

THE TAB

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T MORE TABLET



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NEWS

The Vanishing

The erasure of Jews from American life

BY JACOB SAVAGE

Suddenly, everywhere you look, the Jews are disappearing.

You feel it like a slow moving pressure system, an anxiety of exclusion and downward mobility. Maybe you first noticed it at your workplace. Or maybe it hit when you or your children applied to college or graduate school. It could have been something as simple as opening up the Netflix splash page. It's gauche to count but you can't help yourself: In academia, Hollywood, Washington, even in New York City—anywhere American Jews once made their mark—our influence is in steep decline.

For many Jews, the first instinct is to look inward: We blame intermarriage, assimilation, the loss of the immigrant work ethic. This is, of course, a cope. Because the most significant cause of the decline isn't Jews themselves, but that American liberalism, our civic religion, has turned on us. Where Jewish success was once upheld as a sign of America's strength and progress over its prejudices, Jewish "overrepresentation" is again something to be solved, not celebrated.

A tenure-track humanities professor at a prestigious public university tells of the finalists for her department's next graduate school cohort. Of the 20 or so candidates, four to five are Jews. One is a working-class yeshivish applicant with an incredible backstory and even

better recommendations. He is passed over for not being "diverse" enough. Of course our professor doesn't complain—her own tenure is at risk. In the end, not a single Jew is offered admission.

Another Jewish professor applies to work in the UC system. In his mandatory diversity statement, which he describes as "the most shameful piece of writing I've ever done," his sole aim is to convey the impression that he hopes to be the last Jewish man they ever hire. He still doesn't get the job.

And why would he? Using YouGov data, Eric Kaufmann finds that just 4% of elite American academics under 30 are Jewish (compared to 21% of boomers). The steep decline of Jewish editors at the *Harvard Law Review* (down

ASIANS AND JEWS IN AMERICA

Discriminated against while being held up as models of success, these two groups have long followed a common road. Now their accomplishments lead to cries of "unearned privilege." What does this mean for the United States and its minorities?

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BY NICHOLAS CLAIRMONT

The New Hamans

Postwar issues of a Yiddish journal for children brought the history of Purim to the present

BY ROKHL KAFRISSEN



roughly 50% in less than 10 years) could be the subject of its own law review article.

The same pattern holds across America's elite institutions: a slow-moving downward trend from the 1990s to the mid-2010s—likely due to all sorts of normal sociological factors—and then a purge so sweeping and dramatic you almost wonder who sent out the secret memo.

Museum boards now diversify by getting Jews to resign. A well-respected Jewish curator at the Guggenheim is purged after she puts on a Basquiat show. At the Art Institute of Chicago, even the nice Jewish lady volunteers are terminated for having the wrong ethnic background. There's an entire cottage industry of summer programs and fellowships and postdocs that are now off-limits to Jews.

In 2014 there were 16-20 Jewish artists featured at the Whitney Biennial. After a very public campaign against a Jewish board member with ties to the Israeli defense establishment, the curators got the message. The 2022 biennial featured just 1-2 Jews.

Comb through the dozens of Jewish names for the 2012 Guggenheim Fellowship (I count 30-40). You'll have a much harder time finding them 10 years later (14-16). There were 3-4 Jewish Marshall Scholars in 2014. I don't see any in 2022.

From 2010 through 2019 there were at least three Jews in every MacArthur Fellowship class, sometimes as many as five or six. *The Forward* would write effusive columns celebrating the year's Jewish geniuses. Since 2020, just 0-1 Jews a year have been awarded grants. *The Forward* hasn't bothered to take note.

Today American Jews watch with Solomonian bemusement as *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* is argued before the Supreme Court. On some level we sympathize with the Asian American plaintiffs, who are suing Harvard for using admissions criteria that discriminate against them on the basis of their race. Maybe they really are the new Jews, facing the same barriers—insidious racism, personality scores, rural geographic preferences—that we once did.

On the other hand, fancying ourselves to be high caste members of a beneficent elite, we pretend not to notice that “diversity, equity, and inclusion” is a cudgel used to exclude certain groups of Americans, including Asians and Jews. Desperate to maintain their waning status within the liberal coalition, Jewish communal organizations ignore these contradictions. Once a protector of specifically Jewish interests but now secure in its new role as handmaiden to power, the Anti-Defamation League filed an amicus brief—in support of Harvard.

In the 1940s, the ADL took a different tack. For decades unofficial quotas at most Ivy League universities limited Jews to around 10% of the student body, despite evermore qualified Jewish applicants. Jewish organizations made it their mission to break this invisible barrier and by the end of the 1950s the quotas were a dead letter. The long summer of American Jewish success had begun.

But the seasons always change. A FIRE/Yougov survey found that self-identified Jews now number just 7% of Ivy League students, compared to 10% during the height of the antisemitic quotas.

In his gripping podcast *Gatecrashers*, about the history of Jews in the Ivy League, Mark Oppenheimer describes the troubled state of Jewish campus life. Harvard has gone from being 25% Jewish in the 1990s and 2000s to under 10% today. “In theory it could be the case that Jews are the same percentage of whites at Harvard as they always were,” he explains. “But Harvard has not shrunk the number of athletes it admits [...] and they've kept their geographical diversity. So if you're a Jewish kid who's not an athlete and not a legacy and not from Wyoming... then there's not much room left for you.”

According to the Hillel College Guide, Penn's Jewish population declined from 26% in 2015 to 17% in 2021; NYU's dropped from 24% to 13%. Princeton, Columbia, and Cornell have seen smaller but significant declines (Brown and Dartmouth, with different institutional priorities, are by all accounts happy exceptions).

Data from the Yale Chaplain's Office—which appears to be the only Ivy League

university that still tracks religious affiliation—shows a similar trend: The Jewish population went from 19.9% in the 2000s to 16.4% in the 2010s. A couple of years ago, the school’s chaplain told Meir Chaim Posner, the Chabad rabbi at Yale, that around 11% of Yale undergraduates were Jewish. “It’s dropped slightly since then,” Rabbi Posner told me in November.

“The university has decided that DEI is the overarching principle of admissions,” one Hillel director told me. “There’s a general consensus that it’s more difficult for Jewish students to get into top tier schools.” Nor is this difficulty confined to secular Jews—the modern Orthodox population has also crashed. A college counselor at a top Jewish day school reports that as universities have revamped enrollment and gone test-optional, the number of Orthodox students has decreased. “Every year has been harder,” he said. “Our ability to thoughtfully predict the likelihood of admission has gone way down.”

An uneasy *omertà* settles in. The Ivies skip college nights at Jewish day schools they visited for decades. At Penn there used to be two daily minyans—now there’s one. There are hushed whispers that if current trends hold, some of these colleges might no longer be able to support an Orthodox community at all.

The 1999 Hillel College Guide now reads like a map to a lost civilization. Harvard and Yale have 1,500 Jewish undergrads apiece. There are 5,000 Jewish students and grad students at Columbia, 6,000 at Penn, 14,000 at NYU. It’s hard to imagine that as recently as 2008, articles were being written about the “race” to attract Jewish students.

What was normal less than two decades ago sounds like a siren call from a distant golden age. To even suggest that a 15%-20% Jewish undergraduate student body might be acceptable in a country in which Jews make up 2.4% of the total population is anathema in today’s liberal society.

In New York—the seat of American Jewish political power—there are almost no Jews left in power. A decade ago the city had five Jewish congressmen,

“The 1999 Hillel College Guide now reads like a map to a lost civilization.”

a Jewish mayor, two Jewish borough presidents, and 14 Jewish City Council members. Today just two congressmen and a single borough president remain. Only six Jews now sit on the 51-person City Council. Shelly Silver, the corrupt Orthodox former State Assembly leader, was replaced by Yuh-Line Niou, a pro-BDS “progressive” whose oligarch father was featured in the Panama Papers. Not even the Lower East Side Tenement Museum is recognizably Jewish anymore.

“What you have is a lack of identity of Jews as Jews,” the Democratic political consultant Hank Sheinkopf told *The Washington Post*. “And they don’t have the power to ensure that there’s more than one Jewish congressman. It’s astounding.”

Younger Jews are being excluded from the liberal organizations their parents and grandparents helped create. Identitarian meltdowns roil the progressive world. The Women’s March, the ACLU, and the SPLC all get rid of Jewish leadership. There will be no more “Mighty Iras” in our lifetime. Not even the Jewish president of the Audubon Society is safe.

There are still powerful Jews in Washington—neo-Nazis on Twitter like to post photos of Biden’s cabinet—but the influence is waning. Is it a coincidence

that in the U.S. Senate (a handsy group of old men if ever there was one) the only senator forced to resign during the #MeToo panic happened to be Jewish? Or that activists pushed for Dianne Feinstein’s resignation for the explicit reason that she be replaced by someone who isn’t Jewish?

Of the 114 federal judges appointed by Joe Biden (as of this writing), just 8-9 appear to be Jewish—in a field that’s historically been at least 20% Jewish. Liberals worship Ruth Bader Ginsburg as a magical Jewish Teletubby, but they wouldn’t dare nominate another “white woman” to the highest court anytime soon. We are back to the single Jewish seat on the court.

Apparently Jews have so much power and influence that the highest-ranking Jewish senator in history finds it too politically difficult to hire a 22-year-old version of himself. There were at least 15 Jews on Chuck Schumer’s staff of 64 in 2014. After facing pressure for not being diverse enough, and despite an enlarged staff of 89, he can no longer make a minyan.

In Los Angeles—America’s second most Jewish city—there are now just two Jewish City Council members, down from six in 2000. In last year’s infamous dustup, Nury Martinez, the sharp-tongued council president, had despicable things to say about Black people, Oaxacans, even Armenians—but Jews were barely a footnote. “Judíos cut their deal with South LA,” she said. “They are gonna screw everybody else.”

Speaking of LA, a decade ago there were 22 Jews on *The Hollywood Reporter’s* annual list of the Top 50 Showrunners. In 2022, that’s down to 13. Other than the half-Jewish (and already famous) Maggie Gyllenhaal, you’d have to go back six years to find a single Jew on *Variety’s* annual list of 10 Directors to Watch.

Thanks to the odious new Hollywood house style that requires a detailed ethnic and racial classification at the top of all capsule biographies, we can see just how many self-identified Jews are in the Sundance writers and directors labs, or the NBC, Paramount, and Disney writers and apprenticeship programs—it is zero. It seems not being Jewish is

actually a primary qualification. So much for Jewish control of Hollywood.

The decline is so rapid—and the golden age so close to living memory—it’s a running joke. On the latest season of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Larry David meets with a group of younger non-Jewish studio executives to convince them to cast a Mexican American girl as Young Larry’s Jewish love interest. On *Reboot*, Steve Levitan’s Hulu show, an old guard of Jewish sitcom writers clash uncomfortably with their younger and woker—and noticeably non-Jewish—colleagues.

Not even Hollywood’s Jewish history belongs to Jews anymore. The new Academy Museum, dedicated to “radical inclusivity” and paid for with Haim Saban’s Jewish money, couldn’t bring itself to include Hollywood’s Jewish founders. In *Babylon*, Damian Chazelle’s epic flop about Hollywood’s golden age, the director follows an ahistorical Mexican studio executive and an Asian American lesbian rather than any of the very real Jewish moguls or screenwriters or directors of the era. What’s telling isn’t that Chazelle ignored Jews (anyone can do that) but that not a single reviewer bothered to notice this “erasure.” The culture has moved on.

What remains of Jewish Hollywood lives on borrowed time. Spielberg can make his *Fabelmans*, James Gray his *Armageddon Time*, but only because these are nostalgia pieces. Soon there will be no more RBG’s, no more Spielbergs, just a few off-brand Seinfelds doing a heritage act. There will certainly never be another Larry King or Andy Borowitz, Jews of such astounding mediocrity you wonder what was in the water.

In the 1950s, after Stalin’s death, after the purges, the Politburo turned to another pressing issue: the overrepresentation of Jews in Soviet life. Proportional representation (3% Tajik! 2% Uzbek! 12% Ukrainian!) became official policy, and the next decade saw the quick erosion of the Jewish nomenklatura. Soviet Jews—who had disproportionately contributed to and benefited from the building of the communist state—had outlived their usefulness.

A 1964 *New York Times* article

“When activists and journalists and executives talk about how Broadway or NPR or publishing is ‘too white,’ what they really mean is ‘too Jewish.’”

explained that because Soviet republics assigned a certain number of students “preferential admission” based on their nationalities, other nationalities—aka Jews—were excluded. “A higher percentage of Jewish students was permitted to attend universities in Czarist Russia than is enrolled in the USSR today,” an outraged American Jewish Congress declared. “The 8.2% of university graduates who are Jews contrasts sharply with the present Jewish university enrollment of 3.22%.”

As true believers in the postwar liberal project, American Jews spent decades advocating for tolerance and equality of opportunity, not least because we were the prime beneficiaries. The ADL didn’t fight the quotas in the 1950s so Jews could matriculate in proportion to their percentage of the population. But there’s a tension between meritocracy and representation. The new DEI regime treats any disparity between groups as evidence of unfair advantage—and yet we’re supposed to think it’s a coincidence that Jewish representation plummets at the exact moment America frantically pushes to racially rebalance all high-status industries.

Because what is framed as a backlash against America’s “white” centers of power is in many cases a clever sleight of hand. Jews are being disproportionately

purged from liberal institutions because Jews disproportionately exist within those institutions.

When activists and journalists and executives talk about how Broadway or NPR or publishing is “too white,” what they really mean is “too Jewish.” When *The New York Times* says it wants to make its internal demographics look more like New York City’s (excepting the Hasidim, of course), what this means is “fewer Jews.” Twenty years ago, if Pat Robertson spoke along these lines—making the same complaints about the same people and industries and institutions—there would have been a rush to condemn it as antisemitic. Today it passes for social justice.

In the 1960s and ’70s, facing hard barriers to their professional advancement, Soviet Jews lost the faith. The children and the grandchildren of the revolution tried to emigrate. When the authorities wouldn’t let them, American Jews rallied to their cause, created brand-new communal organizations, petitioned Congress, rallied thousands-strong outside the United Nations. Ours was a community confident in its power and confident in its future.

Asian Americans have the dignity of looking at admissions practices and demanding fair representation. The Jews, as ever, are a people apart. From civil rights to Vietnam to the spectacular bounty of their cultural and political achievements, liberal Jewish boomers always managed to be on the right side of history. It is a supreme irony that they’ve helped empower a movement that now places their children and grandchildren on the wrong side.

If Putin or Orban reduced their universities’ Jewish populations by 50%, the ADL would be howling. But Harvard and Yale can magically lose nearly half their Jewish students in less than a decade and we’ll take it on the chin. That this is occurring with the full acquiescence of a terrified liberal Jewish establishment should tell you just how much power Jews in America still have. ■

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Are Asians the New Jews?

Despite similar backgrounds, the fates of Asian and Jewish Americans are now diverging

BY JOEL KOTKIN

In countries where Asians and Jews immigrated in large numbers, they have long followed a common path. Both groups occupy a dual position: discriminated against for standing out, while at the same time held up as models of success.

But increasingly, that success has itself become a liability. Jews and Asians outperform the overall population in such critical areas as education and income, not only in the U.S., but in Canada, Australia, and the U.K., and as a result are collectively held a party to supposedly oppressive power structures in those countries. According to progressive ideas being taught by public schools and diversity departments, Jews are bearers of “white privilege,” no better and sometimes worse than the white Protestant descendants of slaveholders. Similarly, Asians are said to be “white adjacent,” a clever way of making them complicit with white racism despite their visible nonwhiteness.

In one essential respect, however, the two groups are heading in opposite directions. While the Jewish population in the U.S. is at best stagnant, Asians are now the fastest growing minority group in the country, with their numbers projected to increase from almost 12 million in 2000 to more than three times that by midcentury. This raises two critical questions: Is a new group of Americans, whose families have come to the U.S. from countries like China and India decades after the waves of mass Jewish immigration, taking the place of American Jews whose greatest successes are now in the past? Furthermore, is such a thing even possible in a culture

that now fetishizes failure and victimhood? Jews sometimes had to force the country to be fairer and more meritocratic but were able to make the most of America’s openness. Today, that door may be slamming shut on the next generation of Asian American aspirants as values like hard work, thrift, and sacrifice are deemed inherently “reflective of white racism.”

Asian Americans, notes author Kenny Xu, have the highest per capita income, lowest per capita crime rates and highest rates of college education in the U.S. Asians are now easily the best educated racial group in the country. Although there is poverty and increasing inequality, particularly among elderly and recent immigrants, median household income among Asians stands at over \$100,000, compared to \$71,000 for whites and \$45,000 for African Americans. This follows the Jewish script. Jews are already the highest earning religious group, followed by Hindus. In terms of education levels, they rank third, behind Hindus and Unitarians.

But a record of achievement does not seem to be making these groups more secure. The assault from the nativist right—one just has to listen to Trump’s openly racist attacks on prominent Asians—has grown while antisemitic memes remain de rigeur in white and Christian nationalist circles. The other, potentially more damaging assault, comes from the progressive left, which views ethnic success as socially regressive rather than a validation of societal openness.

In this new world view, Asians use “white supremacist thinking to assimilate and ‘get ahead,’” as former San

Francisco school board member Alison Collins tweeted, before comparing Asian Americans to a “house n****r.” Similarly, despite millennia of persecution, progressives increasingly claim the children of Abraham are just another group enjoying “white privilege.”

The rising social status of Jews paralleled the rise of capitalism. Jews took advantage of their higher rates of literacy, global ties, and knowledge of the cash economy. Long suppressed under medieval feudalism, Jews developed habits which turned out to be highly advantageous. Most individual Jews remained poor, but as a group Jews made up the vast majority of Eastern Europe’s factory owners, bankers, lawyers, and physicians. They also dominated the professions and the stock exchanges. A handful rose to global banking families, most obviously the Rothschilds, who played a preeminent role in the rise of the modern European, and later North American, economies.

A similar process took place in the Chinese diaspora. Poor Chinese immigrants, largely from the southern provinces of the country, started migrating to Southeast Asia during the Ming Dynasty. Like the Jews, they found their niche in an environment rich in natural resources but poor in educated human capital. As early as the 17th century European observers described the local Chinese as “Jew-like,” “gleaning here and there” to make a living.

As waves of Chinese people emigrated outside of the country, they became economically dominant forces in the economies of other Asian nations where they arrived: Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, and most powerfully in Singapore. More recently, immigrants from mainland China have transformed the once Japanese farming colony of Formosa into a global hub of chip manufacturing.

Both Jews and Asians have historically



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been the victims of discrimination. Jewish success was one motivation for pogroms in Russia and Poland, but even in the U.S., Jewish success engendered quotas for Jewish students, particularly at elite colleges. Asians, at least in the United States, faced more overt discrimination. In California, anti-Chinese, anti-Japanese and anti-Indian hysteria led to legislation that restricted the ability of Asians to own land and serve on juries. Vigilante action, remarkably similar to the Eastern European pogroms, occurred on occasion, with a particularly horrendous occurrence in Los Angeles in 1871, where over 1,000 Anglos attacked Chinatown, leaving 19 Chinese dead.

For much of American history, Jewish and Asian immigrants were poor, and few held advanced degrees. They made their way, for the most part, through work, thrift, investment, and reliance on familial ties. In the early days of mass Asian migration many people came without English-language fluency, which meant they were forced to work in fields where credentials did not matter but a willingness to work hard and suffer brutal conditions did. Like the Jews, many started with small businesses—corner stores or dry goods stores in underserved neighborhoods from Harlem to South Los Angeles, for instance—causing the the Asian share of all U.S. businesses to more than double since 2000.

Successive generations of Asians have moved up the ladder, however, to ever more sophisticated industries. This has become increasingly evident in the world of tech. A Google search suggests that one-third of leading tech CEOs are Asians. Similarly, foreign-born workers, overwhelmingly from Asia, make up a remarkable three-quarters of all of Silicon Valley's tech workforce.

“Asian businesspeople, like many of their Jewish counterparts, want to see their kids do more than manage a small grocery store or a 7-Eleven.”

The current prime minister of the U.K. is a Hindu, while another Indian, Nikki Haley, is running for U.S. president. The number of Asians in Congress has more than doubled since 2001 and, unlike other racial minorities, Asians have strong representation in both parties.

Yet in the bizarre world of modern progressivism, success constitutes something of an embarrassment. Asian progressives—the kinds quoted by places like NPR—suggest that being a “model minority” is less a credit than a cruel stereotype, claiming (correctly) that not all members of the race are successful or well educated. Others make a big deal about such things as being asked where they are from, which, it seems, is a question one can innocently ask of anyone in a country of innocents.

As is the case for American Jews, hate crimes are on the rise for Asian Americans. Much of this takes place in urban environments where many Asians own or run businesses that serve poor communities. But this is more something of the past; Asian businesspeople, like many of their Jewish counterparts, want to see their kids do more than manage a small grocery store or a 7-Eleven. Most Asians, like most Jews, see their own upward mobility, and even more so for their children, as dependent on the

concept of merit, something increasingly abandoned by progressives.

Today Asian students make up large shares of the student body both at leading universities—almost 20% of Ivies and 40% of the University of California system, outdistancing whites. They also dominate the elite, competitive academic public high schools from San Francisco's Lowell High School to Thomas Jefferson in Virginia to New York City's Bronx Science and Stuyvesant.

In all these cases, progressives are working to replace merit and test-based systems with racial preferences by changing admissions standards, and even advocate weakening educational content. Some progressive academics even consider science and mathematics as structurally racist, even though Indian, Arab, East Asian, and Jewish practitioners have greatly influenced these fields. Some elite colleges, along with law and medical schools, have made the embrace of diversity and “right thinking” more important than grades or test scores.

There's clearly an “Asian penalty” in applying for college: According to research from Princeton University, students who identify as Asian must score 140 points higher on the SAT than whites and 450 points higher than Black Americans to have the same chance of admission to private colleges.

Sadly such approaches are deeply embedded in the Biden administration Education Department where one official has even denounced democracy itself as “built on white supremacy.” Biden's choice of deputy director for the White House's Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), Alondra Nelson, has a similar perspective and focus. This approach promises to enrich the growing “diversity-industrial complex” which seeks ways to expel merit as a primary factor in admissions or hiring over academic achievement.

These developments could have long-term political consequences. The drive for reparations for descendants of slaves—over 150 years since emancipation—seems certain to exacerbate the divisions between minorities. California, the mecca of racial virtue signaling, has even decided to award

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six-figure “reparations,” even though the state never had any large, Southern-style slave economy, and entered the union as a free state. California also saw greater discrimination against Asians as well as Native populations and descendants of early Spanish settlers.

The drive for reparations, which could cost \$100 billion for San Francisco alone, seems likely to enhance the emerging racial spoils system, taking money from taxpayers in order to award gifts based on race and past discrimination, a practice that could extend well beyond descendants of slaves.

For both Jews and Asians, this poses a potentially difficult political equation. Historically Jews have tilted strongly toward the Democratic Party, while Asians, who once tended Republican, shifted in the last decade as well to the Democrats. Certainly, the presence of nativists and “Christian nationalists” in the Republican Party naturally turns them off from the GOP. But the notion that such things as thrift, rationalism or excelling at school are “white” values makes little sense to groups who displayed these characteristics well before they immigrated to the U.S., Canada, Australia, or the EU. Not surprisingly, Asians—Hindus and Sikhs in Britain, and Asians in the United States and Australia—are clearly now moving away from the parties of the left. Indians in Britain, tend to be well-educated and often entrepreneurial which, as *The Guardian* admits, makes them less sympathetic to their traditional home with Labour.

Some signs of political pushback are already evident in the United States as well. Asian voters in San Francisco led the drive to replace both ultra-left school board members and the famously lax DA Chesa Boudin. In the last presidential election, even with Trump at the top of the ticket, support for the GOP grew among Asians, while the number of Asian American Republicans elected to Congress increased. Although embraced by politically correct academics, nonprofits, and media, most Asians have voted against race-based admissions. One recent national poll found 4 in 10 Asians saw affirmative action as “racist” and more than half

welcomed a Supreme Court ruling outlawing it.

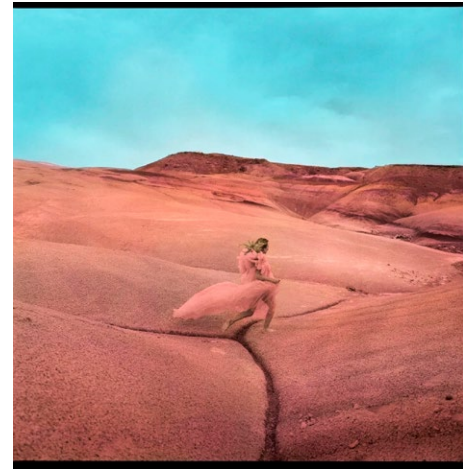
Jews are also moving toward America’s political center, further tilting their vote toward the GOP in 2020. In this year’s L.A. mayoral election, heavily Jewish communities favored former Republican Rick Caruso, who wound up losing to progressive Karen Bass. In New York’s recent gubernatorial race, meanwhile, Jewish voters—especially the Orthodox community—helped make it the closest in decades.

This shift is taking place at a time of rising hostility to Jews—now the largest targets per capita of hate crimes—while hate crimes against Asians have skyrocketed. Hate crimes against Asians and Jews are disproportionately committed by African Americans and other people of color; this is particularly true in places like New York where white nationalists are not exactly thick on the ground, though *The New York Times* would rather focus on the “Asian fetish” of the alt-right.

The fate of Asians and Jews in America is about more than two minority groups. It is about the efficacy of equal and fair treatment under the law, and a democratic system based on merit rather than ethnicity. Neither Jews nor Asians—nor our increasingly diverse society—benefit from the replacement of the “post-racial” ideal for what writer Wesley Yang describes as a racialist “successor ideology” that instead celebrates victimization as the prime value.

It would be far better to make use of the Jewish and Asian experience to prove how any ethnic group in America can overcome discrimination and prejudice by focusing on thrift, hard work, and education. The success of dark-skinned immigrants, whether Indian or from the West Indies or Africa, suggests that not being white is not quite the determinant imagined in the academic and media hothouses. Rather than outliers, or even oppressors, both Jews and Asians represent models for how Western societies can evolve and thrive without regressing back to racialist modes better buried in the past. ■

This article was originally published on February 26, 2023.



Album of the Week

Margo Price, *Strays*

In Margo Price’s wonderful new record, *Strays*, her fourth studio album, Price exists in multiple time periods at once. In the current moment, she’s one of country’s most innovative musicians, pushing the genre forward. But her sound is firmly rooted in the late ’70s, taking inspiration from *Seven Year Ache*-era Rosanne Cash and *Simple Dreams*-era Linda Ronstadt, a moment when rock and country were romping around together to create a feeling of something real.

If “something real” is too abstract, listen to *Strays*’ opening track, “Been to the Mountain.” Here, Price describes herself in ever-changing terms. “Used to be a lover, queen and a drifter / A cowboy devil, a bride in a box, and / A pilgrim and a thief, but it was me underneath.” The song’s music video documents a version of the mushroom trip that Price has said influenced the album’s creation, with multiple versions of herself dancing in unison.

“Been to the Mountain” has the feeling of a trippy revelation. Price, however, hasn’t completely disappeared into herself. She has grown and changed, trading in alcohol for weed and psychedelics. It’s a trade that suits her well, and her band is as tight as ever, following whatever rabbit hole she dives into next. She’s made the first great album of the year.

—David Meir Grossman

Double Crossed

Organizations that claim to represent minority groups are really working for the managerial elite

BY SHELUYANG PENG

New York City’s Stuyvesant High School, the crown jewel of the city’s public education system, was once 90% Jewish. By the time I entered Stuyvesant in 2013, it was 70% Asian. In the black-and-white photos that adorned the walls, rows of Steins and Cohens looked upon the newest crop of children from working-class immigrant families. Asians are ascendant in many once heavily Jewish domains: specialized high schools; elite colleges; medical schools. Like the American Jewish community, debates now rage within Asian American communities over whether we are “real minorities” or white-adjacent, and we even write Tablet articles about being the victims of violent hate crimes.

American Jews and Asian Americans share something else in common: Both have been sold out by activist organizations that are more interested in catering to the sensibilities of the wealthy elite that dominate the Democratic Party than in advocating for ordinary working-class constituents. Leading Jewish and Asian American organizations like the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and Asian Americans Advancing Justice (AAJC) have demonstrated their real priorities in how they have responded to two of the biggest issues in their respective communities: a wave of violent hate crimes and discriminatory education policies.

“In New York, street harassment, minor assaults, and even full-on beatings of visible Jews are almost a banality now, too frequent over too long of a period to be considered an active crisis, even in the communities most affected,” wrote Armin Rosen in the summer of

2022. Virtually the same thing could have been said about Asians. During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, there emerged one grainy video after another of Asians on the streets of American cities being beaten, occasionally to death. The victims were typically senior citizens or women, and they usually lived in coastal metropolises with high Asian populations. One attack involved an elderly Asian woman being called an anti-Asian slur before being punched in the head 125 times.

As *The Scroll* pointed out last year, “the rise in hate crimes [in New York] targeting highly visible and vulnerable groups like religious Jews and Asians tracks to the increase in the overall level of violent crime and disorder in the city.” Many working-class members of minority groups have reacted by advocating for stricter criminal justice policies given crime disproportionately affects them. But the groups that claim to speak for these vulnerable working-class Jews and Asian Americans, such as the ADL and AAJC, don’t advocate for these policies because they’re afraid to risk alienating the donor class and progressive base of the Democratic Party—groups that have consistently called for “restorative justice” policies and to defund the police. The ADL and AAJC has chorused those calls, virtue-signaling instead of fighting for the interests of the communities they claim they represent.

Take, for instance, the main targets of the ADL’s activist campaigns. Despite the ADL’s own statistics showing that in 2019 more than 55% of the attacks on Jews in New York City were carried out by individuals affiliated with “black supremacist” ideologies like the Nation of Islam and Black

Hebrew Israelites, the ADL, echoing New York City’s former mayor, Bill de Blasio, has focused on white supremacy—an important issue, but not the one most plaguing New York City or San Francisco’s Asian American or Jewish communities. When de Blasio wanted to signal that he was “doing something” about the explosion of violence against Jews, he appointed an ADL veteran, Deborah Lauter, to head a new Office for the Prevention of Hate Crimes focused on finding a “holistic approach” to the problem.

Of course, Lauter’s office did nothing to stop the violence because New York’s court system appears unwilling to pursue hate crime convictions, which would signal the city’s seriousness about combating the issue. In one instance—the killing of a 62-year-old Asian woman who died from injuries sustained when she was beaten outside of her Queens home—the murder was not prosecuted as a hate crime “even though it seemed to have no other motive besides hatred of Asians,” as Armin Rosen put it. As the Crown Heights Jewish activist Devorah Halberstam explained to Rosen, the lack of hate crimes prosecutions is a systemic issue. “It’s not against the Jewish community. It’s not against the Asian community ... It’s the broader picture.” On the issue of the city systematically ignoring hate crimes, the ADL and AAJC have been silent.

With hate crimes increasing and hate crime charges nowhere in sight, what were these organizations busy advocating for? In the midst of this sustained

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wave of violence, Jewish and Asian advocacy groups were more preoccupied with chanting fashionable social justice slogans than with actually trying to prevent and punish hate crimes. In 2020, for instance, the AAJC tweeted “today we observe the National Day of Mourning in solidarity with all who have lost loved ones due to police violence or white supremacy.” This is not a good way of supporting those Asian American communities relying on police protection for their safety and sense of security. Also in 2020, the New York-based Asian American Federation (AAF) backed the creation of a special Asian Hate Crimes task force in the city. The group’s executive director, Jo-Ann Yoo, said the move was necessary “to help raise safety awareness in the pan-Asian community.” In a city that refuses to prosecute hate crimes, raising awareness is perhaps the best that can be hoped for.

If you were one of the people being beaten in the streets or walking them in fear, however, you would have wanted—indeed needed—more from these organizations. This gets at the fundamental problem: The people who run the advocacy NGOs do not view themselves as potential victims of such attacks. Orthodox Jews in New York City, whose attire makes them highly visible, are the prime targets of antisemitic violence. Most have little social capital outside of their neighborhoods, which are often side-by-side with other immigrant enclaves. Secular, progressive Jews who make careers in “social justice advocacy” tend to see the Orthodox community as a relic.

A similar dynamic applies to the relationship between the working-class Asian American immigrants who are the victims of hate crimes and their professional class spokespersons. Recent immigrants from Asian countries

“American Jews and Asian Americans have been sold out by activist organizations that are more interested in catering to the sensibilities of the wealthy elite.”

often lack English fluency and hold no social or cultural capital. Many struggle with America’s labyrinthine immigration system and are prime candidates for group-based lobbying efforts. Meanwhile, the NGOs that represent Asian Americans are staffed by the kinds of highly educated members of the managerial class who choose to go into the nonprofit sector. The more powerful these organizations become, the more they draw from a national network of affluent individuals and families that have the social and economic capital to let their children study arts and humanities at America’s top colleges.

The same thing is happening in America’s fights over access to education. High Asian enrollment at New York City’s specialized high schools like Stuyvesant has become a problem for the city’s progressive politicians. In 2020, the chancellor of the Department of Education under Mayor de Blasio, Richard Carranza, commented that “I just don’t buy into the narrative that any one ethnic group owns admission to these schools,” suggesting that Asians, like the pushy Jews of previous generations, had somehow gotten their spots unfairly. Never mind the open tests they took to get in, that a full three-quarters of Stuyvesant’s students are immigrants

or the children of immigrants, and that Asians are, on average, the poorest racial group in New York City.

While there were local organizations fighting to preserve fair and colorblind access to schools like Stuyvesant, at the national level the major Asian and Jewish advocacy organizations have actively supported policies that are biased against their own constituents. Take the affirmative action case now before the Supreme Court, *Students for Fair Admissions v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*. Progressive organizations have attempted to frame SFFA as a white-led effort, which erases the Jewish background of the lawyer spearheading the suit, Edward Blum, and the historical legacy of quotas limiting Jewish access to Harvard and other elite institutions.

As Jacob Scheer has written in *Tablet*, the leading American Jewish organizations once opposed affirmative action, as *numerus clausus* quotas were once used to keep qualified Jewish applicants out of elite institutions. The “big three” Jewish advocacy organizations (the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Congress, and the American Jewish Committee) filed amicus briefs in *Regents v. Bakke* (1978) taking a firm stand against affirmative action policies. But now the leading Jewish organizations have changed their tune on affirmative action, and the ADL filed an amicus brief supporting Harvard’s admissions policies. Similarly, the AAJC has filed two amicus briefs supporting Harvard’s de facto anti-Asian discrimination.

The truth is that “our” organizations have become empty mouthpieces parroting affluent liberal talking points in the interest of getting more donations and mainstream media coverage. Rather than advocating for policies that working-class immigrant communities actually support, progressive nonprofits use their influence to regulate language.

In one particularly salient example, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the oldest and most powerful Latino-interest NGO in America, adopted the neologism “Latinx” in their official communications. The organization’s 2019 summit in Washington, D.C., was called “State

SPORTS

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of Latinx America.” The problem, as detailed in Politico, was that while “Latinx” was “favored by activists and a growing crew of Democrats, consultants and media pundits [...] just 2 percent of Hispanics use the word—while 40 percent are actually offended by it.” While LULAC eventually decided to drop the term, the fact that the organization had felt compelled to adopt it in the first place despite the complete lack of grassroots support suggests that professional activists set the agenda for these groups, and not their beleaguered constituents. For the activists, however, using terms like Latinx is useful insofar as it confirms their membership in the coastal liberal class.

A similar linguistic power struggle is taking place within Asian American communities—indeed with the term “Asian American” itself. In a 2012 Pew survey of people from the six largest groups that make up the Asian American category, fewer than 15% of respondents said they considered themselves “Asian Americans.” As Wesley Yang pointed out in Tablet: “there is no reason to expect otherwise” seeing as “no one chose it for themselves. Others applied it to them.” The reason for choosing such terms is to generate the appearance of a powerful and coherent political and electoral bloc out of what were (and are) a number of fractious groups pursuing their own interests. In one sense the strategy worked: While there is still no organic “Asian American” identity which binds together people of Chinese and Bangladeshi background, the category has given the class of spokespeople who claim to speak for “Asian Americans” power within the political system.

The term Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) is even more absurd. AAPI originated within the federal government’s Office of Management and Budget, when it formalized the term’s usage in 1977 as a way to decide which ethnic groups along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border were eligible to apply for special loans. Yet somehow this archaic bureaucratic term escaped the dustbin of history and now sits alongside *BI-POC* and *Latinx* as one of the newest progressive shibboleths. Imagine trying to explain to an actual living “AAPI”

“Rather than advocating for policies that working-class immigrant communities actually support, progressive nonprofits use their influence to regulate language.”

immigrant why Koreans, Indians, and Samoans are all considered part of the same group, while Kazakhs and Afghans are not?

The answer, obviously, is that it has nothing to do with “communities” and everything to do with politics. Under the leadership of the managerial class, identity-based NGOs have become appendages of the Democratic Party machine. The ADL, Liel Leibovitz wrote last year, has abandoned its founding mission and transformed into a “stealthy progressive, partisan operation” that “actually puts real Jews in danger.”

In one sense it has worked: In recent years the ADL has seen a massive surge in revenue. On the other hand, the ADL is so far off course that it couldn’t even issue a statement last November when hundreds of Black Hebrew Israelites chanted “We are the real Jews!” in a show of solidarity with Brooklyn Nets player Kyrie Irving. Jonathan Greenblatt, the ADL’s director, never condemned the march, but hours after it ended, he was attacking progressive activists’ public enemy of the month, Elon Musk, for not doing enough to safeguard Twitter from “hate, harassment, and misinformation.”

A few weeks later, Greenblatt appeared on the popular radio show the *Breakfast Club* and made a fool of himself trying to discuss hate crimes without

offending anyone. The comments section beneath the video, meanwhile, filled up with people spewing every antisemitic trope in the book.

A similar phenomenon has taken place in the case of the organization Stop AAPI Hate. Like the ADL, Stop AAPI Hate aggregates instances of hate and promotes a sanitized, corporate-donor-friendly style of Asian activism meant to be shared on the Instagram stories of white collar professionals. The group’s website declares that “our approach recognizes that in order to effectively address anti-Asian racism, we must work to end all forms of structural racism leveled at Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color.” This is the type of thing one says to win acceptance in a freshman comp lit class or corporate DEI seminar—not to give hope and confidence to working-class Asian Americans.

Stop AAPI Hate co-founder Kulkarni Manju, meanwhile, appeared in a video two months after six working-class Asian immigrant women were murdered in Atlanta spas to argue that Asian Americans were striving for “White-adjacency” and that there was “significant levels of anti-Blackness in our community,” showing how the interests of the Asian activist class and the Asian working class diverge.

This reveals something essential about the true purpose of these organizations. While they appear to lobby the powerful in Washington on behalf of ethnic communities, their true purpose is exactly the opposite: to provide the power elite in Washington with ethnic branded communications platforms that they can use to sway these communities toward supporting parties and policies working against their own interests. ■

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COMMUNITY

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THE REST

→ **Elan Ganeles, the 26-year-old from Connecticut who was killed in a terrorist attack near the West Bank while he was driving to a friend's wedding, will be buried in Israel rather than his hometown of West Hartford.** The decision by his parents reflects Ganeles' long connection to Israel, anchored in part by his service in the IDF before he went back home for college in the United States. "He felt at home in Israel," family friend Yona Friedman told the Ynet news. Ganeles was killed when a group of militant Palestinians opened up fire on several vehicles before setting fire to their own car and fleeing on foot. The attack came amid a streak of deadly clashes in the West Bank that have seen more than a dozen people killed and riots in the streets.

→ Following the Feb. 4 **chemical disaster after the derailment of a Norfolk Southern train in Ohio, six senators from both sides of the aisle backed a new bill titled Railway Safety Act** on Wednesday. A rather substantial clampdown on the railroad industry, which has leveraged an aggressive lobbying arm to lessen safety requirements and penalties for violations, the bill could roll those relaxed standards right back into the books as the new law of the land. But the evenly split group of Republicans and Democrats will face challenges from other lawmakers who want to leverage the high-profile crash for their own political capital. Already, House Republicans are saying any legislative maneuvers should come after a splashy congressional probe that would offer plenty of chances for legislators to go viral as they make examples of the train execs who've spent years behind doors trading campaign donations for reduced government oversight.

→ On average, **14 bus and subway drivers in Los Angeles were assaulted every month last year** as law enforcement struggles to contain the spike of drug overdoses and incidents of crime on public transit. The city's Metro Transit Watch app saw a **100% jump in reports of drug sales and overdoses taking place on the city's transit system**, with reports of serious crimes up 24%. The ongoing public health issues have kept riders from returning, with train riders down 62% and bus riders down 71% compared to how many were riding both before the pandemic.

→ **QUOTE OF THE WEEK: "Fox News should not be spreading conspiracy theories. ... Move on from Donald Trump, and stop spouting election lies."** That's from the deposition of former Republican Speaker of the House Paul Ryan recalling the advice he gave to his fellow board members of the Fox Corporation after the network spent several weeks bringing on guests who claimed without evidence that voting machines had taken votes from Donald Trump and given them to Joe Biden.

Ryan was deposed as part of the ongoing defamation lawsuit brought by voting-machine maker Dominion against Fox, and his suggestion, reported for this time this week, apparently resonated with Fox Chairman Rupert Murdoch, who considered pushing his top prime-time hosts—Tucker Carlson, Laura Ingraham, and Sean Hannity—to tell viewers Biden had won the election.

"[It] would go a long way to stop the Trump myth that the election was stolen," Murdoch recalled saying in a meeting. Yet, that myth was driving the ratings that suddenly disappeared after Trump lost the race. "Privately they are all there," Fox CEO Suzanne Scott told Murdoch of Fox's top hosts, but "we need to be careful about using the shows and pissing off the viewers."

THE BIG STORY

The White House said on Monday it would support state science laboratories conducting controversial **gain-of-function (GoF) research, just as a new Department of Energy report said the COVID-19 virus likely originated after a GoF accident at a laboratory in Wuhan, China.** "[The president] believes there has to be legitimate scientific research into the sources, or potential sources, of pandemics," John Kirby, National Security Council spokesman, said at a White House press conference. Research like GoF, which involves **tampering with viruses to make them more dangerous in order to better understand them and create prevention measures, "must be done in a safe and secure manner and as transparent as possible to the rest of the world."**

Kirby went out of his way to note the administration was not confirming the leak of the classified DoE report to the press, and he reiterated that the president had "doubled down" on getting to the "bottom of the origins" of the virus. All of which raises suspicion that the leak was placed by the White House as it continues to take a more prominent role in the bipartisan jockeying to own the narrative on how to deal with China.

—Sean Cooper

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America on Fire

Across the United States, critical infrastructure is breaking down and blowing up in plumes of toxic smoke

BY SEAN COOPER

Last year the Fern Hollow Bridge in Pittsburgh collapsed hours before a planned visit by President Joe Biden; he was scheduled to give a speech addressing America's infrastructure. About an hour's drive northwest of Pittsburgh sits East Palestine, Ohio, where a train carrying hazardous materials derailed earlier this month, leading to the town's evacuation and causing a public health crisis that has yet to be resolved. The two incidents, one year and roughly 50 miles apart, are not disconnected: They point to a widespread rot afflicting America's transportation networks, public schools, health care facilities, energy grid, and other critical infrastructure that is already causing dangerous failures like the ones in Pittsburgh and East Palestine, and which appears likely to get worse before it gets better.

Because your electricity might not stay on long enough to reach the end of an article of any greater length, here is a brief survey of the current crisis afflicting America's critical infrastructure.

Rail

The American rail system was given a respectable grade of "B" by the American Society of Civil Engineers in the organization's most recent analysis of U.S. infrastructure in 2021. But that grade doesn't fully reflect the dysfunction in the rail system. There have been 12,400 train derailments over the past 10 years, including 6,600 tankers holding hazardous liquids or gases with 348 of those tankers spilling their contents and at least 18,600 people forced to subsequently evacuate affected areas. As the Doomberg Substack recently

reported, the transport of chemicals is a potentially explosive issue within the industry because "freight rail companies are forced by the federal government to transport dangerous materials regardless of the peril such cargoes represent." At the same time, "the chemical industry all but accuses the big four Class I freight rail companies" of "operating as a de facto oligopoly, routinely using their excessive market power to extract disproportionate profits despite offering deteriorating service, risking public safety in the process."

Not an ideal recipe for safe and efficient service ...

Education

If you put aside the current culture war over book bans and ideological purity tests for teachers, the crumbling physical infrastructure of America's school buildings and the chronic absenteeism of America's students should give you plenty to worry about.

While public school campuses currently account for the second biggest allotment of all public infrastructure expenses, the physical buildings and utilities that make up the school system at large were found to be nearly failing, receiving a "D-plus" grade from the American Society of Civil Engineers in 2021. Citing at least 53% of all districts that required upgrades to multiple core building systems like HVAC and water pipes, the most recent Civil Engineer analysis of American schools also noted that at least 30% of all schools are so overcrowded that they now rely on trailers and other temporary structures.

Poorly weatherized classrooms are only part of what's keeping students from showing up to class. After years of remote learning left kids with tenuous

feelings of connection to their studies and stunted the development of social skills crucial for navigating the stress of adolescence, students across the nation have simply stopped showing up to class.

The latest data from New York City's public school officials shows that at least 350,000 students are regularly missing school, with almost half of all students in the Bronx and 3 in every 5 students in Harlem chronically absent. Absenteeism "is something that is being experienced across the board [in California]" said Jacqueline Mora, an assistant superintendent in the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District. In Mora's district, chronic absenteeism (a designation given to students who miss at least 10% of the school year) essentially doubled from 10% before the pandemic to 20% during the 2020-21 academic calendar. The most recent attendance record shows a 31% rate of chronic absenteeism. In Pennsylvania, "habitual truancy rates" more than doubled during the 2020-21 school year while Mississippi reported that 28% of its students missed at least 18 days during the 2021-22 calendar.

Though the statewide 30% absenteeism rate in Illinois is a little better than Chicago's 45% chronic absenteeism in 2022, the poor attendance is nonetheless exacerbating a swift decline in academic performance across the entire Illinois school system. Almost 20% of the state's schools reported that only 1 out of every 10 students can read at grade level. Statewide, 53 schools lack *any* students currently proficient in math. Remarkably, the Illinois State Board of Education rated several of these schools with zero math proficiency as "commendable," the second-highest accountability rating it gives to its schools.

Energy Grid

Over the past several years, extreme weather events have revealed an energy system that's neither ready to transition to renewable sources nor able to rely on its existing facilities, which are long overdue for upgrades and repair. Last December, Winter Storm Elliott took coal and natural gas plants in Tennessee and North Carolina entirely offline and

came close to leaving 65 million people with rolling blackouts as temperatures dipped below freezing. Despite hundreds of people dying during a similarly catastrophic winter storm in Texas in 2021, the Dallas Federal Reserve said in January that the state's power grid remains entirely susceptible to another cold snap. "Wind and solar are the leading share of planned capacity additions in Texas over the next several years," the Dallas Fed noted, "but with utilization rates that are well below installed capacity due to weather and time of day, their expected contributions are limited."

It might not be a blizzard, however, that next knocks out your electricity. Poorly secured power stations and resentment toward inept government has led to a 71% increase in physical attacks on energy system infrastructure in 2022 compared to the year prior, according to a new *Wall Street Journal* analysis. Pointing to "people frustrated by the onset of the pandemic, social tensions and economic challenges," the *Journal* projects 2023 will only see more strikes like the set of firearm attacks on several substations across North Carolina last December that left 45,000 residents without power.

"There seems to be a pattern where people are targeting critical infrastructure, probably with the intent to disrupt," Manny Cancel, the chief executive of Electricity Information Sharing and Analysis Center, told *The Wall Street Journal*. "Going back to the 2020 presidential election, as well as the recent midterm elections, we've seen an uptick in chatter and an uptick in incidents as well."

Health Care

While the roughly 1.5 million health care employees who quit their jobs during the pandemic left the medical field with widespread staff shortages and hospitals reporting extensive delays for emergency care and surgical procedures, routine doctor visits have become their own bureaucratic nightmare. A new Kaiser Family Foundation analysis found that almost 1 in every 5 claims by patients with insurance purchased on the federal exchange were denied coverage. As high as that might

"Communities with dirty water arguably have it better than the 2 million Americans who lack basic indoor plumbing altogether."

be, some plans in the report were denying as many as 80% of claims for insurance coverage, a discrepancy that might be wider still, Kaiser said, if only insurance company data was uniformly collected. "The federal government has not expanded or revised transparency data reporting requirements in years and does not appear to conduct any oversight using data that are reported by marketplace plans."

Water

Residents downstream of East Palestine, Ohio, have learned that while the nation's train system might be able to maintain the appearance of infrastructure integrity despite the occasional chemical spill, the water distribution network is far more susceptible to toxic encroachments. "I think it was not in the best interest of human health and welfare and the environment to simply cover [contaminated soil] up and keep going without at least a preliminary evaluation to determine if the level of vinyl chloride that was present in the soil was going to create a potential contamination threat to surface or groundwater," Dr. Julie Weatherington-Rice, an environmental consultant, told Ohio's WKBN after Norfolk Southern simply dumped dirt over the trench used to burn off

vinyl chloride that spilled from derailed train cars.

It's a minor consolation for those in eastern Ohio to learn they've joined the ranks of dozens of communities across the nation struggling to access clean water and functional water treatment systems. Communities with dirty water, however, arguably have it better than the 2 million Americans who lack basic indoor plumbing altogether. "Because septic systems cost more than most people earn in a year and tend to fail anyway in the impervious clay soil of [Lowndes County, Alabama]," Catherine Coleman Flowers writes in *Waste: One Woman's Fight Against America's Dirty Secret*. "Families cope the best they can, mainly by jerry-rigging PVC pipe to drain sewage from houses and into cesspools outside."

While proper wastewater systems elude several rural regions, clean water in urban areas remains a perennial problem for many American cities. Last fall, old pipes ushered in an E. coli outbreak across Baltimore's water system, and Michigan residents in Flint are still receiving advisories to boil their water as recently as this month, after a 2014 lead poisoning crisis impacted the drinking water of more than 100,000 homes. As one recent analysis found, "counties with elevated levels of incomplete plumbing and poor water quality in America—which are variously likely to be more indigenous, less educated, older, and poorer—are continuing to slip through the cracks."

Bridges

The Biden administration's recent \$26.5 billion package to address the American bridge crisis was among the largest federal interventions in the road system since the federal government began building interstate highways in 1956. Though with 43,000 bridges in need of immediate repair and a total of 220,000 bridges in need of upgrades, much of that money will be used to play catch-up on long neglected bridges. Politically important states like Pennsylvania, meanwhile, are scheduled to receive disproportionate chunks of the aid.

The reason why hundreds if not thousands of damaged bridges will ultimately

be left untouched speaks to some of the larger issues afflicting American infrastructure decline writ large: No one person or agency is accountable, leaving public officials, utilities, and public servants the opportunity to say it's someone else's problem.

From Broken Infrastructure to Brokenness

Much is made of the collapse of trust in America's public institutions like

Congress and the press, but the country's decrepit physical infrastructure seems to be contributing to the larger sense of national brokenness. In 2020, Pew found that national pride had dipped to a record low, with 21% of Americans either "only a little proud" or "not at all proud" to be an American.

Maybe national pride is too much to ask for when so many communities are struggling to maintain safe roads

and clean drinking water. Last week, Vermont's chapter of the American Society of Civil Engineers took a look at nine categories of the state's major infrastructure systems before granting an overall grade of a "C." Mediocre as that might be, the report put Vermont a notch above the national average: a "C-minus." ■

This article was originally published on February 23, 2023.

ARTS & LETTERS

Mel Brooks Kicks Larry David's Skinny Ass

Part II in a continuing series on the decline of Jewish vulgarity

BY DAVID MIKICS

The first crass biblical joke was directed squarely against God by Sarai, the mother of the Israelites and the world's first Jewish stand-up comic, who famously laughs at God's plan to give her and her husband, Avram, a son. Her point, more or less, is "You expect a 99-year-old man to get it up, and with old shriveled me?" Adonai and his angels—a tough crowd—don't laugh, but we still do, several thousand years later.

And the jokes continue. Aside from Judaism, it's hard to think of another religion that specializes in lambasting the master of the universe, a sarcastic form of rebellion that climaxes with the book of Job. Moses' Israelites are sharply satirical. "Weren't there enough graves in Egypt? You had to drag us out to this wilderness?" they carp.

The Bible's crude gibes are equally directed at the dimwitted enemies of Israel. Balaam's ass thwarts his master, stopping Balaam from prophesying against

Israel. The Talmud's rabbis insisted that when the ass complains "You've been riding me all day" this means that Balaam has been shtupping his beast of burden (Sanhedrin 105b). Traditional Purim-shpils endlessly barbecue the hapless Haman, that numbskull who thought he could decimate Jewry.

But there are no better targets for Jewish humor than Jews themselves, especially respectable ones. In one Purim-shpil, Mordechai, the virtuous uncle of Esther, recites a parody of the Yom Kippur confession, the Vidui. Here is the scholar Jeremy Dauber's translation (capital letters represent the prayer's Hebrew verses):

FOR

I go gladly with young girls into
the stable

THE SIN

Much more gladly to bed
THAT WE HAVE COMMITTED

Even with a widow
BEFORE YOU

Quite quickly I do it

ABRAHAM SINNED

Has a large shop,
Makes all the young girls lame

ISAAC SINNED

His thing is quite sharp,
Makes all the girls witty

Dauber cites Mikhail Bakhtin's idea that the raucous mockery of authority figures acts as a safety valve, a way of making sure that authority remains strong. *Abraham avinu*, like the Talmud's rabbis, is no stuffed shirt, but a man with a penis, like Milton Berle at a Friars' Club roast. (Yes, penis size is discussed in the Talmud, Dauber informs us.) The same student who recited Mordechai's mock-Vidui was, in the study hall, earnestly immersed in the Gemara.

Bakhtin's argument that humor is a means to prop up authority can be sensibly applied to medieval Purim-shpils. But Jewish laughter in the modern age pricks harder. Then it's not a safety valve but a serious battle with authority. In 20th-century America, the ripest target for Jewish humor was the Jewish claim to respectability, which went hand in hand with assimilation.

American Jewish humor at its best asserted the neurotic glory of Jewishness against the white-bread norms of

NEWS

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middle-class life. A cookie-cutter existence in the suburbs meant the stifling of any unruly Jewish impulses, in order to swear fealty to goyishe norms of proper behavior and good citizenship. Being calm and neighborly, the gentile ideal, required not getting upset or anxious, two traits that have been closely allied to Jewishness from the start.

Those mostly Jewish gods of modernity, Hollywood's moguls, with their bad manners and grandiose egotism, produced movies that were the stark opposite of their own florid personalities. During Hollywood's golden age they ensured that cinema stayed clean and decent—and non-Jewish. The Hollywood musical, especially, presented a never-ending paean to wholesomeness. But by the '70s Hollywood was spotlighting discontented riffraff like the heroes of *Taxi Driver*, *Midnight Cowboy*, and other gritty sagas. Jewishness appeared on the big screen too, in Woody Allen's cuddly, affected *Annie Hall*, but there was little attention paid to the Jews' messy, offensive edge. Until, that is, the advent of Mel Brooks, the biggest source of Jewish vulgarity in movies.

Brooks, who is still alive and kicking at age 96, has had a near-endless comedy career. He began as a tumbler in the Catskills, wrote for Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows*, and then hit it big with the comedy album he made with Carl Reiner, *The 2,000 Year Old Man*, which Queen Elizabeth reportedly found quite amusing. (In a sad instance of dynastic decline, Brooks' partner Carl Reiner passed the comic baton to his son Rob Reiner, aka Meathead, a wan liberal voice of reason.) *Blazing Saddles* and *Young Frankenstein*, released in 1974, became sacred texts for my high school circle of friends, ranking up there with Monty Python. *History of the World, Part I*, which came out in 1983, is the third member of Brooks' comic triumvirate. Miraculously, 40 years later, his *History of the World, Part II*, filmed last year, will be released March 6 on Hulu.

As a kid on the streets of Williamsburg, Brooks told *Playboy* in 1975, he perfected his "corner shtick": "You had to score on the corner—no bullshit

"In 20th-century America, the ripest target for Jewish humor was the Jewish claim to respectability, which went hand in hand with assimilation."

routines, no slick laminated crap.... The story had to be real and it had to be funny. People getting hurt was wonderful."

Brooks' best in-your-face tour de force was *History of the World, Part I*, an immortal classic from its opening parody of 200T's apemen, who salute the dawn of humanity with jerking-off gestures, to the coming attractions at the end. *History of the World, Part II*, we are informed, will feature Jews in Space, a Viking funeral (complete with horned Vikings, or are they Jews?), and Hitler on Ice, where the Fuehrer executes some dainty spins.

Like the Three Stooges' Moe (born Moses Harry Horwitz), Brooks will be forever linked to his Hitler parodies. Brooks cut his comic teeth with *The Producers*, which he wanted to call *Springtime for Hitler*—a title unimaginable on a marquee, it was decided. Brooks' producer cluelessly suggested that the film's sublimely awful musical, put on by Zero Mostel and Gene Wilder, be retitled *Springtime for Mussolini*, but Brooks thankfully won that one.

History of the World satirizes the Roman empire with sloppy gusto, along with *ancien régime* France ("it's good to be the king!") As David Denby comments, the film is a "celebration of barbarous behavior throughout the ages." But Brooks' most stunning sequence is

devoted to the Spanish Grand Inquisitor Torquemada, known for burning conversos. Brooks plays Torquemada as a cheerful smoothie, dapper in his red robes, who delights in the tortures he is about to inflict on the Jews. Burning Jews is an irresistible treat, a delighted Brooks confesses. An auto-da-fé is, he sings, what "you know you shouldn't do ... but you do it anyway." The Spanish Inquisition was sufficiently remote in time that Brooks could get away with making fun of its brutality, and of the Jews' sufferings.

With the lavish Torquemada sequence, which cost more than the rest of *History of the World* combined, Brooks roasted the fantasy purveyed by classic Hollywood's Jews, who sold the American dream to the masses. Brooks wanted to parody the glossy innocent cheer of a big number in a Hollywood musical, which poured on the spectacle to overwhelm the audience with irresistible feel-good vibes.

"Bring on the nuns!" yells Brooks' Torquemada, and a line of swim-capped shikas plunges gracefully into a swimming pool, synchronized as in an Esther Williams musical. In response the hirsute, caftan-wearing Jews plummet clumsily down a water slide. They thrash about, their tangled rabbinical beards floating underwater, while the immaculate goyishe beauties trace acrobatic patterns all around them. These Aryan angels' effortless smoothness sets off the hairy, awkward Jews' floundering. Earlier, they have had their balls "pingponged" (as Jackie Mason, one of the victims, puts it), made ready for the auto-da-fé.

Brooks' Torquemada routine mocks the array of untouchable female gentile flesh put on display in Hollywood musicals by Jewish studio heads. These Jews didn't allow even the slightest trace of Jewishness into their pictures; Jews

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didn't belong in Hollywood's white-picket-fence America or its sanitized idea of history. But in the real history of the world, Brooks was saying, Jews played an outsize role as buffoons and truth-tellers. Even when they were victims, about to be burned alive by the Inquisition, they preserved their comic chops the same way they held on to their tallis and tefillin. The swimming shikasas were there for decoration, but the Jewish jokes were what really mattered. And so the Torquemada episode ends with the bathing beauties holding up the lights of a menorah, a spectacular finish that could have been designed by Busby Berkeley.

Classic Hollywood was the custodian of genteel American life, which prizes wholesome sex appeal. Brooks' Inquisition scene reminds us that Hollywood can turn anything into a song and dance full of infectious joy, and also that killing Jews for many centuries offered the world's best entertainment value, unless you happened to be Jewish.

Even for Brooks there was a limit beyond which bad taste could not pass. He would never have dared satirize a Nazi death camp, since that hellish past was just a few decades gone, and really not gone at all. *MAD* did a parody of *Hogan's Heroes* set in Buchenwald, but that was a single page in a magazine, not a big-screen spectacle. No one I know has ever seen Jerry Lewis' suppressed Auschwitz movie *The Day the Clown Cried*, but I suspect it must be full of cringe-worthy schmalz rather than transgressive laughter—a worse sort of desecration.

Brooks came out of the 1950s when vulgar Jews like Lenny Bruce stuck in the craw of mainstream America. But the pull of WASPish assimilation, which Brooks always resisted, started to have degrading effects on Jewish comedy starting in the 1960s. Brooks' fellow *Show of Shows* writer Woody Allen moved from the silly vulgar comedy of *Bananas* to faux-Ingmar Bergman "masterpieces" without a single laugh in them. Philip Roth went from Portnoy's obscene antics to the cultured Upper East Side voice of the Zuckerman books, geared toward the public television crowd. There were still Jewish pornographers—Al Goldstein, the Powers

“Roth’s heroes tend to be overgrown adolescents whose revolt against staid norms sputters out because they are too stringent and perverse to actually find pleasure in life.”

brothers—but Roth had cleaned up his act. Despite the late-career efflorescence of Mickey Sabbath, Roth for the most part scurried into respectability, telling tales about lonely bachelors ensconced in deepest Connecticut.

Roth loved to battle righteous pricks (as he saw them). *The Anatomy Lesson* attacked a literary critic named Milton Appel—transparently Irving Howe, who had condemned *Portnoy's Complaint*. Appel, Roth wrote, was “frozen stiff” in his “militant grown-upism,” a pompous hawk of “Loftier Values.” But despite his profane flourishes, Roth's temperament was as stiff as that of his enemies. He substituted the holy cult of writing for the moralist's sanctimony. Like Swede Lvov, he was a country squire dedicated to his work.

Roth's heroes tend to be overgrown adolescents whose revolt against staid norms sputters out because they are too stringent and perverse to actually find pleasure in life. These men are wedded to a monotonous promiscuity that feels like hard work, not fun. Sex in Roth often “enslaves and isolates,” as the critic Ross Posnock observes. Getting laid becomes an ascetic endeavor—Mickey Sabbath is “the monk of fucking.”

Roth produced masterpieces like *The Human Stain* and *American Pastoral*, but these books also suffer from

a pinched will to self-defense. Nearly every protagonist in later Roth is persecuted by someone who claims a moral high ground. Hamstrung by the indignation he felt at the feminists, the rabbis, and the puritanical book reviewers, Roth fell into the trap of claiming his own higher ground, the sacred territory of art. Instead of depicting human comedy with its unpredictable beauty, Roth turned programmatic, intent on showing why the critics were wrong. The rigid moralists he hated could never be upended by a polemic so self-serving and so devoid of wildness. Roth needed more vulgarity, not less.

By the '90s the once coarse, crass American Jew had been reduced to a ghost in corduroy slacks with blow-dried hair, musing about dental floss. Larry David and his partner in tepid comic narcissism, Jerry Seinfeld, presided over the shrinkage of Jewish comedy during the nine-year reign of *Seinfeld*, which became a zeitgeist show by doling out observational humor baby food and telling audiences that indulging one's peccadilloes is the funniest thing in the world. *Seinfeld* coddled its quartet of comic actors, whose every gesture was meant to be hilarious. The show was *Friends* with chocolate babka, its stars a group of perpetual adolescents who never once uttered anything provocative. Seinfeld's cushy trivialities went over big in America, where, at our worst, self-involvement is close to a national religion.

David then stepped out from behind the curtain to give us *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, which revolves around its star's wish to be liked rather than deemed a jerk, even at his most irritating. Being Jewish according to David means annoying other people because you lack self-doubt. But the truly great comedians dig masochistically into

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self-doubt (as do some essential writers, like Kafka).

Howard Stern was, for a time, the anti-*Seinfeld*, his stock in trade the obscene and insinuating, until therapy tamed him. But the grandest vulgarian of them all was that nonpareil aristocrat, Gilbert Gottfried, with his unforgivable 9/11 and tsunami jokes. Gottfried's strangulated, panicked-sounding yawp restored the honor of vulgar Jews everywhere.

We have to look to the work of Jewish stand-up artists like Gottfried the great, not *Seinfeld* or *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, for genuinely uncomfortable jokes. Louis CK and Dave Attell, milking their sad sack gripes, can lash out at themselves and their audience in startling ways. Sarah Silverman's finest moment, and her most offensive one, was aimed straight at Jewish middle-class respectability. "I was raped by a doctor. Which is,

you know, so bittersweet for a Jewish girl."

It's impossible not to squirm at this. Truly hard-hitting vulgarity isn't easy to come up with, but Silverman did it with her rape joke. May we all have our pieties rocked in such a way, and may the grand tradition of Jewish vulgarity continue until Moshiach arrives. ■

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HOLIDAYS

The Joy of Purim— Alcohol Not Included

The holiday's delights aren't only found at the bottom of a bottle

BY STUART HALPERN

I'm a grape-juice-at-the-Seder kind of guy. It's because alcohol—the taste, the temptation of shedding inhibitions, and the loosening of logic—is just not my thing. I'm not moved by Manischewitz, I sipped my first (and last) beer in my late 20s, and never felt the siren song of schnapps beckoning me from the white disposable tablecloth-bedecked kiddush in shul. Relying on modern-day rabbinic opinions that the four cups of redemption can be brought to you by Kedem, I've been able to picture myself as if I left Egypt without being enslaved by the choice of red or white.

So I've always had a particularly hard time imbibing on Purim.

"One must drink on Purim until that person cannot distinguish between cursing Haman and blessing Mordechai," the Talmud instructs in Tractate Megillah. Alas, the years of experience I've accrued downing the same drinks as my three young children have led me to

believe the road to joyfully confused inebriation on the 14th of Adar is ruefully closed to me, even if I topped things off with a glass of *sparkling* grape juice. Some years I've tried to sneak in a nap relying on the rabbinic suggestion of this lie-down-for-a-few-minutes loophole, since while you're dozing, you can't differentiate between the Purim story's hero and villain. Other years, I've comforted myself with the thought (hope?) that the intention behind the rabbinic edict can be found by finding unabashed bliss amid the holiday's carnivalesque climate, bouncing between homes after Megillah reading with little Luke, Leia, and Boba Fett in tow, handing out *mishloach manot*, giving charity to the poor, and chowing down on the festive meal with family and friends.

The concoction of intoxication and elation, spirits and scrolls, delirium and danger and ultimately delight is, after all, the maze through which the ancient Jews of Shushan navigated. "When Adar enters, joy increases," the rabbis

stated in another part of the Talmud, an adage about which one could not distinguish whether they were being prescriptive or descriptive. That is because the story of Esther offers—amid its poured glasses, politics of power, beauty contests, and military clashes—a perspective on joy that predates today's pundits by millennia.

The actual word for joy, *simcha*, appears eight times in the Megillah's 10 chapters. Its first occurrence is hardly an auspicious one and is rather unexpected. In a tale in which to this point numerous parties have been proffered, a new queen has been found, an assassination attempt foiled, and a plot hatched by Haman to dispose not only of his enemy Mordechai and all his fellow Jews, no one is yet described as being happy. It is only in the book's fifth chapter, after Esther works up the courage to enter Ahasuerus' throne room and invites Haman and the king to a feast, and then to a second feast, that the reader even catches the possibility of joy, but even then, only aspirationally. Zeresh, Haman's wife, offers a suggestion to her bummed-out husband, whose hyper-exclusive series of invitations into the king and queen's private dining room is not enough of an ego boost as long as that pesky Mordechai is refusing to

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bow down to him. “Build gallows 50 cubits high,” she suggests. “And tomorrow morning, recommend to the king that Mordechai be hung on them.” This way, she says, “you will go to the next feast with the king *joyfully*.”

Offering the possibility of peace of mind, victory, and even joy through the murder of his personal foil, Haman and his family undoubtedly spent the evening celebrating like any good Shushanite, offering toasts as they hammered the gallows up high.

One royally disturbed night of sleep later, and Mordechai ends up ceremoniously paraded through the streets instead of pulverized by Haman. And when Esther reveals both her hidden Jewish identity and Haman’s plot to destroy her people to an enraged King Ahasuerus, Haman and his lot end up being the ones hanging from the gallows.

And it is then that joy in the book is made manifest—and multiplies, appearing seven times in the book’s closing three chapters.

“And Mordechai went from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold, and with a robe of fine linen and purple; and the city of Shushan shouted and was *joyful*.”

Letting loose not because of liberties but because their very lives had

been liberated, the Jews of Shushan, and in fact all the city’s inhabitants, are unabashedly happy. Celebrating their salvation, the Jews enjoy “light and joy, happiness, and honor.” Through a series of proclamations ensuring the commemoration of the salvation that had been achieved, the 14th of Adar is declared a “day of feasting and joy.” So is the 15th of the month for the Jews of Shushan.

The joy enshrined in Purim’s practices, the call to cultivate that original outpouring of happiness, couldn’t be more different from that which Zeresh attempted to offer her pouting husband. It is a joy emerging not out of the need to destroy difference but rather of the possibility of delighting in diversity. “Observe the 14th day of the month of Adar,” the Megillah instructs, “and make it a day of joy and feasting, and as a holiday and an occasion for sending gifts to one another.” The same month during which the Jews had faced destruction at Haman’s hands “turned from one of grief and mourning to one of festive joy.” Sending gifts to one another, and charity to the poor, were the ways to observe these “days of feasting and merrymaking.” Sure, drinking will make an appearance at the feasts, but the ethos is less bartending than brotherhood.

In 2020, a team of international scholars set out to uncover the formula for joy. Distilling the findings of these “distinguished and prolific academic experts on the science of happiness” in a 2022 article for *The Atlantic*, former think-tank president turned Harvard social scientist Arthur Brooks listed ways to get happier that “work and are workable.” And they will come as little surprise to those who have ever felt even a little bit sloshed in celebration of Shushan’s salvation.

“Invest in friends and family” was the first recommendation—say, by hosting them for a *seudah*, for example.

“Join a club”—because it fosters a sense of belonging and protects against loneliness. You can’t do much better than delivering *mishloach manot* to welcome new neighbors, reconnect with old friends, and foster a sense of communal solidarity.

“Be physically active.” Anyone who’s ever climbed in and out of a minivan with young kids in tow for half a day

while balancing cardboard boxes stacked with *mishloach manot* can most definitely skip “leg day” at the gym.

“Practice your religion.” As spiritual experiences go, it’s kind of hard to top a wall-rattling, grogger-spinning Megillah reading.

“Act nicely” and “be generous”—say, by giving funds and food to those less fortunate.


“Don’t leave your happiness up to chance,” Brooks concludes. Make sure you proactively cultivate it and “share it with others.”

Mordechai and Esther and our wise ancient rabbis understood what today’s credentialed elite only now discovered. “The Jewish response to trauma is counterintuitive and extraordinary,” wrote Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks in an essay titled “The Therapeutic Joy of Purim.” “You defeat fear by joy. You conquer terror by collective celebration. You prepare a festive meal, invite guests, give gifts to friends.”


What was true in ancient Shushan remains timeless. True joy can be found not in elite invitations to exclusive soirees but in the “my roommate’s best friend is visiting for the day—can she pop by ... and also bring a friend ... and can that friend bring a friend?” *balagan* that is de rigueur at Purim *seudahs*. Deeply felt smiles emerge not from accumulating power but from spotting Spider Man praying at the Western Wall and clown cars blasting “*mi she, mi she, mi she, mi she nichmas Adar*” down Broadway. Serenity is achieved not through dunking on, let alone hanging, our enemies, but through delivering smiles, sustenance, and sure, some spirits, to both those less fortunate and those more familiar—all while carrying your 5-year-old’s plastic light saber. Adar’s monthlong merrymaking, and Purim’s mix of generosity, spirituality, community, and connection offer a cocktail of joy ... even to Purim prudes like me. ■

Excerpted from “Judaism as an Ode to Joy: Happiness in Thought of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks and Beyond,” edited by Erica Brown and Shira Weiss, forthcoming from Palgrave Macmillan.

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 **UPCOMING HOLIDAY**

Purim
The Story of Esther



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The Other Side of Esther

The Hebrew version we read doesn't mention God, and avoids theology. But the ancient Greek versions of the story took a very different approach.

BY A.J. BERKOVITZ

The scroll of Esther is the Hebrew Bible's least religious book. Nonreligious, even: It contains neither prophecy nor prayer; almost every other biblical book does. Absent as well is any theological system of reward and punishment. Its author does not even view as problematic Esther's inevitable violations of Jewish dietary laws. By contrast, the Book of Daniel, another text set in the post-exilic period, begins its story by demonstrating the fealty to the laws of kashrut by Daniel and his three friends; they subsisted on legumes and water instead of consuming the rations and wine provided by King Nebuchadnezzar. And perhaps most problematic of all in the Book of Esther as we read it in Hebrew today, God is never mentioned. Serendipity seems to replace him as the chief architect of Israel's destiny.

Various ancient Greek translations of Esther, however, are far more religious.

As in modern times, many diasporic Jews in the ancient world could barely read, let alone understand, Hebrew. Those living in places dominated by Hellenism—such as Alexandria in Egypt and the Greek isles—would gather in synagogues to read from sacred scripture translated into their Greek vernacular. The story of Esther that these communities heard on Purim vastly differs from the tale as told by our familiar Hebrew text.

The most popular version of the Greek Esther was composed sometime between Sept. 12 in 78 BCE and Sept. 11

in 77 BCE by Lysimachus, an Egyptian Jew living in Jerusalem about 400 years after the events recounted in the story of Purim. Like all translators, Lysimachus interprets his Hebrew source text while rendering it meaningful in Greek. Some of his changes are minor: He includes Haman in the first chapter as one of King Ahasuerus' seven eunuchs (1:10); reduces the number of enemies that the Jews kill on the 13th of Adar from 75,000 to 15,000 (9:16); and explains that jealousy about Mordechai's recent promotion prompted some eunuchs to devise a regicidal plot (2:21).

But Lysimachus also actively fixes perceived theological and religious problems with his Hebrew source text. After Haman determines to kill the Jews, Mordechai pleads with Esther (4:8): "Call upon the Lord, and speak to the king about us, and deliver us from death!" Likewise, it is the "Lord" who prevents Ahasuerus from falling asleep (6:1). And when Mordechai and the Jews instill fear among the nations (8:17), they "were circumcised and became Jews" (Greek text) instead of merely "professing to be Jews" (Hebrew).

Also at stake for Lysimachus was religious practice. Only in the Greek does Mordechai's letter permit the Jews to defend themselves as well as "to live in accordance with their laws in every city" (8:11). And in its Hebrew version, Mordechai commands Esther to conceal her ancestry and Esther obeys, "just as when she was brought up by him." In the Greek version, Mordechai commands Esther "to fear God and to do his ordinances, just as when she was with him. So Esther did not change her way

of life" (2:20). Esther presumably kept some version of kosher.

The Greek Esther also contains six large passages absent from the Hebrew. Scholars call them Additions A through F. Addition B details the text of Haman's edict to vanquish the Jews, and Addition E contains content of Mordechai's decree to rescind it. They add further texture to a familiar tale. Additions C and D, located between Esther's request that the Jews of Susa fast (4:17) and her audience with Ahasuerus (5:3), introduce religion into the narrative. Addition C describes the prayers with which Mordechai and Esther beseech God. And Addition D claims that Esther angered Ahasuerus when she approached him. That is, until God changed the king's mood.

The remaining two Additions introduce and conclude the story as well as radically reframe it into a drama about prophecy and fulfillment. Addition A contains two parts. In the first, Mordechai receives a vision: Two dragons clash (yes, Jews also do dragons!), nations prepare for war against the righteous, and through prayer the lowly are exalted. In the second, Mordechai enters the king's service by foiling a plot on the monarch's life. But in turn, he earns the scorn of Haman, who was fond of the conspirators. In Addition F, Mordechai finally understands and explains the vision he received in Addition A. He also provides a new etymological origin for the word and holiday Purim (i.e., lots). The world exists as two lots: Israel and the Nations. When the time came for God to decide between the two, he "remembered his people and vindicated his own inheritance." The Addition concludes by telling us about Lysimachus.

Ultimately, the Greek Esther transforms a godless Hebrew narrative into a story of divine providence and redemption—a text worthy of the biblical canon. So why not follow the example of our Greek-speaking ancestors? How about we translate the Greek version and read it this Purim in place of our current Hebrew text?

Perhaps we really need the Hebraic Esther. Granted, this version of the story sidelines religious beliefs, precepts, and practices. But it is animated by

something equally (if not more) fundamental: Jewish peoplehood and identity, the not-necessarily-religious glue that binds Jews together. Although Mordechai hails from the tribe of Benjamin, the narrative throughout calls him the “Jew” (*yehudi*). Esther ascends to the throne—and is almost deposed from it—by concealing her Jewish identity (2:19-20). And it is ultimately her self-revelation as a Jew that saves the day (7:4), not some preordained prophecy or belief-fueled *deus ex machina*. Haman, likewise, acts against the Jews as people. Although incensed by a personal affront, he seeks to eradicate all the Jews, “Mordechai’s nation” (3:6) who in his estimation commit treason “by not keeping the king’s laws” (3:8). Haman’s downfall, as well, is predicated on the fact that he acted against the Jews as a family. His wife, Zeresh, said

it best: “If Mordechai, before whom your downfall has begun, is of the Jewish people (lit. from the seed [*zerah*] of the Jews [*yehudim*]), you will not prevail against him, but will surely fall before him” (6:13).

It is this version of the Esther story that best aids its modern readers in thinking about the current variant of the antisemitism that infects the minds of otherwise rational humans. Judaism’s contemporary detractors rarely challenge the validity of Moses’ laws; they can tolerate—and even laud—Judaism as a religious system constituted by a series of otherworldly beliefs and ritual practices. What they cannot brook is the Jewish spirit, Judaism as an identity constituted by a cohesive family in which each member cares about and feels deeply for one another, “one nation spread out among

the nations” (3:8). Consequently, they fail to fathom why many Jews view as facile any boundary that segregates antisemitism from anti-Zionism. They cannot comprehend Judaism’s long history that includes thousands of years of being oppressed for being identified as a Jew. And they cannot acknowledge the vast geographic and ethnic diversity within the Jewish nation, that the skin tone of the modern Jew ranges well beyond various shades of white. Ultimately, the modern Haman wishes to whittle away at Judaism until all that remains is a religious husk devoid of the animating force provided by the particularistic identity of peoplehood. But Jews know better. And the Hebrew Esther is their story. ■

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COMMUNITY

Hyper-Emancipation

The rise and decline of Reform and Conservative Judaism

BY DANNY SCHIFF

The arrival of emancipation in the 19th century was, unquestionably, a transformative moment in Jewish history. As Professor Robert Seltzer observed, emancipation prompted a “drastic and far-reaching” reconceptualization of Jewish life that led to the “destruction of the old corporate status of Jewry” and “the end of the quasi-political functions of the *kehillot*.” Yet despite these profound changes, the ostracization of Jews persisted. Quotas and institutional roadblocks remained palpable realities. Indeed, the sheer extent of Jewish social exclusion illustrates something crucial about the nature of emancipation up until the late 20th century: It was only

partial. To be sure, a revolution had taken place in the 19th century: Jews had achieved citizenship, were full economic participants, had non-Jewish friends, attended prestigious institutions, and some attained positions of communal prominence. Any societal obstacles that remained for Jews were rarely highlighted, so Jews lived with the sense that they had been accepted; and, compared with the long centuries of seclusion, modernity unquestionably provided expanded freedoms, commercial opportunities, and possibilities for social interaction.

Yet it is now apparent that this first stage of emancipation was anything but complete. Insofar as European emancipation required a Jew to become a Christian to be fully accepted,

a largely insurmountable hurdle to full emancipation remained in place. Even when that obstruction disappeared, the exclusion from colleges, professions, institutions, and clubs that remained—both in Europe and the U.S.—restricted emancipation. Jews continued to lack the type of complete social penetration that might have been expected had emancipation been allowed to reach its ultimate logical conclusion.

During this period of “partial emancipation,” Jews not only worked hard to build institutions to serve Jewish needs, they also created social structures that would allow young Jews to meet and marry. Since, during the first half of the 20th century, Jews and gentiles had little interest in marrying each other, a Jew who wanted to marry needed to meet other Jews. Encountering other Jews occurred primarily at synagogues, youth organizations, and other communal bodies that promoted such interactions. The desire to marry essentially compelled Jews to look inward, to depend on their own communal institutions, and to socialize within a Jewish context. The ghetto walls might have fallen, but invisible barriers remained. Given that Jews were still

required to form their principal social contacts within the Jewish community, Jewish emancipation was still a “work in progress.” Jews were free, yet not wholly accepted; liberated, but not totally admitted. So long as exclusion remained a practical problem with which Jews had to grapple, Jews were not truly able to move in society with the same range of options as those that existed for non-Jews. Hence, insofar as the goal of emancipation was to make Jewish identity into a wholly “private commitment”—a choice of the individual, without external pressures or social dictates—it was unfinished.

It follows that the effective ending of most all social exclusion that took place between 1960 and 1980 represented a notable opening. From that point on, no longer were affiliations with Jewishness or with the Jewish community predicated upon a reality of limited alternatives. Jews became fully free, without external constraints on their choices to remain within the Jewish fold or to leave. The outcome that emancipation had originally portended, but had never wholly delivered, had arrived.

The response of a vast number of Jews to this new reality was unambiguous: Given that the intermarriage rate was no more than 7% prior to 1960 but was in the vicinity of 40%—and rising quickly—in the 1980s, it is clear that emancipation and assimilation were linked. Many Jews who intermarried did not intend to abandon Judaism; some hoped to raise Jewish children and stay connected. Given the nature of intermarriage, however, this resolve often remained an aspiration. Despite the fact that it became increasingly plain that intermarriage was a likely pathway to assimilation, Jews continued to marry non-Jews in ever greater numbers.

It would be a mistake, however, to limit consideration of assimilation to the phenomenon of intermarriage. Intermarriage is, after all, an indicator of a broader phenomenon. The 2020 Pew study found that around one quarter of U.S. Jews are Jews of “no religion,” meaning that they have a Jewish parent or were raised Jewish, but do not identify Judaism as their religion, regarding themselves instead as cultural or ethnic

“The embrace of the trappings of Jewish culture by the wider society has caused Jews to feel more accepted in America, not more attached to Judaism or the Jewish community.”

Jews. Tellingly, the report observes that “Jews by religion are far more likely than Jews of no religion to say that being Jewish is very important to them (55% vs. 7%); 55% of Jews of no religion say being Jewish is of little importance to them.” These numbers demonstrate that in an environment where the barriers to leaving Jewish life are virtually non-existent, a large number of American Jews are prone to assimilate.

There seems to be little prospect that trends in the surrounding society will turn in a direction that will make assimilation less likely. Indeed, in the 21st century, it is possible to assert that Jews have gone beyond full acceptance. Various cultural signs suggest that Jews and Jewish folkways are “trendy” in American culture. Thus, Jon Stewart, one of America’s most watched early-21st-century comedians, liberally inserted Jewish references into his daily delivery of mock news with the reasonable expectation that they would be widely appreciated. Some non-Jews, not content with merely attending bar and bat mitzvah observances for their Jewish friends, adopted such celebrations for themselves. And President Obama, enthusiastic to practice a quintessential Jewish tradition, introduced an annual Seder ritual to the White House. Indeed, a 2014 study showed that, of all the religious

groups in the U.S., Americans felt most warmly toward Jews. When the study was repeated in 2017 and again in 2019, it came up with the same result: Jews continued to receive the “warmest ratings.” In a brief three decades, Jews went from being unwelcome at the country club to drinking four cups of wine in the home of the leader of the free world. Perhaps not since Joseph in Egypt rose from being a foreign prisoner to a national leader had Jews leaped in standing so far, so fast.

The embrace of the trappings of Jewish culture by the wider society has caused Jews to feel more accepted in America, not more attached to Judaism or the Jewish community. It is, consequently, reasonable to assert that the 21st century has become a period of what might be termed “hyper-emancipation.” In the U.S., home to more than 70% of the Jewish diaspora, not only have the barriers to full Jewish participation been removed, but the wider society now exerts a magnetic attraction upon Jews to move beyond the Jewish orbit. This age of hyper-emancipation that began post-1980 represents a break with the Jewish past almost as significant as the initial move toward partial emancipation two centuries ago.

In the 19th century, even though full acceptance remained a distant prospect, the changes brought about by emancipation were significant. Jews were offered citizenship in the emerging nation states of modernity, provided that they dissolved their autonomous communal existence in which Jewish law held sway. For the most part, it was an offer they could not refuse. But accepting the bargain meant that Judaism needed to adapt to a new environment and, in the process, had to be remade. It could no longer be the lived expression of a separate nation with its own laws, customs, and practices. Becoming a nation within a nation was not an option. The solution for Judaism was, in short order, to become a religion. Judaism effectively became “Christianized,” with its parameters and its relationship with the state modeled on those of the church.

Hence, virtually simultaneously, Judaism was recast as a religion, and

Jews became citizens of nation-states with broader societal access than they had experienced in centuries. The vast majority who remained Jews sought to maximize the gains of citizenship by demonstrating that they could be loyal, productive citizens and that their reformulated Judaism was ready for smooth incorporation into mass society, no longer encumbered by its “shtetl” past. Not only did Judaism have to become a religion, it had to become the type of religion that was conducive to the zeitgeist of the modern state.

Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Judaism represent the three major 19th-century solutions to making Judaism function on religious terms within the non-Jewish states of modernity. There would, of course, be other responses. Some groups attempted to enshrine Judaism within the framework of cultural or benevolent organizations. Some attempted to resist the advances of the state, preferring to continue a cloistered existence on the margins of society, to the extent that it was possible. Zionists proposed an altogether different solution: to recreate an autonomous Jewish polity within a Jewish state.

From a sociological perspective, Reform and Conservative Judaism began as attempts to forestall assimilation while embracing the ethos of modernity. To be sure, the two movements approached these goals with considerably different solutions: The Reform movement made the individual the arbiter of Jewish practice. The Conservative movement, by contrast, committed itself to halakhah and effected its changes through the mechanism of rabbinic decisions. Both movements emphasized that “visionary change” was necessary to adapt Judaism to modern times. Orthodoxy took a different path. Having come into being in reaction to the modernizing movements, Orthodoxy distinguished itself by its determination to offer an “orthodox” form of traditional Judaism, that was to some extent impervious to the currents of modernity, but still operated within the new “religionized” structures necessitated by the nation-state.

Reform and Conservative Judaism were both products of Western Europe, where they established solid foundations.

But their real success came in post-war America. Reform Judaism had been a rising force in 19th-century American Jewish life. However, between 1880 and 1924, some 2 million Jews from Russia and Eastern Europe, most of them Orthodox, fled persecution and made their way to America. As a result, in the first decades of the 20th century, despite the growth of Reform and Conservative Judaism, Orthodoxy was the largest movement in American Jewish life. That reality changed swiftly. By the middle of the 20th century, a new generation, largely born in America, turned away from Orthodoxy, associating it with an old world that lay in ruins. Orthodoxy seemed less well suited to the freedoms of America and the spirit of rebirth and renewal that animated post-Holocaust American Jewry: In the words of Professor Rodney Stark, “They had, after all, immigrated not only to escape poverty and anti-Semitism but in pursuit of ‘modernity.’”

Not surprisingly, the most popular destination for those leaving Orthodoxy was the Conservative movement, where the philosophy and aesthetics were more familiar than those of the Reform movement. The historian Jonathan Sarna paints the picture of what happened: Between 1945 and 1965, the Conservative movement added 450 new congregations, “more than the number of new Reform and Orthodox synagogues combined.” While the Reform movement was not in first place, it too made strides. From the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s, the number of Reform congregations doubled, and the number of affiliated families tripled. By the late 1950s, the synagogue affiliation rate reached 60%, “a figure never exceeded.” America was moving to the suburbs, and Jewish life was going through a renaissance: “Between 1945 and 1965, well over 1,000 synagogues and temples were built or rebuilt.” Secularism was not in vogue, belonging to a congregation was fashionable, a “baby boom” of young Jews needed to be educated in new synagogue education buildings, and post-Holocaust theological inquiry was popular. By 1970, a national survey reported that 42% of Jews identified as Conservative, 33% as Reform, and 11% as Orthodox. As noted earlier, this level of non-Orthodox vigor

lasted till somewhere around 1990, by which time the Reform movement at 38% had overtaken the Conservative movement at 35%, with Orthodoxy at a low of 7%. It is clear that by the third quarter of the 20th century, the Reform and Conservative movements had become the foremost hubs of Jewish life in the U.S., the world’s largest Jewish community.

In truth, though, it is unlikely that the strength of non-Orthodox Judaism between 1950 and 1990 was due to widespread enthusiasm for the ideological core of what the movements offered. Ironically, even as Reform and Conservative Judaism were ascending, there was “every indication” that their adherents were “actually becoming more lax in their religious practice.” It was not “belief, synagogue attendance, [or] the regular practice of Jewish rituals” that best described the reasons why Jews built, buttressed, and belonged to non-Orthodox institutions. Rather, it was because the reality of exclusion, or perceived exclusion, left little choice.

It was in the synagogues—the Conservative and Reform synagogues—that Jews found the education that would lead to bar mitzvah and where youth groups would open the door to marriage partners. The more people that joined synagogues, the more magnetic the synagogues became as places where social and business connections were forged. This was particularly true in the mushrooming suburbs and in the newer urban communities, where the non-Orthodox synagogue was often the only outpost of Judaism and regularly served as a substitute for far-distant family ties. Jewish cultural organizations were not nearly as adept at filling these roles. By the time Jewish exclusion began to evaporate, the synagogue building boom was in full swing, and non-Orthodox synagogues were simply “the place to be.”



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Momentum, and long-embedded habits, ensured that robust non-Orthodox identification continued for some time even after the social ostracizing of Jews had diminished. Yet it cannot be an accident that the noticeable decline of Conservative and Reform Judaism began little more than a decade after Jewish exclusion had effectively come to an end.

A generation later, with the non-Orthodox proportion of the American Jewish pie shrinking, it is worth reflecting on what happened. Looking back, it seems clear that the manifold 20th-century successes of the Conservative and Reform movements ought to be considered within the reality of the partial emancipation that prevailed when the two movements became ascendant. The rise of the non-Orthodox movements essentially took place behind a firewall of social separation and was fueled by the need to build families and communities in multiple locations. Hundreds of thousands of Jews belonged to these movements more by default than by devotion, such that their ongoing exposure to the movements did not reliably result in durable commitments to the practices or the institutions of Conservative or Reform Judaism—or even to the importance of transmitting Judaism itself.

In 1990, with 73% of American Jews identifying as Reform or Conservative, only 10% of American Jews attended synagogue weekly, only 12% reported that they kept kosher, and only 19% “usually” lit candles on Friday night. Given that some of the Jews who engaged in these practices must have been Orthodox, these were plain indicators that the religious eagerness of Conservative and Reform Jews was low. It is hard to imagine that intermarriage rates would have risen as steeply or that the pace of movement contraction would have been as pronounced had there been a robust dedication to the positions of the movements. After all, both movements continued to express plain opposition to intermarriage throughout the last quarter of the 20th century. Yet hundreds of thousands of Reform and Conservative Jews paid no heed. The same held true for fidelity to ideology: Many Jews who described themselves

as Conservative did not have a systematic approach to Judaism that might be described as halakhic, and few Reform Jews were “committed to the ongoing study of the whole array of mitzvot” or “to the fulfillment of those mitzvot that spoke to them.” In short, while describing themselves as Reform or Conservative, a considerable proportion was rarely interested in more than a glancing involvement with movement practices or philosophies. Small wonder, then, that when hyper-emancipation arrived, many would detach themselves from these affiliations. While non-Orthodox Judaism had thrived behind a barrier of exclusion that impeded assimilation, there was insufficient loyalty to stop the outflow once the levee was breached. As Stark put it, a large number of American Jews had “lost all religious basis for sustaining a distinctive identity, and the protective encapsulation once provided by their Jewishness collapsed.”

It is easy to level blame at the Conservative and Reform movements themselves for their contraction. Voices from within Orthodoxy sometimes opine that American Jewry would not have experienced such sustained assimilation were it not for the positions taken by the “compromising” non-Orthodox movements. This claim has little credibility. It assumes that the main reason why Orthodoxy fell from its peak in the first half of the 20th century was because of the alluring siren song of non-Orthodox Judaism, and that if Orthodoxy had been the sole option the situation would have been healthier. In reality, had Orthodoxy been the sole option available, a more moderate alternative would have been invented; many Jews living in free societies would not have constrained themselves within traditional boundaries. It is certainly possible that, for some, identifying with a non-Orthodox approach made abandoning Judaism an easier step. It is equally possible that, for others, being non-Orthodox kept them involved in Jewish life in a way that otherwise would not have been a consideration.

There is yet another criticism that is sometimes advanced. According to this viewpoint, the Conservative and Reform movements are in decline principally because they did not do enough to

be accommodating to the needs of those who sought intermarriage; if only they had been more responsive, the argument maintains, many more might have remained connected to their Jewishness. It is, of course, impossible to know what might have happened, but what did happen in response to every act of amelioration and accommodation is clear: The intermarriage rate never plateaued but continued to rise no matter what was attempted. The Reform movement introduced patrilineal descent and an outreach program in the 1980s, and an ever greater number of Reform rabbis moved to officiate at intermarriages. The Conservative movement introduced a *keruv* (drawing close) program and made sure that every social barrier to acceptance of the intermarried melted away. In the final analysis, none of it mattered. The intermarriage rate climbed ever higher, no matter what the movements did. Hyper-emancipation offered extensive possibilities for connecting beyond the Jewish milieu and that reality proved far more powerful than the decisions of non-Orthodox rabbis.

Though the 21st century has been marked by a discernible uptick in antisemitism, the hyper-emancipation thesis remains intact. Societal doors continue to be almost fully open to Jews in a way that was not the case a century earlier. Just as the Reform and Conservative movements flourished within the conditions of partial emancipation, they are plainly now struggling in a world of hyper-emancipation where Jews have virtually unrestricted public opportunities. It was not, however, just the place of Jews in the broader society that was evolving in the last decades of the 20th century. The world of ideas and the needs of Jews were also shifting. In many ways, those transitions would prove to be even more formidable for the movements of modernity. ■

Excerpted (and slightly modified) from “Judaism in a Digital Age: An Ancient Tradition Confronts a Transformative Era,” recently published by Palgrave Macmillan (Cham: 2023).

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Queen Esther's Toast

BY JOAN NATHAN

INGREDIENTS

- ½ cup (1 stick) unsalted butter**
- ¾ cup dark brown sugar**
- 2 tablespoons maple or corn syrup**
- 4 bananas**
- 6 1½-inch-thick even-size slices of bread, like challah or brioche**
- 1½ cups half-and-half**
- 6 large eggs**
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract**
- 1 tablespoon orange zest**
- 4 teaspoons confectioners' sugar, for garnish**
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon, to garnish**

PREPARATION

Step 1

Melt the butter, brown sugar, and maple or corn syrup in a saucepan, stirring to break up the brown sugar. Bring to a boil and continue to cook for 2 minutes without stirring. Then coat the bottom of a 9-by-13-inch pan with this syrup and cool.

Step 2

Cut the bananas in half-inch-thick circles. Scatter the fruit over the syrup in the pan.

Step 3

Trim the crust from the bread if you wish to make the slices uniform (I don't usually bother) and arrange the bread over the fruit.

Step 4

Blend together the half-and-half, eggs, vanilla, and orange zest in a large mixing bowl and carefully pour the mixture over the bread in the pan, making sure that all the bread is well soaked. You might have to use a spatula to pat the bread down or spoon some of the egg mixture over the pieces. Refrigerate overnight.

Step 5

When ready to bake, preheat the oven to 350 degrees and remove the casserole from the refrigerator. Bake for 30-40 minutes or until golden brown on top. Let cool 10 minutes before serving. Run a knife around the inside of the pan. Invert a platter over the baking dish and carefully flip the pan over onto it. There will be a lovely fruit pattern on top. Sprinkle with confectioners' sugar, cut into portions, and serve immediately.

Yield: 8 to 10 servings

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