the books it took from the Strashun Library. For many of the books, the provenance section still mentioned that the book was originally from the Strashun Library, even if the nameplates had been altered. It was therefore possible to reassemble a large part of the library, if YIVO had so desired.

In the early 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union, it became widely known that thousands of books from the Strashun Library remained in Lithuania and were housed among thousands of other books, all piled high in a large room in a former church. Some of those Strashun books were among the most valuable parts of the library's collection, including those that had been hidden in *malinas* and dug up after the war—only to be nationalized by the Soviets and left to languish in storage. Eventually, Lithuania would create, as part of the Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania, a Judaica Research Centre with a reading room dedicated to the Strashun Library's extraordinary librarian Haykl Lunski.

Piles of unidentified books in the Offenbach Archival Depot warehouse, Offenbach, Germany, 1946Yad Vashem

The center's inaugural exhibit from May 22-June 23, 2017, “The People and the Book of the Strashun Library,” provided an accurate history of the Strashun Library books—with the library remaining independent from YIVO until its demise. The Strashun exhibit included a history of the library, rare books from Mattityahu's collection, some with his marginalia, rare documents regarding the library, including his last will and testament and documents that inventory the holdings in 1940 and concerning the transfer of the public Strashun Library to the Soviet state, and other ephemera related to the library—all of which confirmed that

The End of Her

Feb. 23, 2022, 7 p.m. EST
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the Strashun Library had remained the Vilna Jewish community library until it was appropriated by the Soviets.

Because of this discovery and general efforts to digitize collections, Lithuania and YIVO agreed to digitize their respective holdings of Strashun materials. This digitization raised the possibility of finally reuniting the Strashun Library, and making it freely and widely available, in the spirit of Mattityahu Strashun's bequest.

In 2014, I purchased a book from Mattityahu's personal library. That began my quest to learn more about the history of the Strashun Library. After many years of my own research into the Strashun Library, I published an essay in 2015 at The Seforim Blog, entitled "Finders Keepers? The Itinerant History of Strashun Library of Vilna" and was then invited by Brandeis University Press to publish a book-length study of my research. My book, *The Lost Library: The Legacy of Vilna's Strashun Library in the Aftermath of the Holocaust*, was published in 2019, tells this story in full. At that time, I remained hopeful that the digitization project would honor the memory of the Strashun Library and not just its books.

Tragically, the digital record had the opposite effect of further scrubbing the Strashun books of their collective history. Now, in many entries, YIVO no longer mentions the Strashun Library even in provenance descriptions. Instead, it merely notes: "Mathias Strashun 1817-1885, Former owner," with the existence of the library and its collections entirely erased. The longer provenance narrative section now reads: "This book was digitized as part of the Edward Blank YIVO Vilna Online Collections Project, a 7-year international project to preserve, digitize, and virtually reunite YIVO's prewar library and archival collections located in New York City and Vilnius, Lithuania, through a dedicated web portal." Only YIVO's prewar library is mentioned; the Strashun Library has disappeared entirely.

Attestation of Max Uveeler, executive secretary of YIVO, to the U.S. government regarding YIVO's associated libraries, 1947 National Archives in College Park, Maryland

YIVO has had other opportunities to acknowledge its attempts to efface the history of the Strashun Library, but has not done so. In 2001, for example YIVO mounted an exhibition, "Mattityahu (Mathias) Strashun (1817-1885): Scholar, Leader, and Book Collector," and published a small monograph with a few essays from leading academic scholars showcasing books "drawn from the holdings of YIVO Library, Strashun Collection, and YIVO Archives." Yet neither the exhibition nor the essays directly addressed YIVO's claim to the Strashun Library. Likewise, on Sunday, Jan. 22, 2017, YIVO held a one-day conference, "The History and Future of the Strashun Library", which elided how the Strashun Library ended up in New York, and squandered another opportunity to potentially correct the record and broadcast the larger significance of the Strashun Library's residence at YIVO. (A recording of the proceedings of the 2017 conference is online here.)

Nor is the Strashun Library the only collection from Vilna to lose its significance in YIVO's embrace. The S. Ansky Jewish Historical Ethnographical Society of Vilna was founded in 1919 by its namesake, S. Ansky, the well-known ethnographer and author of *The Dybbuk*, in Vilna. From nearly its creation, YIVO had repeatedly suggested that the society be incorporated into YIVO—an offer that was rejected time and time again by the society's trustees. While some materials were transferred to YIVO, that was done on the explicit condition that the society retain ownership. Eventually, the museum did transfer ownership—to the Vilna *kehillah*, the community board—and became a public institution.

Nonetheless, in the same documents that YIVO asserted ownership of the Strashun Library, YIVO told the United States government that in 1939, the trustees had formally and legally incorporated the Ansky Society's materials into the YIVO's treasures. Today, YIVO includes this narrative regarding the provenance of the Ansky materials: "After 1939 the ethnographic materials of the S. Ansky Society were merged with YIVO."

Like the Strashun Library, the society's materials were never legally transferred to YIVO. All the contemporaneous evidence points to that conclusion. There is no doubt that YIVO preserved these items, just not their full history.

In the past few years, there have been multiple archeological digs at the site of the former *shulhoyf* in Vilna. In the process the archeologists have uncovered a mikvah, part of the great synagogue, and a tiny hand of a Torah pointer, the *yad*, all preserved under the rubble of decades of neglect and deliberate destruction. Nothing remains of the Strashun Library.

Whether any relics of the fabled library will eventually be discovered beneath modern day Vilna is almost a moot point. The Strashun Library is no longer constrained to serve 100 people at a time; the digital medium at The Edward Blank YIVO Vilna Online Collections is nearly endless. Nonetheless, without acknowledging its material history, the library's virtual patrons lose out on appreciating the fullness of the history they are engaging with, and instead are enveloped by a series of distortions about the provenance of the books they are reading. The simplest way that YIVO could atone for its wrongdoing is to finally tell the truth about its appropriations of books that are not theirs and decades of systematic falsification of the historical record. By doing so, it might allow part of the Strashun Library to live again, albeit in virtual form. These corrections would make YIVO's efforts all the more impressive, preserving not only an archive, but the memory of one of Eastern Europe's greatest intellectual institutions for everyone. ■

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BELIEF

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Aruk

Iraqi Herb and Potato Patties

BY JANNA GUR

INGREDIENTS

- 3 medium russet potatoes**
- 1 large yellow onion**
- 2 large eggs, lightly beaten**
- ¼ cup chopped scallions**
- ¾ cup chopped fresh parsley**
- ¾ cup chopped fresh cilantro**
- 1½ teaspoons baharat spice mix (look for it in spice shops or Middle Eastern groceries)**
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin**
- 1 teaspoon sweet paprika**
- 1 tablespoon kosher salt**
- Freshly ground black pepper**
- Vegetable or olive oil, for frying**
- Tahini for serving**

PREPARATION

Step 1

Preheat the oven to 350. Bake the potatoes in their skins until completely soft when you poke them with a skewer or thin knife, about an hour. Let them cool on the counter.

Step 2

Scoop out the cooled potato flesh and roughly mash in a large bowl. Grate the onions into the same bowl. Add the rest of the ingredients and mix thoroughly. If you have time, cover and refrigerate for 30 minutes (this will stabilize the texture).

Step 3

Line a tray or plate with two layers of paper towels. Fill a large nonstick skillet with vegetable oil to a depth of 1/2 inch (1.5 cm) and heat the oil over medium-high heat. While the oil is heating, rub your hands with additional oil and shape the potato mixture into patties about 2 1/2 inches (6 cm) across.

Step 4

Working in batches, add the patties to the hot oil and fry until they are deep golden-green and crispy, 2 to 3 minutes on each side. Transfer to the paper towels to drain. Repeat to cook the remaining patties.

Aruk latkes are best fresh out of the skillet, but you can keep leftovers in an airtight container in the fridge for a day; reheat them at 350 for 5 to 7 minutes.

Yield: Serves 4 to 6 (makes about 24 patties)

Hundreds of recipes at
tabletmag.com/recipes

