

# THE TAB

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ARTS & LETTERS

## Could Roosevelt Have Saved Millions?

Ken Burns and others exaggerate American antisemitism—and U.S. responsibility for the Holocaust

BY MARJORIE PERLOFF

**T**he *U.S. and the Holocaust*, the PBS documentary series directed by Ken Burns, Lynn Novick, and Sarah Botstein, has received much attention and largely positive reviews since its first showing in September 2022. Now, in an essay for the *New York Review of Books* called “The Millions We Failed to Save” (June 22, 2023), Ruth Franklin follows and enlarges upon the material in the film, arguing, as did the Burns team, that the Roosevelt administration failed to do what was necessary—and, she believes, possible—to save the European Jews who were to perish in the death camps of World War II. Her Exhibit A is the well-known family of Anne Frank, all of whom, except Anne’s father, Otto, who lived to tell her story, died at Belsen. It’s a compelling narrative—and the Burns film has some unforgettable footage of pro-Nazi activities in America—but I think it is also curiously misleading. As myself a Jewish refugee from the Nazis—now, at 91, one of a dying breed—let me attempt some clarification.

First and foremost, the refugee problem was not just a matter of getting *into the U.S.*, as Franklin and Burns would

have it, but of getting *out of* Austria (or Germany or the Netherlands, etc.). In 1933, when Hitler came to power in Germany, the Nazis were at first eager to have as many Jews leave as possible. In 1934 or ’35, the Frank family could have obtained a visa to the U.S., especially with the sponsorship of the wealthy and prominent Nathan Straus Jr. But the Catch-22, even in these early years, is that no one was allowed to take money or material goods out of Germany or the nations it controlled. Whatever his reason—America probably seemed too remote, too alien, or perhaps he had hopes of recovering his business—Otto Frank took his family to the Netherlands, which soon fell into German hands. By July 1941, Nazi Germany ordered U.S. consulates in all Nazi-occupied territories to close. After this, until the end of the war in 1945, legal immigration—not just to the U.S. but to any country—was all but impossible. The Otto Frank case is thus something of a red herring.

I was 6 1/2 when I left Vienna on March 13, 1938. I was one of the lucky ones. But it wasn’t only luck. In Vienna, my paternal grandfather had had the foresight to put a little money into a Swiss bank account. My family of four, together with my father’s sister and her

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BY BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY

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BY CAROLE HOOVEN

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BY VAL VINOKUR

### Hey, I'm Your Cousin

Tracking the descendants of America's early Sephardic elite, from WASP blue bloods to the great-great-grandchildren of slaves

BY MICHAEL HOBERMAN



family, as well as Grandfather Mintz—nine people in all—left secretly a day after the Nazi Anschluss of March 12. By March 13, the only border still open was the Swiss one: The Hungarian border had just shut down. We left on the night train to Zurich with four suitcases, leaving behind an apartment full of furniture, books, clothing, family photographs—everything. We never saw any of it again. At the Innsbruck border, we were taken off the train and the adults body-searched; all the cash at hand was confiscated.

Once in Zurich, application for a visa could begin, and it is true, as Franklin tells it, that we had to have a sponsor, in our case a second cousin from Mannheim, who had left Germany a few years earlier. The wait for the visa took about three months: We lived frugally in a little pensione and then in Rome with my aunt Susi, who

had married an Italian. We sailed on the Veendam to Hoboken in August 1938. The scariest part, as I remember it, was the cross country train ride from Rome to Rotterdam. At every border crossing, we had to get off the train and go to the police station to get a permit to continue. At any point, we might have been sent back to Vienna.

Within the next month or two, almost all my parents' friends and our relatives made it out of Vienna because they applied for visas immediately. True, these refugees were middle class, primarily from the professional classes—economists, art historians, psychoanalysts—including our family doctor, Otto Gersuny, who later settled in Queens but came all the way to Riverdale to treat us. But most were by no means wealthy and had to scramble to get by in the New World.

Even for this subset of refugees, getting out of Austria took much ingenuity. My other grandfather, Richard Schuller, a leading Austrian civil servant and diplomat for 30 years, had originally stayed behind, hoping to recuperate some of his lifelong pension which was his only income. He was 70. Within a few months of the Anschluss, the opposite happened: The Nazis were about to seize his apartment as well as his pension and all other assets. Grandfather escaped, *Sound of Music* style, hiking over the Alps into Italy—a harrowing trip! The English then offered him a short-term visa, but after 1939, he would have been interned in a camp, as were all “enemy aliens.” Instead, a great thing happened. Alvin Johnson, the political scientist from Nebraska, who became the president of the New School in Manhattan, founded the University in Exile and brought over, on academic visas, hundreds of professors and intellectuals, my grandfather, an economist, included. He taught at the New School till 1947 as did the philosophers Felix Kaufmann and Alfred Schütz. Hannah Arendt was also a colleague.

Certainly, Alvin Johnson deserves to be remembered, along with Varian Fry, whom Franklin writes about, as a savior of the Jews. Once war began, however, the Germans and Austrians no longer permitted Jews to leave. Systematic mass

deportations from Vienna, as elsewhere in greater Germany, began in October 1941. Of the 190,000 Jews who were living in Vienna in 1938, about 35,000, a little over one-fifth, were still there in 1941. Most of these were soon deported from Vienna to ghettos in Eastern Europe. Those sent to, say, Minsk and Riga were shot by detachments of the *Einsatzgruppen* shortly after arrival. Those left behind were doomed. Over 15,000 Austrian Jews were deported to Theresienstadt (the Austrian concentration camp), and from there to Auschwitz or Dachau. In France the port of entry was Drancy, right outside Paris. The poet Max Jacob, once Picasso's best friend, died in Drancy and Georges Perec's parents were imprisoned there.

Ken Burns rightly exposes the virulent antisemitism of the Charles Lindbergh/Father Coughlin faction of the American 1930s. Burns provides heartbreaking footage of the turning back, in the Cuban harbor, of the refugee ship *Sz. Louis*, followed by the U.S. refusal to allow the ship into our own waters. Surely Roosevelt erred in permitting someone like the proto-fascist Breckinridge Long to become assistant secretary in the State Department; even worse was the appointment of Joseph Kennedy, an avowed Nazi sympathizer, who fully expected—and hoped—Germany to win the war, to the post of ambassador to Britain. But Roosevelt was operating in a post-Depression isolationist USA where the American Jews themselves, the children of the immigrants of the early 1900s, did little. The prominent and largely Jewish *Partisan Review* group, for example, actively opposed all talk of going to war with Germany, this being in their estimate, just another war between two capitalist nations. It took the cynical Hitler-Stalin nonaggression pact of 1939 to change their minds.

In this climate, it is not clear to me what Roosevelt could have done. True, the 27,370 visas made available to German nationals each year between 1939 and 1941 were not sufficient: Perhaps a more zealous president could have done more, but once war broke out, his hands were, in any case, tied. Thus Roosevelt's policy was to win the war as quickly as possible so as to rescue its victims as

soon as possible. It has been suggested that we could have bombed the train tracks or trains that took the Jews to the camps, but it's not clear how many lives this would have really saved in the end. Not to mention that the camps in question were almost all in the East, and our armed forces were nowhere near them: It was the Russian zone.

I find shocking, in any case, the argument, made both by Burns and by Franklin, that, just as the Roosevelt administration didn't do enough to save the Jews, so we are not doing enough now to help the immigrants on our Southern border. The Holocaust, in Burns' scheme of things, was not unique: It must be understood as one of many holocausts. "The similarities between the persecution of Jews during the Holocaust," writes Franklin, "and the contemporary treatment of undocumented immigrants in the United States are discomfiting."

Discomfiting indeed but for whom? The Jews of Europe were not just oppressed or persecuted: They were systematically and openly murdered, not for anything they said or *did*—on the contrary, many tried to please their new would-be masters—but simply because

their ethnicity of origin was Jewish. Period. And bear in mind that although Germany lost the war, Hitler was largely successful in his aim of getting rid of Europe's Jews. In most of Europe today, Jews are almost extinct. In Germany, for example, the population is .03% Jewish as compared to 5.8% Muslim. Indeed, in today's Europe, antisemitism flourishes without the actual presence of any Jews.

Let me end on a personal note. Lest readers and Ken Burns' viewers conclude that antisemitic conduct à la Father Coughlin was the norm in pre-war and wartime America, I will describe my own experience. At P.S. 7 in the Bronx, in what was a lower-middle-class neighborhood consisting primarily of Irish and Italian Americans, I was treated with kindness and generosity by teachers and students alike. True, my classmates wondered why I didn't wear wooden shoes like the little Dutch girls in their picture books, but in my second-grade class, I quickly made friends and learned English overnight. For years, my family was poor: My father, who, sadly enough, could not practice law (his profession) in America,

became a CPA within a year and in his first job made \$27 a week—about \$340 in today's currency. We thought that was pretty good for a recently arrived refugee. My mother, later a professor of economics at Columbia, spent her days cleaning, cooking, and doing laundry: There were no washing machines in those days, no dishwashers.

As for Roosevelt, for all his flaws (my parents took him to be much too pro-Stalin!), he was, in these war years, a family hero. It was the last time any president was to qualify for that role in my parents' minds. Incidentally, Joseph Kennedy's son John, the future president, spent the summer of 1937, when he was a 20-year-old Harvard student, touring Germany and reported to his family that Hitler must be doing something right because the country seemed so orderly, so disciplined and prosperous. The rest is history—or should I say, the history of the 20th century from the Russian Revolution through the two world wars—a subject all but untaught in our schools today. ■

*This article was originally published on June 22, 2023.*

ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

# Biden's Ties That Bind

How the U.S. is working to constrain Israel before announcing its new Iran deal

BY MICHAEL DORAN

Last November, after 22 months of failed negotiations with the Iranians, President Joe Biden said the Iran nuclear deal was "dead." In recent weeks, however, he has revived discussions with Tehran in a bid, reportedly, "to reduce tensions." But that phrase hides more than it reveals. While Biden and his team claim to be working to halt the advance of the Iranian nuclear weapons

program, their unstated goal is to constrain Israel, permanently.

Upon assuming office in 2021, Biden returned to the Middle East strategy originally charted by President Barack Obama, whose North Star was an accommodation with Iran. While Obama's strategy represented an ambitious, regionwide realignment of American policy, he packaged it as a narrow arms control agreement. In truth, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

(JCPOA), as the nuclear deal is officially known, did not live up to its billing as a foolproof barrier blocking all of Iran's pathways to a bomb. But it did succeed in moving the controversy over Iran's nuclear weapons program off to one side, so that Obama and his team could open direct channels to Tehran, which, they believed, would help stabilize the Middle East.

Obama's attempt to skirt the nuclear issue rather than solve it was key to the entire nature and structure of the JCPOA. The foundation for that agreement was set in 2013, at the beginning of Obama's second term, when the U.S. president buckled to Iran's demand that the United States recognize its self-proclaimed "right" to enrich uranium. At one stroke, Obama's concession removed the most formidable barrier preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapon—namely, American political will.

In its public statements, the Obama administration hid the crucial role of its concession in kickstarting the negotiations, presenting its Iran diplomacy instead as the result of the election of Hassan Rouhani, the Iranian president who took office in August 2013. With the help of an “echo chamber,” to borrow the phrase of Ben Rhodes, Obama’s deputy national security adviser for strategic communications, Obama and his team created the impression that a change of heart in Tehran (from an election, no less) had produced a new dawn in relations between the West and Iran. Moreover, by depicting the negotiations as a peace train driven by the twin conductors, Obama and Rouhani, they placed an insurmountable political obstacle before an Israeli attack on Iran. They checkmated, that is, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Officials in the Obama administration openly gloated over the victory. In 2014, once the negotiations for the JCPOA were well underway and the momentum toward a deal was unstoppable, the officials spun cartwheels in *The Atlantic*, their mouthpiece. Under cover of anonymity, one official famously called Netanyahu “chickenshit.” Embroidering on the theme, another said, “It’s too late for [Netanyahu] to do anything. Two, three years ago, this was a possibility. But ultimately, he couldn’t bring himself to pull the trigger. It was a combination of our pressure and his own unwillingness to do anything dramatic. Now it’s too late.”

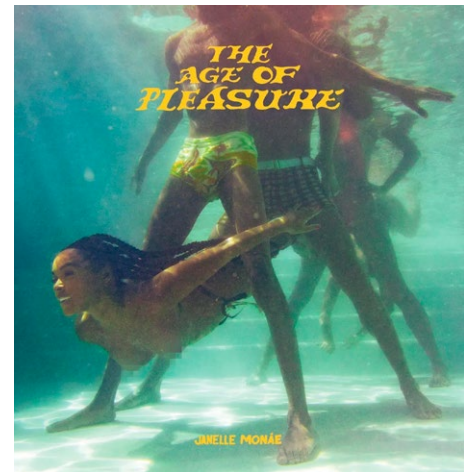
Indeed, we now know that Obama and his team worked in parallel or together with sympathetic Israeli officials to block Netanyahu from launching an Israeli strike in the period 2009-12. Biden, who staffed his Middle East team exclusively with alumni from the Obama administration, is working today directly from Obama’s playbook. As Netanyahu and his advisers mull anew a unilateral strike, the Biden team is restarting the peace train by reviving the “dead” negotiations with Tehran. At the same time, it is applying pressure inside the Israeli political and security structure. A main goal of Biden’s policy toward Israel today is to create a political atmosphere that will encourage Israeli officials and military officers to identify

with Washington rather than with the country’s elected leadership and geo-strategic interests.

By now, the depth of the Democratic Party’s commitment to Obama’s regional strategy and tactics should be obvious. Almost two years ago, Biden officials defended their supine policy toward Iran by suggesting that it was a temporary posture, that their patience with Tehran was running thin, and that, if results weren’t forthcoming, a tougher policy would result. “We are committed to diplomacy, but this process cannot go on indefinitely,” Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in July of 2021. “Time is running short” for Iran, he said one month later. “If [Iran] doesn’t want to get back into the deal, if it continues to do what it appears to be doing now, which is to drag its feet at the nuclear diplomatic table and accelerate its pace when it comes to its nuclear program, if that’s the path it chooses, we’ll have to respond accordingly,” he said a month after that.

If patience is a virtue, Blinken is a saint. Since those expressions of flagging patience, the Islamic Republic has, to name just a few developments, brutally suppressed the worst protests in its history, advanced its nuclear weapons program considerably, pursued plots to murder former American officials on American soil, and developed a defense industrial cooperation with the Russian military—all while refusing to accept the generous terms for renewing a nuclear deal offered by Washington. None of these developments managed to try the patience of the Biden administration.

Why? Domestic political calculations partly explain Biden’s indulgence of Iran’s malignant behavior. Imagine how the progressives, the most dynamic element in the Democratic Party, would respond if Biden were to stand before them and admit, tacitly or explicitly, that President Donald Trump got it right: There is no purely diplomatic means to convince Iran to give up its nuclear program. “Maximum pressure” is the only rational way to deal with Tehran. The rebellion would be fierce and immediate. Progressives believe, as an article of blind faith, that a diplomatic path to better relations with Tehran



## Album of the Week

### Janelle Monáe, *The Age of Pleasure*

Janelle Monáe’s new album, *The Age of Pleasure*, is both a reinvention and a call to—well, it’s too cool and relaxed to say it’s a call to arms. As is the responsibility of every generation of horny people, Monáe is remaking pleasure in her own image.

Monáe first exploded into indie music circles during the nebulous late-aughts period, presenting a fully formed sci-fi world with *Metropolis* and then *The ArchAndroid*. Her character, Cindi Mayweather, was an android who found herself falling in love with a human, a crime for which she is on the run.

Although *The Age of Pleasure* starts off with Monáe saying “I’m not the same” over and over again, there’s a clear sense of continuity between the Monáe of today and Cindi Mayweather. The difference is that now she doesn’t have to run. Instead, as the opening track makes clear, she “floats.”

In all, Monáe has a simple reminder packaged in a vital album. *Pleasure* feels good, and can sound even better.

—David Meir Grossman



exists. They resent Israel, its American supporters, and any policy designed to assist it.

But domestic politics is not the whole story. Among the American national security elite, there exists an entrenched school of thought supporting the Iran realignment, but which does not advertise its existence too loudly, for fear of running afoul of the pro-Israel community. That school of thought rests on five core convictions. First, the Middle East no longer matters as much to the United States as it once did. Second, America's allies, Israel and Saudi Arabia, have forced the United States, historically, to take a tougher stance on Iran than is strictly necessary on the basis of a cold calculation of the American interest. Third, a major Israeli-Iranian conflict risks sucking the United States into a costly and unnecessary war with Iran. Fourth, offensive countermeasures, in the form of punitive military strikes or aggressive economic sanctions such as those imposed by the Trump administration, are also a slippery slope to war. Fifth, and most importantly, a war to stop Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon is a worse outcome than simply containing a nuclear-armed Iran, just as North Korea, Pakistan, and other nuclear-armed states have been more or less successfully contained.

These convictions lead inexorably to the conclusion, always unstated, that Israel's hostility to Iran is a threat to the national security of the United States. They turn managing Israel, suppressing its supposed bellicosity, into a strategic priority of American foreign policy.

Biden officials regard Netanyahu as their *bête noire* not simply because he openly objects to their approach or because he sides with Republicans, but because he is better positioned than anyone else to expose the egregious flaws of the strategy they favor, which is based on the assumptions that accommodation with Iran is both possible and in the American interest. Netanyahu is that rarest of things: a foreign leader to whom Americans directly listen as if he were one of their own. Israeli military capabilities amplify his voice and embarrass the administration.

**“In fact, Biden and his team are building a new regional order, centered on accommodating Iran.”**

Starting with Obama himself, supporters of the Iran realignment have never been open and honest with the American people about their true convictions. To advance their policy, they have always relied on misdirection, obfuscation, and half truths. Netanyahu has a unique gift for exposing this dishonesty.

He rests his case for military action on the time-tested logic of deterrence. If the United States and Israel truly seek to stop Iran from acquiring a bomb, then they must persuade Tehran that they will exact a price that is too painful for it to bear. Persuasion means taking military actions that demonstrate both a political and military capacity not just to punish Iran's leaders once or twice but to follow them in a dynamic fashion as they proceed up the ladder of military escalation, to absorb whatever counterattacks they unleash and to answer them with even more punishing blows.

This task of persuasion is best done jointly. Ron Dermer, Israel's minister of strategic affairs and one of Netanyahu's closest confidants, explained the challenge in a podcast last December, before he joined the government. For the Iranian regime, Dermer explained, the nuclear program is the queen in the chess game; the regime itself is the king. “The only way that you'll get

Iran to give up its program peacefully is if the king is threatened,” he said. “They will only sacrifice the queen to save the king.” Israel, by itself, does not have the power to threaten the regime's existence. The United States alone can threaten the king. “Without the U.S. credible military threat, no diplomacy will achieve a positive outcome. Nothing you do will achieve a positive outcome,” he added.

According to Dermer, Israel on its own perhaps has enough military capacity to prevent the Iranians from building a bomb, “but it will not get them to dismantle their nuclear capability.” Dermer might have added that, even when acting entirely alone, Israel's ability to exact concessions from Iran increases exponentially if the United States offers it unqualified diplomatic support. Israel can strike Iran nuclear sites on the first day of the war, but on days two and three, it needs the convincing threat of American intervention to deter Iran from widening the conflict.

Based on this thinking, the Israelis have been proposing to the Biden administration a division of labor: They will carry out the strikes on sensitive targets, but the United States military must be visible in the background to deter Iran lest it be tempted to widen the war. Though it is thoroughly rational, Biden will never accept this proposal. Nor will he reject it outright. Although the roots of the Iran realignment extend deep into progressive soil, the Democratic Party cannot rule without the support of pro-Israel voters. In addition, it must also manage disgruntled allies, Israel above all, who regard the Obama-Biden perspective on Iran as utterly delusional.

Formulating a policy that looks, tastes, and feels like a pro-Israel orientation but that delivers Iran appeasement is no mean feat. To accomplish this illusion, Biden and his team are proceeding along four tracks simultaneously.

First, they express strong rhetorical support for Israel and its security. “There can be no doubt that we are walking the walk and not just talking the talk when we say that our commitment to Israel's security is ironclad,” said

Biden National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan at a recent appearance.

Second, they sponsor joint planning and exercises between the American and Israeli militaries.

Third, now that Israel is a member of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), the combatant command responsible for the Middle East, the United States is sponsoring greater coordination between Israel's military and the militaries of other regional powers, working toward an integrated missile defense.

Fourth, Biden and his team are promoting normalization with Saudi Arabia.

None of these tracks—seen in isolation—is objectionable in any way. On the contrary, they belong, individually and collectively, in the category of “strongly advisable.” To an untrained eye, however, they create the impression, as consciously intended, that the administration is building a regional coalition, centered on Israel, designed to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. In fact, Biden and his team are building a new regional order, centered on accommodating Iran. The purpose of the four policies enumerated above is to mislead and restrain Israel and its supporters. Let's take them one by one.

When it comes to military deterrence, actions send the most important messages. A recent exchange between Sen. Tom Cotton and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin at a Senate hearing was instructive. Since Biden had taken office, the exchange revealed, Iran and Iran-backed militias attacked American forces 83 times. The United States retaliated on only four occasions. “What kind of signal do we think this sends to Iran?” Cotton asked. If the United States refuses to lift a finger to deter attacks on Americans, it will never take military action to protect Israelis.

To the pro-Israel community, the administration presents its full slate of joint military exercises as an expression of deep love and affection. In reality, it is a “bear hug” tactic designed to incapacitate Israel's military from pursuing independent action, like a strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. Close cooperation between the two militaries allows the U.S. to monitor its partner more thoroughly

and to penetrate and influence the officer corps, which, thanks to the turmoil in Israeli politics, is increasingly polarized, with some officers deeply disaffected from Netanyahu.

Integrated missile defense, also a bear hug tactic, will certainly deliver useful capabilities to Israel and to the Arab states who are also working with CENTCOM, but their value should not be exaggerated. They are purely defensive capabilities. According to General McKenzie, the former commander of CENTCOM, Iran now possesses “overmatch.” This assessment, based on military science that is not up for debate among serious national security professionals, means that Tehran and its proxies can send drones, ballistic missiles, and cruise missiles in configurations that will overwhelm even the most sophisticated missile defense systems in the world. The United States and Israel cannot deter Iranian attacks or prevent a nuclear breakout with purely defensive measures.

As for normalization with Saudi Arabia, it will likely happen one day, possibly relatively soon, but not before November 2024. The Saudis have well-founded concerns about the commitment of the Biden administration to their security—concerns based on the proven reluctance of Washington to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon and to contain the ever-growing threat that its conventional military power poses. In return for normalizing relations with Israel, Riyadh has asked Washington for, among other things, security guarantees. Biden officials have demurred, precisely because doing so would require them to abandon their quest for a strategic accommodation with Tehran.

Of all Biden's stratagems for misleading pro-Israel voters, advocating for normalization of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia is the most delicious of all. The policy will not bear fruit, at least not in the short term. Washington will never give the Saudis what they are asking for, because, to repeat, doing so would sink the U.S. alignment with Tehran. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Netanyahu eagerly associates himself with Biden's kabuki peace effort, thus

fostering the impression of greater comity between him and the White House than truly exists. After all, no Israeli leader can publicly stand against either the U.S. or peace with Saudi Arabia. So Netanyahu is trapped.

In the end, when the policy fails to deliver tangible results, Biden and his team will enjoy the delightful opportunity of choosing whether to blame the Saudis, the Israelis, or both. “We tried hard,” they will tell us in November 2024, “but Riyadh just wasn't ready to take the risk.” Progressives will eagerly note that Netanyahu, the leader of an “extremist” government, was unwilling to make the concessions on Palestinian statehood that might have brought the Saudis around. Call it the peace trap.

The “extremist” moniker brings us, lastly, to the intersection between Israeli domestic politics and Biden's Iran realignment. No sooner did the controversy over Israel's judicial reform erupt than the Biden administration hoisted the anti-reform banner. “They cannot continue down this road,” Biden said in March about the Netanyahu government's support for the reform. When asked in response to that statement if he intended to invite Netanyahu to the White House, Biden answered, “No, not in the near term.” In recent days, he has doubled down on the snub by inviting President Isaac Herzog, who holds

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a purely ceremonial office, to visit the White House instead.

For Biden, the judicial reform controversy is a godsend. In fact, with respect to his priorities of preventing an Israeli strike on Iran and preserving the Iran realignment, it is a trifecta. First, it offers camouflage. Opponents depict the judicial overhaul as an attack on democracy by a corrupt ruler hellbent on instituting an autocracy based on extreme religious and religious nationalist elements. By associating himself with this critique, Biden disguises his fight with Netanyahu over Iran policy to look like a principled dispute over “democratic values,” in which Biden rather than Netanyahu seizes the high ground.

Second, the dispute distracts the Jewish diaspora. The more America’s pro-Israel community debates judicial reform and the ideological character of the Netanyahu government, the less it will concentrate on fighting Biden’s Iran appeasement.

Last week, a senior Biden administration official harshly criticized Amichai Chikli, Israel’s diaspora affairs minister, for calling the Jewish progressive organization, J Street, a “hostile organization” and for calling one of its funders, billionaire and progressive activist George Soros, “one of the greatest haters of Israel in our times.” Chikli, the anonymous Biden official said, “does not understand the American Jewish diaspora.” The official added that Chikli’s “comments have ramifications. The Biden administration is watching.” Clearly, if Biden has his way, many Jews will see him, not Netanyahu, as their community’s true champion.

Third, and most importantly, the judicial reform sows discord between the top ranks of the Israeli military and the political leadership. “[T]he growing rift in society is penetrating the IDF and the defense institutions,” said Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant on March 25. “This is a clear and present danger to the security of the state,” he continued, in a public appeal to halt the reform legislation. Netanyahu responded by sacking Gallant, only to reinstate him two weeks later, in response to public outcry. Even some supporters of

the judicial reform balked at Netanyahu’s reaction. They understood Gallant, a career military officer before joining politics, to be sincerely conveying the concerns of military officers to the national leadership.

When Netanyahu debated about whether to reinstate Gallant, he no doubt mulled over the 2009-12 standoff between him and the IDF leadership over a strike on Iran. Top Israeli security officials, reportedly including Ariel Sharon’s close confidant Meir Dagan, played a restraining role, in close communication with the Americans. Whatever Gallant thinks about the judicial reform, he agrees with the prime minister on Iran. If push comes to shove, he won’t side with Biden. Indeed, Netanyahu packed the entire security cabinet with political loyalists and Iran hawks, precisely to avoid a replay of 2009-12.

But every strategy has its point of weakness. Three names in the security cabinet deserve special attention: Justice Minister Yariv Levin, Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir, and Minister of Finance Bezalel Smotrich. When opponents of the judicial reform depict it as a religious nationalist putsch, they point to these three men, together with Simha Rothman, the chair of the Knesset’s Constitution, Law, and Justice Committee, as the architects of the supposed coup. Regardless of the truth, these accusations fill the air in Israel today. If Netanyahu were to rely on these ministers to order a strike on Iran, the Biden administration would undoubtedly steal a page from Obama’s playbook and amplify the accusations, feeding to the American and Israeli press lines such as, “The most extreme government in Israel’s history is dragging Israel and the United States into a reckless war against Iran.”

This prospect undoubtedly weighs on the minds of Israeli generals today. An attack on Iran large enough to set back the Iranian nuclear program for years could potentially spark a major war between Iran and Israel. Schooled in the thinking of Israel’s founder, David Ben-Gurion, Israeli generals refrain from starting wars without great power support. In 2012, especially, they

mounted significant opposition to the planned strike against Iran and thereby denied Netanyahu a needed majority in the security cabinet. Would they behave any differently today?

Attacking Iran would be the challenge of a lifetime for Netanyahu even in the best of circumstances. To launch a strike while his society is bitterly divided over his premiership, while his security cabinet is at odds with the military brass, and while the Americans drip poison in the ears of his own generals would be nearly impossible.

Perhaps for that reason, Netanyahu shows signs of acquiescing in the interim deal that Biden is now cooking up with the Iranians. According to press reports, Iran will refrain from enriching uranium beyond 60%, and in return the U.S. will refrain from imposing stricter sanctions and will release Iranian assets worth billions of dollars. The deal is a victory for Iran, because it blesses a status quo on enrichment that violates previous red lines drawn by both Israel and the United States while also failing to address areas other than enrichment in which Iran’s nuclear weapons program continues to advance. To be sure, the Israeli prime minister is guarding his freedom of action by saying that Israel will not be bound by any agreement between Washington and Tehran. But on June 14, he also reportedly said, “What’s on the agenda at the moment between Washington and Tehran is not a nuclear deal, it’s a mini-deal. We will be able to handle it.”

With that statement, Biden’s *bête noire* signaled that between now and November 2024, he will take no military action that will disrupt the president’s reelection prospects. Nor will he disrupt the realignment. With each passing day, Iran appeasement becomes the baseline American policy toward the Middle East. Iran’s atomic weapons enterprise grows larger, more sophisticated, and more hardened against attack. The Biden administration says it is protecting Israel and preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. It is doing the exact opposite. ■

*This article was originally published on June 21, 2023.*

# Was the COVID Vaccine Safe for Pregnant Women?

The CDC deferred to Big Pharma instead of waiting for evidence. Now the facts are in.

BY MARTY MAKARY

**I**n December 2020, just before the vaccines for COVID-19 were first released to the public, Dr. Mandy Cohen, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Resources in North Carolina, urged everyone to get vaccinated as soon as they were able. “Corners were not cut,” Cohen said with confidence.

Then as now, pregnant women asked if COVID vaccines were safe for them. Public health officials said “yes” when the correct answer should have been “we don’t know yet,” given that pregnant and breastfeeding women were excluded from the original COVID vaccine trials. With Cohen set to replace Dr. Rochelle Walensky as director of the Center for Disease Control at the end of June, it is a good time to consider how Walensky performed on COVID—and in particular, on Women’s health issues—and ask whether Cohen will be any different.

In February 2021, to settle the controversy over whether the COVID vaccines should be used during pregnancy, Pfizer launched a randomized controlled trial of 4,000 pregnant women. But five months into the study, after enrolling 349 women, the study mysteriously stopped recruiting. Pfizer never offered a reason. Most concerning, the pregnancy outcomes of those who participated in the trial, and their babies, are still not public today, nearly two years later.

But the CDC did not wait for good data to make a decisive recommendation. In April 2021, just four months after the COVID vaccine was first granted an emergency use authorization and two months into the then ongoing Pfizer pregnancy trial, Walensky decided not to wait for the trial results, and instead recommended that all “pregnant people” get the vaccine. Three months later, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) followed the CDC and “enthusiastically” recommended it as well.

Concerned by the zealotry and absolutism of this recommendation in the absence of evidence, a group of scientists and I petitioned the FDA to add a disclaimer to the vaccine label stating that no randomized trial data is available on the vaccine in pregnant women.

A few months ago, the FDA’s Dr. Peter Marks wrote back to us, denying our request. “The Petition fails to explain how including the fact of no results being reported would be relevant information that would contribute to the safe and effective use of the vaccine,” he claimed.

In other words, women don’t need to know. Just get vaccinated.

Can a vaccine have a different safety profile in pregnant women than in the general population? There’s actually a precedent. The CDC advises that pregnant women not receive the HPV, MMR, or chickenpox vaccines, and instead recommends taking them before or after pregnancy, when indicated.

Remarkably, as the now outgoing CDC director—along with the ACOG—was pushing COVID vaccine absolutism for all pregnant women (regardless of preexisting natural immunity), a June 2021 *New England Journal of Medicine* editorial on COVID vaccines warned readers of “the dearth of safety information about pregnancy.” The article added the importance of waiting for Pfizer’s pregnancy trial to shed light on the matter, but alas, the early results are still locked up.

Pharma companies actually have a track record of halting trials that aren’t going their way and hiding results they don’t like. It allows them to control the narrative and manipulate markets. In many cases where data is hidden, Pharma companies play doctors like a fiddle.

A 2021 study by Yale, Stanford, and the University of Pennsylvania published in *The BMJ* found that out of 58 new drugs that the FDA approved in a two-year period, 33% did not make their trial results public, according to the researchers’ review of the data six months after the drugs’ approval. In 2004, Merck famously withheld clinical trial findings that Vioxx, their newly approved drug that was being used by 80 million Americans, increased heart attack risks. Vioxx was eventually pulled off the market.

In the case of the COVID vaccine trial in pregnant women, the trial may have been terminated not because the results were unfavorable, but because no data was needed. The medical and public health establishments had already made up their minds, declaring it safe and effective regardless of what the data was going to show. Why evaluate a product if the CDC and ACOG are already sold on the product?

Using the same groupthink science, the CDC and ACOG are now blindly recommending boosters and the new bivalent vaccine for healthy pregnant women, and once again ignoring the role of natural immunity. The ACOG website does not cite any clinical trials to back their recommendation, of course. Not only does the new bivalent vaccine lack any randomized trial data in pregnant women, it lacks any randomized



trial data in humans (it was authorized based on data from eight mice).

More stories about COVID19

Recently, public health officials went a step further and proposed the idea that people will need an *annual* COVID shot. That would mean that the average 5-year-old girl would need 77 mRNA COVID vaccine shots in her lifetime. Given the known risks of myocarditis and blood clots with each shot, such a sweeping recommendation should be based on trial data, not dogma. A recent study authored by Dr. Joseph Fraiman in the journal *Vaccine* identified the rate of “serious adverse events” after the COVID vaccine to be 1 in 662 doses.

To their credit, ACOG’s website does acknowledge COVID vaccination could delay menstruation. A large COVID vaccine study published last July found that “periods were late by less than 1 day on average.” When asked about this, Dr. Anthony Fauci told Fox News’ Bret Baier, “The menstrual thing is something that seems to be quite transient and temporary. We need to study it more.” But saying for two years that we don’t have enough studies is ironic when Fauci himself commanded an annual research budget of \$6 billion. A Swedish study published last month in *The BMJ* found that an adjusted 26% increased risk of menstrual disturbance after the COVID vaccine in women age 12-49.

Since early 2021 women were reporting changes to their periods and unexpected vaginal bleeding, calling for proper study. Last October, the European Union’s regulator advised that “heavy menstrual bleeding” be added as a side effect on Pfizer and Moderna vaccine labels. Here in the U.S. there’s been no such update to product labeling.

This lack of humility was also evident when healthy young women were told with incredible absolutism that the COVID vaccine cannot affect fertility. The right answer should have been: We don’t think it will affect fertility but we don’t have any good data on the question. A *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* study published last fall concluded

“In the absence of good data, organized medicine chose the path of stern paternalism.”

that, “Findings of this study suggest that receipt of the first inactivated COVID-19 vaccine dose 60 days or less before fertilization treatment is associated with a reduced rate of pregnancy.”

The medical establishment has also blindly pushed for universal COVID vaccination and boosters in lactating mothers. This recommendation came before a study in *JAMA Pediatrics* discovered vaccine mRNA particles in breast milk. The finding was so unexpected that it became the journal’s No. 1 most discussed study of 2022, according to the *JAMA* website. Coming in second was a study reporting myocarditis after COVID vaccination, and third was a study I authored with my teams at Johns Hopkins on durability of natural immunity. It’s telling that the most discussed *JAMA* studies of 2022 were all on topics that public health officials have consistently downplayed.

In the absence of good data, organized medicine chose the path of stern paternalism. But in my experience as a physician, it’s far better to properly inform a patient rather than steamroll their questions. It may be that Pfizer’s pregnancy trial would have been favorable to the vaccine, showing that the benefits outweigh harms, but Pfizer has not released the data. Perhaps the data was not favorable, or perhaps

Pfizer realized they had convinced the medical establishment without data, so why run the risk of sharing what a placebo-controlled trial shows?

Perhaps the most famous example of hidden trial data is the 1989 Minnesota study that found there were more deaths in the group that ate a low-fat diet than in the control group that did not. The study was completed in 1973, 16 years before it was released to the public. When asked about the delay, the lead investigator, Dr. Ivan Frantz, famously said “we were just so disappointed in the way they turned out.”

The FDA recently authorized a second round of COVID bivalent vaccines for people over the age of 65, with no supporting clinical data. The authorization came a month after the FDA leaked to the press their intention to do so. This is the Biden administration’s new way of running the FDA. Leak something to the media, gauge public backlash, and fast track authorization of the drug without the supporting data typically required.

Is the COVID vaccine safe in pregnancy? Probably. But cutting corners on research and pushing vaccines without data is dangerous. It’s probably why 58% of women under age 50 say they do not trust public health officials when they say that the COVID vaccine is safe and effective in pregnancy, according to a University of Pennsylvania study published last month. Overall trust in the CDC is down from 69% pre-pandemic to 44% today. Dishonesty has consequences.

Even if the vaccine’s benefit outweighs the risks in healthy pregnant women, a review of 65 studies published in *The Lancet* in February concluded that natural immunity is at least as effective as vaccinated immunity, and probably more effective. So why is the medical establishment blowing through so much political capital on a blanket campaign to immunize those already immune?

For those who think the boondoggle of COVID policy has ended, consider the fact that just two months ago, public health officials beclowned themselves by insisting Novak Djokovic could not enter the U.S. to play tennis outdoors

because he's not vaccinated. This position, known as Biden's "Djokovic doctrine," embodies persistent errors in public health groupthink today, from ignoring natural immunity to downplaying vaccine induced myocarditis in young males to overlooking data on how extremely low risk the virus is for healthy young people to segregating people by vaccine status.

And just this week, the Biden White

House required college athletes who won national championships visiting the White House to mask and stay six-feet apart if they are not vaccinated. Even if they have natural immunity. What does Mandy Cohen have to say about this standing policy still in place today?

To rebuild trust, the medical establishment—including physician associations and academic leaders—should

be honest about what is known and unknown, rather than lock arms and broadcast its dogmas as science. For every subgroup in the population, medical science has long held high the principle of requiring data before making strong recommendations. Women should not be treated any differently. ■

*This article was originally published on June 22, 2023.*

NEWS

# The War on Trump Is a War on Millions

Biden's Justice Department views Trump as a traitor.  
It views Trump's supporters the same way.

BY LEE SMITH

**W**ith the arraignment of Donald Trump on charges brought under the Espionage Act, America's cold civil war pitting blue cities against red regions has gotten considerably hotter. But that's inevitable when you manipulate the nation's laws to designate the leader of a movement representing one half of the country a traitor.

Legal experts say the Justice Department's case against Trump is strong. Even many on the right agree. "This indictment contains serious charges," says Trump's former Vice President Mike Pence. The former president is "toast," says his onetime Attorney General William Barr. But to others, the 37-count indictment looks like a reboot of the 2020 letter signed by 51 former U.S. spies claiming Hunter Biden's laptop was Russian disinformation. The package is so big it's got to be real, when in fact it's just Bubble Wrap all the way down.

Debating the indictment's details—the

DOJ's legal theory, which documents do and do not belong to Trump under the Presidential Records Act, etc.—is a ritualized expression of faith that the law is still impartial and the justice system is in the hands of serious men and women, devoted law enforcement officials who even when it looked most hopeless over the last seven years never once veered from their mission and now finally got their man. But it's just playacting, for the stark fact is this: The never-ending campaign to get Trump is evidence the country has gone mad.

"Here's what I was hoping," journalist Joe Klein wrote on his Substack. "That Trump would be charged with espionage. Full stop." Of course he did, as did the majority of the media hastening America into open conflict. The Espionage Act was written for times like these. Enacted in 1917 to criminalize antiwar activism, the statute is a political weapon designed to bypass the Constitution and prosecute the ruling party's domestic opponents. The fact that Trump has been charged with

crimes under the Espionage Act is evidence that the world's oldest democracy has fallen into the hands of a corrupt and pathological ruling faction that has turned federal law enforcement into a people's commissariat serving a cohort of performative elites who still harbor the fantasy that a former American president is a Russian spy.

The appropriate legal framework through which to view the indictment is election interference—it's the latest leg in the Department of Justice's ongoing effort to bar Trump from the White House that began in 2016. For the purpose of obtaining a Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act warrant to spy on Trump's campaign, the FBI alleged that the Republican candidate and his aides were Russian agents. The bureau was acting on behalf of the rival campaign, worried that the deleted emails from Hillary Clinton's private, unsecure email server were in circulation. They wanted to know if Trump aides had any foreknowledge that evidence of her arrangements with foreign powers and enterprises would be leaked as an October surprise. Russia "collusion" was the information operation built up around the FBI's phony justification for its digital break-in of the Trump campaign.

For the 2020 election cycle, federal law enforcement used the same plot points for the same purpose: to shield the Democratic candidate from revelations of corruption that might thwart his chances. The FBI was especially concerned about Hunter Biden's laptop, which it had taken into its possession in 2019. To prevent the voting public from

learning of the evidence of Biden family corruption sourced to the laptop, the bureau set up a censorship task force and labeled reports about it “Russian disinformation”—just Vladimir Putin again, so keen to keep Trump in the White House he’s polluting the infosphere by smearing Joe Biden and his son. After the election, social media platforms acknowledged how the FBI had defrauded the public, and press organizations that had participated in the cover-up admitted that the laptop was genuine.

The incumbent has problems this time out as well. The FBI can no longer hide the evidence alleging that Joe and Hunter Biden each demanded \$5 million from the owner of Burisma, a Ukrainian energy firm once under Ukrainian and international investigations. A year after vacating the vice presidency, Biden boasted before a New York audience that in March 2016 he threatened to withhold a \$1 billion loan guarantee from the Kyiv government if it didn’t fire the prosecutor investigating Burisma. The charges against Trump deflect attention, for the time being at least, from Biden’s alleged bribery scandal as well as his own problems for possessing classified information he wasn’t supposed to have.

So the Trump indictment is a cover-up for Biden as well as an early effort to tilt the 2024 vote away from Trump. But it’s part of a second storyline, too, and though it intersects in places with the DOJ thread, it represents something significantly more dangerous than one political faction turning the spy services against the other faction. After all, that’s a standard feature of all third-world security regimes, but few caudillos risk setting the stage for domestic conflict.

Charging Trump under the Espionage Act plays on a theme first developed by Barack Obama when he ordered CIA Director John Brennan to produce an Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA) concerning Russian interference in the 2016 election. Published just before Obama’s term ended, the January 2017 report concluded, without evidence, that Putin had sought to help Trump win the election. Sourced to the brazen fabrication known as the Steele dossier, the ICA anchored the collusion narrative and served as the foundation

for Robert Mueller’s special counsel investigation of Trump and his aides.

Obama’s strategy worked: The Russian collusion narrative crippled Trump’s presidency. More importantly, he used the authority of the executive branch to declare Trump’s presidency, and by extension the political movement that supported it, illegitimate. Because the election was compromised, so in effect was the electorate that chose as commander in chief a man who, according to the ICA, had been assisted by a foreign power. Trump was a foreign agent and the more than 60 million people who voted for him were, at best, useful idiots. As Obama likes to say, that’s not who we are as Americans.

Thus the Espionage Act charges are crucial to advancing the traitor narrative. Obama tipped you off more than six years ago that Trump wasn’t really American and here are the charges to prove it: He betrayed U.S. secrets because he’s working on behalf of a foreign power.

That narrative is due to be reinforced when the special counsel charges Trump, as seems nearly certain, with offenses related to January 6. After all, the point of referring to the raucous and sometimes violent three-hour-long demonstration at the Capitol as an *insurrection* more dangerous to our domestic peace than 9/11, Pearl Harbor, and the Civil War wasn’t just to drive news coverage. And charging January 6 defendants with seditious conspiracy wasn’t just to enhance their prison sentences. No, the purpose was to bulk out the narrative that Trump and the voters who favor him are in a fundamental way not American. Accordingly, since Trump and his followers are foreign agents, it follows that they don’t really have constitutional rights, and can’t complain about their votes being nullified through election interference, since they’re not really American in the first place.

Some may be tempted to see the current indictment as Obama turning the tables on Trump—you pushed the idea I didn’t have a U.S. birth certificate and now look who’s laughing, foreign spy. Except it was Clinton whisperer Sidney Blumenthal who invented the birther hoax. And then there’s the fact that all of

us will pay for the plot to set Americans at each other’s throats.

The fallout from the permanent bureaucracy’s war on Trump has turned millions of Americans into combatants in a conflict started by Democratic Party bosses and spy masters. Trump’s followers aren’t brainwashed cultists for believing attacks on him are assaults against them, too—the political and legal establishment describes them as domestic terrorists to designate them as targets of counterinsurgency warfare tactics developed during the global war on terror. It seems that Washington is breeding at home what it nurtured in the Middle East—civil war. That it strikes our political class as a good idea to renew hostilities between Americans after more than 150 years of peace is further evidence that the current regime is pathological.

It’s no small thing to arrange for two sides that bled each other to live side by side again. Look at the last half century alone, from Lebanon and Somalia to the former Yugoslavia and Syria—many countries never find a way to get along after blowing each other’s brains out. America is an exception. Indeed it is an astonishing fact that after our own fratricidal conflict, America became the most powerful nation in world history. And yet the fabric of our domestic peace is fragile and now we are tempting fate: Brother calling brother traitor may be the prelude to a renewed nightmare. ■

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## THE REST

→ A group of some **200 Israelis entered the West Bank town of Turmus Ayya on Wednesday and set fire to at least 30 homes and 60 vehicles as a response to the terrorist attack that left four Israelis dead on Tuesday.** Police who responded to the clash were attacked by Palestinians, officials said, and at least 12 Palestinians were reported injured with one killed in the melee. Israeli military officials condemned the attack on civilian property, saying that such incidents undermine the IDF's "true objective" of "preventing terrorism."

→ **Quote of the Day: "The reason why Xi Jinping got very upset in terms of when I shot that balloon down with two box cars full of spy equipment is he didn't know it was there. That was the great embarrassment for dictators, when they didn't know what happened."** That's President Joe Biden calling a spade a spade at possibly the worst time possible on Tuesday, just days after his Secretary of State Antony Blinken returned from a trip to Beijing during which he tried to restore frayed diplomatic ties with Xi and top Chinese officials. The off-the-cuff comment describing Xi as a dictator came during a fundraising event in California and was quickly rebuked by China, with a foreign ministry representative saying the remarks were "extremely absurd" and "irresponsible."

→ **A fire in a Manhattan e-bike repair shop killed four people and injured two others, raising new questions about the safety of e-bike equipment used widely by delivery drivers** and an increasing number of urban consumers who see them as environmentally conscious alternatives to vehicles. The shop had previously received a summons from the city's fire department for having too many batteries charging in the shop, which was not open at the time of the fire. Unlike typical building fires, those involving e-bikes and lithium batteries are more explosive and can be difficult for firefighters to put out. According to the fire department, just this year alone **13 people have been killed in 108 fires related to lithium-ion batteries.**

→ Looking over its books, the Pentagon said on Tuesday that it caught an accounting error that led it to overestimate the amount of military aid given to Ukraine by \$6.2 million—sorry, billion. \$6.2 billion. Which is about twice the amount of the error previously disclosed. Speaking to the media, Deputy Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said the **\$3 billion error first disclosed in May was elevated to \$6.2 billion when Pentagon officials more carefully scrutinized how they valued the equipment, missiles, and ammunition sent to Ukraine.** The extra funds, Singh said, will "[just] go back into the pot of money that we have allocated for future Pentagon stock drawdowns."

→ An ongoing **surge in the number of millennials and Gen Zers living in G20 nations diagnosed with early-onset cancer is so extreme that some epidemiologists say it could be an epidemic.** In a new Financial Times analysis of University of Washington School of Medicine data, cancer rates among 25- to 29-year-olds are up 22% from 1990 to 2019; for those between the ages of 20 and 34, the rates are higher than they've been in 30 years. At the same time, cancer rates among those age 75 and older are trending down. Researchers haven't been able to explain the pronounced increase in cancer diagnosis, though the significant number of the cases that include young people with colorectal cancers has some experts considering changes in diet and decreased physical activity over the past few decades as a possible factor.

## THE BIG STORY

**Four people were killed and another four wounded on Tuesday when a pair of Palestinian gunmen opened fire on a restaurant and then a nearby gas station in an Israeli settlement in the West Bank. One shooter was shot and killed by a bystander at the gas station while the other assailant, who'd fled the scene in a stolen vehicle, was shot and killed by the Israeli military. Taking responsibility for the attack, terrorist group Hamas said its gunmen had carried out the shooting in response to the previous day's clash between the Israeli military and Palestinian militants in the West Bank city of Jenin.**

Monday's gunfight started after IDF soldiers seeking to arrest militants in Jenin were attacked with explosive devices. The ensuing fight left six Palestinians dead and dozens wounded, as well as eight Israeli servicemembers with injuries. On Tuesday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said, "I would like to remind all those who seek to harm us: All options are open. We will continue to fight terrorism with full force and we will defeat it."

Following the attack in Jenin on Tuesday, several top lawmakers in Netanyahu's coalition, including Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, called for law enforcement to stop carrying out targeted raids to arrest militants in favor of an aggressive military operation involving the army and the air force.

—Sean Cooper

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# The Church at the Beach

Provincetown's Unitarian Universalists maintain their progressive traditions in a historic building in the middle of a popular LGBTQ resort town in Massachusetts

BY MAGGIE PHILLIPS

**T**he original landing site of the Pilgrims, Provincetown, Massachusetts, is today better known as an LGBTQ-friendly beach town. Its seaside New England charm was evident even on a damp, chilly Pride Weekend earlier this month as tourists, couples both gay and straight, bachelorette parties, drag queens, and people in fetish wear milled around Commercial Street. Here, in the bustling center of the town's busiest and most tourist-oriented thoroughfare, is where the Unitarian Universalist Meeting House of Provincetown is located, a pristine white church built in 1847 that, despite its very traditional exterior, propounds very progressive theology and politics.

A pamphlet titled "Belief and Belonging" can be found in the foyer of the Meeting House, explaining that Unitarian Universalist beliefs designate the individual as the "ultimate religious authority," which means that "the answer to the question, 'What do I have to believe to belong here?' is 'what you already believe in your heart and soul now.'"

"Belief and Belonging" denies that "a lack of strongly stated, shared beliefs" makes Unitarian Universalism rootless. Rather, they point to their roots in Christianity, as well as their openness to other religions and spiritualities and their traditions, as a way to discover unity in diversity. Unitarian Universalism can include not only liberal Christians and Buddhists, but rationalists, pagans, and even atheists and agnostics.

That Unitarian Universalism traces its

roots to the Pilgrim Fathers may come as something of a surprise, but it is a paradox that Provincetown embraces. Along Commercial Street, pedestrians pass Standish Street, and a restaurant named for Gov. Bradford that hosts drag karaoke. Jutting 60 miles out into the Atlantic, Provincetown is the site of Long Point, the peninsular bit of Massachusetts that curls upward ("Just the tip," as the T-shirts cheekily have it). It is visible from the marshland where the Pilgrims coming from Holland first landed and drew up the Mayflower Compact, the self-governing agreement that both the religious separatists and "strangers" (their fellow settlers with nonreligious motivations), would abide by while far from the gaze of the English monarchy.

The coastal location means that the omnipresent rainbow flags and windsocks are nearly always fluttering. Also catching the brisk sea breeze when I visited in early June was a banner, tied to the fence in front of the UU Meeting House, for Womxn of Color, an annual Pride Weekend retreat for LGBTQ+ people who identify as either cisgender or transgender women, nonbinary, or gender-fluid, with the aim to increase the representation of people of color in Provincetown. Registration for the event was taking place inside the Meeting House. Just a short distance from Pilgrims First Landing Park, in a church founded by the Pilgrims' spiritual descendants, LGBTQ+ people of color were hosting a vendor fair featuring adult novelty retailer House of Bawdy. It is easy to forget, given their caricature in the American national imagination

as censorious killjoys, that the New England Puritans were in fact radicals. Provincetown, a Portuguese fishing village-turned-artist-colony-turned-gay-friendly tourist spot, is a consequential reminder.

Unitarianism and Universalism both developed as an outgrowth of the New England Puritans' wrestling to reconcile their Calvinism with Enlightenment principles.

Unitarians, who disbelieved in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity (the idea that God, Jesus Christ, and an animating spiritual force called the Holy Spirit are all one), and Universalists, who did not believe in the doctrine of hell, merged in 1961 to create the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA). But prior to that, Unitarian Universalism's origins are almost as unlikely as its history in Provincetown itself. (Enthusiasm for Universalism spread there in the 1820s, after one family shared the soggy biography of a Universalist minister that their children had discovered washed up on the beach.)

Unitarianism had existed in different flavors since the dawn of the Reformation in Poland and Transylvania. With the English Reformation and the advent of Puritanism, a strain of dissent from the Anglican Church came to reject Trinitarianism, taking a strictly literal understanding of Christian scripture, and coming to believe that Christ was subordinate to, rather than a co-equal being with, God. In 1648—the same year the Treaty of Westphalia established noninterference in the affairs of autonomous states—65 congregations in Massachusetts signed their own agreement of self-determination, the Cambridge Platform, which provided for independent, lay-governed congregations, free from outside clerical interference. The signees were all Calvinists, and so perhaps as a consequence, considerations of doctrine took a back seat to the nuts and bolts of administration and governance. Over time, one thing (the First and Second Great Awakenings) led to another (Transcendentalism), and contentious questions of original sin and salvation were resolved by the more progressive congregations, which had

become some shade of Unitarian or Universalist in character as the 19th century progressed. These decided to dispense with the doctrines altogether, and to root their spirituality in individual reason and experience.

Unitarianism gained popularity in liberal Congregationalist communities throughout the 18th century. These eventually broke away from the more conservative wing of Congregationalism to form the American Unitarian Association in 1825. Meanwhile, American Universalism began developing in earnest with the arrival of Englishman John Murray, who founded the first Universalist church in Gloucester, Massachusetts, in 1780 (it was his biography that the girls in Provincetown had discovered on the beach). Universalists rejected the Calvinist belief in predestination, that salvation was for a group of “elect,” and instead believed that all humanity was “saved” from eternal damnation. Their leaders were eventually brought over to a more Unitarian theology, and by 1935, under the influence of theologian Clarence Skinner, Universalists had dispensed with traditional Christian notions of salvation altogether, shifting to a humanistic emphasis on universal human experience and unifying themes, adopting the “Bond of Fellowship,” which downplayed Jesus’ divinity, and put its faith “in the power of men of goodwill and sacrificial spirit to overcome evil and progressively establish the Kingdom of God.”

While both churches were open to the wisdom traditions and beliefs of other world religions and cultures, they had their differences. “The Universalists put more stress on the love and grace of God, and the Unitarians put more stress on man’s natural goodness,” according to a 1975 UUA pamphlet reflecting on the 1961 merger. Nevertheless, the synergy between the two theologically and socially progressive churches gathered apace from the Civil War onward, with a series of interdenominational congresses and conferences that occurred nearly every decade after bringing the two closer and closer to a formal union. Today, according to the Unitarian Universalist Association’s own history, 21 of the original 65 congregations that signed

“Provincetown’s UUA Meeting House, with its demure lawn and Greek revival façade, is a near-perfect metaphor for the town’s synthesis of old-fashioned charm and liberal politics.”

the Cambridge Platform belong to the Unitarian Universalist Association.

After Unitarianism and Universalism joined forces in 1961, a UUA survey conducted a few years later found that over 80% of their members thought homosexuality should be discouraged. However, attitudes changed quickly. By 1970, the UUA’s governing body, the General Assembly, had voted to end discrimination against homosexuality, and for the creation of a sex ed program that would acknowledge and encourage acceptance of different sexualities. The 1970s and ’80s saw the UUA adopt a variety of initiatives to affirm gay members within its ranks, from establishing an Office of Gay Affairs, working to end discrimination against people with AIDS, and recognizing its first openly gay clergy member, as well as developing a program to help congregations welcome and include gay members. UUA leadership voiced support throughout the 1990s on hot-button issues: the repeal of “don’t ask, don’t tell” in the military, the legalization of same-sex marriage, and an end to discriminatory policies against homosexuality in the Boy Scouts of America. In 2004, the then-president of the UUA officiated at the wedding of the two women who were lead plaintiffs in *Goodridge*

*v. Massachusetts Department of Public Health*, the case that led to Massachusetts being the first state to legalize same-sex marriage. He conducted the marriage at Eliot House, the former Beacon Street UUA headquarters in Boston, named for former American Unitarian Association president and Boston Brahmin Samuel Eliot—a relation of T.S. Eliot, himself the grandson of a Unitarian minister.

In 2014, the UUA added to its bylaws a pledge to replace “with ever-widening circles of solidarity and mutual respect” the “barriers for persons and groups with particular identities, ages, abilities, and histories,” by “structuring congregational and associational life in ways that empower and enhance everyone’s participation.”

Another pamphlet in the Provincetown Meeting House foyer, “A Spiritual Home for LGBTQ People,” lists various life situations in which seekers may find themselves: divorced lesbian with two transracially adopted children, a transgender woman of color who has been rejected by friends and family, a teenager “looking for other queer young adults to connect with on a deeper level,” a middle-aged bisexual man who has lost a partner to HIV/AIDS complications, or someone with a same-sex partner whose immigration status is threatened. “You are welcome in Unitarian Universalism,” the pamphlet says after each scenario. Today, UUA congregations hold services and participate in events surrounding Pride, National Coming Out Day, and Transgender Day of Remembrance.

Rummaging among the materials in the Meeting House foyer, I come across a quote from retired UUA minister Rev. Barbara Merritt: “Unitarian Universalists have said for centuries that there is room in our religion for all seekers. Skeptics and poets and scientists are welcome here, as are nonconformists and shy and uncertain folk. We believe that restlessness and doubts are a sign of grace, that the love of truth is the holiest of gifts.” Provincetown itself certainly echoes this embrace of diversity: Various languages could be heard everywhere during the day I spent there. I didn’t even see anyone confront the

guy in the “Let’s Go Brandon” hat, who as far as I can tell, was left in peace to browse puzzles and board games at a bustling hobby shop.

The crowd was picking up as I prepared to leave in the late afternoon. Outside Town Hall, a stately Victorian festooned with rainbow bunting that spilled out in defiance of the gray exterior conditions, a line was forming, presumably for the Pride rally that had been moved indoors due to weather. I left as I arrived, by bus, the ferry having been canceled out of concern for the wind. The cold and rain had done apparently little to dampen the spirits

of the college students who’d joined me on the two-hour bus ride from Boston, though, who laughed and talked nearly the whole way, and braided rainbow scarves into each other’s hair en route. As I waited to depart in the afternoon, I saw group after group of people laughing and hugging. Some were rainbow-clad, others were more excitingly and scantily dressed (I worried for their comfort and well-being as the temperature continued to drop), but many others were neither.

Built almost two centuries ago by off-duty fishermen to accommodate a growing congregation, today it serves

a membership of 112. Provincetown’s prim-looking UUA Meeting House, with its demure lawn and Greek revival façade, is not an anomaly in this progressive town. Rather, it is a near-perfect metaphor for the town’s synthesis of old-fashioned charm and liberal politics. Its ostensible clash of traditional aesthetics and individualistic theology is less of a contradiction than a manifestation of Unitarian Universalism’s unique worldview: at once thoroughly Yankee and thoroughly radical. ■

*This article was originally published on June 21, 2023.*

## COMMUNITY

# Saving a Building That Saved Hundreds of Children

Château de Chaumont was a sanctuary for young Jews fleeing the Nazis. Now a British contractor is restoring the French mansion, and documenting his renovations online.

BY LISA KLUG

**A**t age 13, Fanny Ben-Ami—herself a refugee from the Nazis—rescued 15 children during the Holocaust. Her epic tale of survival has touched audiences via a children’s book, a feature film, sketches, paintings, and countless testimonies. Recently, however, a contractor’s passion project thrust a chapter of Ben-Ami’s saga from literal ruins into the social media spotlight.

Now 93, Ben-Ami is among the few living beneficiaries of the WWII-era efforts of the Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants—the Children’s Aid Society. During the Shoah, this Jewish French

humanitarian organization, commonly known as the OSE, brought Ben-Ami to safety in the French countryside. Over several years, the OSE nurtured more than 200 refugee children at the towering Château de Chaumont, a grand, seven-story manor—including Ben-Ami’s younger sisters, Erika, now 91, and Georgette, who died in 2015. They never saw their parents again.

The estate fell into disrepair after a fire ravaged the building in the mid-1980s. It sat in shambles until it was sold in 2022 to a British ex-pat named Daniel Preston, a trained chef. For his YouTube channel, “Escape to Rural France,” in which he also renovates a stone farmhouse, Preston filmed a visit

to Chaumont in 2021. The self-taught builder has since posted more than 100 videos revealing the painstaking removal of Chaumont’s debris, trees, bees, and bathroom fixtures dangerously perched at perilous heights.

“I really appreciate what he’s doing,” Ben-Ami said after watching excerpts of Preston’s videos. “The château was part of my life. And not just me—72 children,” at the time she lived there. (Throughout the war, the children’s ranks fluctuated until a newly installed local village priest betrayed them to Nazi officials.)

Since 2021, Preston’s channel has captured upwards of 34 million views. Rebuilding floors, laying bricks, and solving structural dilemmas have attracted more than 850 Patreon subscribers seeking additional content. Tree surgeons and friends from another channel, “The Château Diaries,” where Preston appeared as a gardener, make cameos. With YouTube ad revenues and “cups of coffee” tips, total monthly income exceeds \$8,000.

“I really wasn’t expecting it to go that far,” said Preston, 33, who also posts on Instagram.

Chaumont is one of 14 châteaux the OSE operated as children’s shelters. “Most of the war homes still exist in a more or less derelict state, most of them, private properties,” said OSE’s Paris Archivist Dominique Rotermund. “Once these

homes had to be closed in 1943, the association found many different hiding places for the children. The number of saved children is around 2,000.”

During the war, Chaumont provided its young transplants surrogate family. “There, we forgot the war,” said Ben-Ami, now a widowed grandmother of six and great-grandmother of two. “And what we always say, by day, we were laughing. And by night, we were crying.”

Through underground networks, the OSE spirited children to Spain, Switzerland, and the U.S. Many of those, like Ben-Ami, link their survival to Château de Chaumont. Among them were Ralph Moratz and Wolfgang Grajonca, the last to be accepted into foster homes after a harrowing sailing to New York. The friends eventually fell out of touch. Moratz was unaware that Grajonca had Americanized his name: Picking a name out of a Bronx phone book, he became Bill Graham, the renowned promoter of shows for Janis Joplin, Jefferson Airplane, Jimi Hendrix, and other rock legends. Graham’s milestones include the 1985 LiveAid concert in Philadelphia and multiple Amnesty International tours that raised millions in charitable contributions and heightened awareness about political injustice.

After Graham died at 60 in a 1991 helicopter crash in Vallejo, California, media reported his origins. Moratz, a Hollywood background actor who became a loan officer and computer programmer, rediscovered his lost friend and documented their connection in a blog and subsequent videos for a multicity exhibit titled *Bill Graham and the Rock & Roll Revolution*. Although Moratz died soon after, his blog remains accessible, as does his archive at the Leo Baeck Institute in New York City.

“Ralph’s enthusiasm for connecting with Bill was inspiring because Bill didn’t remember the first 10 years of his life, but Ralph did,” Graham’s son David, 54, said from his home near New Hope, Pennsylvania.

Admitted posthumously to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, his father’s legacy continues through the Bill Graham Memorial Foundation and an autobiography.

“We look forward to telling his story because there are so many remarkable

events nobody knows about,” said David Graham, who, with his brother Alex, is exploring creating a documentary and other projects. “He was a master of mass congregation. Peter Coyote called him a mix between Mother Theresa and Al Capone. If you add up all the tickets to his shows, he touched more people with music than died in the Holocaust.”

In 1975, Graham ignited a global phenomenon by funding the first public menorah lighting outside Israel. “When Chabad asked Bill Graham to build a 22-foot ‘Mama Menorah’ and light it every year in the heart of San Francisco, he underwrote the entire thing and never looked for recognition,” said SF Chabad Rabbi Yosef Langer. “Only after he passed, we named it the Bill Graham Menorah. That one menorah spread its light far, inspiring thousands of others, from Buckingham Palace to the shores of Oahu.”

Like Moratz, who appeared in the blockbuster *Independence Day* and many other projects, Graham also earned Hollywood screen credits in *Bugsy*, *The Doors*, and *Apocalypse Now*. Their love of theatrics can be traced to Chaumont. Managed by resistance fighter Lotte Schwarz, whose room was on the fourth floor, counselors instructed children to hide their Jewish identity outside the château. But at Chaumont, they engaged in everything from sports, foraging herbs, and other survival skills to music, literature, and Purim *shpiels*.

“We thought we would stay there forever,” said Ben-Ami, whose room among the older children was on the third floor.

Currently, English TV is profiling Preston’s renovation for a future broadcast. With such a large building, his goal is to remain off-grid to reduce costs. An on-site well yields water and a sponsor provided solar panels, but 40 windows, staircases, wiring, and plumbing require reinstallation, not to mention a roof and turret. Preston expects it may take five years to complete 90% of the work. “I don’t think it will ever be done,” he added.

This isn’t the first time Chaumont has required reinforcements. The OSE, too, repaired windows and plumbing, as cited in *Rescuing Jewish Children During*

*the Nazi Occupation in OSE Children’s Homes 1938-1945*.

A 2022 process photo documenting Preston’s restoration Courtesy Daniel Preston

At the entrance to rue de Chaumont, a plaque commemorates its significance. “Preserving authentic sites, structures, and artifacts from the Holocaust highlights their historic relevance and is one way of connecting the past to the present,” said Yad Vashem spokesperson Simmy Allen.

Years ago, OSE vice director, Eric Ghozlan, then-director of the Childhood Department, visited Chaumont to explore purchasing it for a summer camp, “in keeping with the château’s legacy,” said OSE historian Katy Hazan. “The project was not feasible due to the extensive renovations required and the high financial costs. Should the place once again welcome and benefit children, it would indeed be very meaningful for us.”

Preston hopes to bring kids back, too. Chaumont hosted a summer camp for disadvantaged children in the 1950s and ’60s. “With all the support we have online, we could support some kind of an academy—for kids who can come for the summer and learn skills,” Preston said.

French comedian Popeck, 87, was 4 when the OSE escorted him and other young refugees to Chaumont. “I am happy to learn that the château is being renovated by a contractor who hopes to make it a summer residence for children in need,” said Popeck, aka Judka Herpstu, whom Ben-Ami remembers from Chaumont. He returned to Paris, as did noted psychologist Claire Meljac, 89. (She was not available to comment due to health complications.)

Fanny Ben-Ami at home in Holon, Israel, earlier this year Courtesy the author

Renovating by day and editing at a nearby Airbnb by night, Preston’s sign-off is a signature YouTube move, a cheeky high-five over the lens. The father of two young boys, he recently separated from their mother, his partner of 14 years, making the project “deeply personal,” Preston said. “I am rescuing the building, but the building is also rescuing me. If I don’t do a video one day, I feel so lost. It’s like keeping a diary but



instead of writing down what you do every day ... you go back and see the day in the best possible light.”

Cinematic shots flaunt sweeping aerial views and close-ups of the majestic scenery, the ruin itself, and the machinery reviving it. Thick woods surround the château with a verdant cloak, fitting the metaphor of a storybook legend returning to life. “It really struck me as soon

as I saw it,” said Preston, who dates the château to 1886. “It was just magical.”

Ben-Ami felt something similar when she visited the neglected property with fellow survivors in 1995. “We went through the gate and it was a sleeping beauty,” she recalled.

In 2019, Yad Vashem honored Ben-Ami’s wartime heroism. Eluding German troops in 1943, she led children

by foot over the Swiss border and, in the process, identified an informer, saving the lives of 150 members of the French underground.

As her next act, Ben-Ami is writing her memoirs. Naturally, she said, “The château is in it.” ■

*This article was originally published on June 16, 2023.*

FOOD

# The Shape of Pastries Past

Trying to recreate my great-grandmother’s cheese-filled bollos

BY ALEXANDER ACIMAN

**F**or most Sephardic families, the story of bollos—a savory, cheese-stuffed pastry from pre-Inquisition Spain—is one of a centuries-old Jewish culinary tradition. In my family, however, bollos tell an even older Jewish story, one dating as far back as the days of pre-antiquity: the battle between a woman and her mother-in-law.

And for *me*, the story of bollos is a story of vindication.

For nearly 70 years my grandmother tried, and failed, to reproduce the perfectly Star of David-shaped bollos that my grandfather’s mother was known for. My grandmother, a deaf jitterbug-dance champion, loved to upstage those who underestimated her almost as much as she hated having things condescendingly explained to her by people who could hear; she must have seen her mother-in-law’s ostentatiously shaped bollos and set out to replicate them on her own.

And yet, even as a woman whose cooking shimmered with some intangible quality of verve and ingenuity, my

grandmother remained stumped by the shape of these pastries for the length of her marriage, and as if she were wrestling with a ghost, my grandmother kept trying even after my great-grandmother, passed away. She tried again and again to produce the perfectly cut points of her mother-in-law’s pastries, but never managed it. My grandmother’s bollos always turned out, in the words of my uncle, “lopsided and deformed.” Some might even have looked at this ordeal and seen in it the premonitions of the lifelong gully between herself and the man who was my grandfather.

Almost a century after it began, I set out to put my grandmother’s endeavor to rest.

My grandmother’s struggles with bollos stemmed from two very different but equally challenging realities. The first is that bollos themselves are a beast of unknown provenance. As I took on this contested family recipe, never having tasted them myself, I found myself asking: What exactly *is* a bollo? No living person today really seems to agree on the answer, or on a

spelling for that matter, since they are also known as boyos, boyoz, and bolos.

The word bollo itself comes from the Spanish *bollo*, which means bun. The most common type of bollos are filled, savory pastries. Unyeasted dough balls are marinated in olive oil, then rolled out into a circle and filled with mashed potato, feta and parmesan cheese, and sometimes spinach. Then the dough is rolled like a cigar and twisted into a bun in the shape of a snail. These pastries arrived in Turkey after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in the 15th century, and would remain a staple of Turkish cuisine for the next 600 years.

Bollos are different from boyikos, the diminutive form meaning *little boyo*, which are not simply smaller versions of bollos, but a thing unto themselves: Boyikos are more like cheese biscuits without a dough. And then there are bourekas—sheets of puff pastry filled with cheese and spinach, and sometimes squash. Different in both appearance and preparation to the typical coiled bollos, the terms bourekas and bollos are, nonetheless, used interchangeably, despite some Sephardic Jews disagreeing with the flattening of these terms. Others will contend that bollos are a form of boureka, while another group holds that it is, in fact, the other way around: A square is a rhombus, but a rhombus is not a square. An odd effect of repeated exiles over the course of centuries is that nobody is sure of anything in the kitchen except that they disagree with everyone else. I do not even have an accurate description of my great-grandmother’s bollos, aside from the shape.

The second problem facing my

grandmother was her lifelong imprecision in all things. Everything in her life was done by approximation. Being deaf put up an impenetrable veil between my grandmother and the rhythms of the hearing world, which seemed to spill out into other areas of her life. Instead of fretting, she adapted. Ingredients could be substituted or forgone entirely; volumetric measurements were abstract concepts. The rows of stitches in her knitwear varied wildly, creating scarves of baffling proportions. Even her birthday is itself an approximation: She was born on July 4, 1924, but her father did not submit her birth certificate until July 11, creating a deluge of confusion when dealing with legal paperwork. Life, for my grandmother, was one extended act of improvisation. This meant deftly stitching together otherwise incongruous ingredients into what would become a signature meal, or deciding one day in her 20s to buy a motorcycle even if it wasn't acceptable for women to ride them in polite Egyptian society; this spirit endured into her late 80s when, without any premeditation, she signed up for yoga classes.

The thought of my grandmother attempting to shape a pastry that, by definition, has a fixed number of points, is itself almost absurd. If the Star of David had some flexibility—if it could be represented with anything between five and seven points—that would be another story. I know this because I inherited her imprecision, and admittedly, the idea of my doing this is no less absurd.

Relying on the collective memories of my father and uncle—the only two people who had tried both my grandmother and my great-grandmother's bollos—introduced yet another hurdle: Their descriptions of bollos varied wildly from recollection to recollection. Sometimes bollos would sound more like bourekas, then other times like savory hamantaschen, crackers, biscuits, spanakopita, or a thing “with flour, but not *too much* flour.” I realized quickly that I'd have to traverse this muddled terrain alone, much as my grandmother had.

I first attempted making traditional bollos. I spent nearly half an hour

kneading dough to the correct elasticity until my arms were sore. Then I spent the next five consecutive hours trying and failing to calibrate the correct volume of filling so that the rolled pastry could be coiled not in the shape of a snail, but into the shape of a Star of David. Finally, my (not Jewish) partner helped me devise a method of weaving two doughy triangles into one another, forming a semibraided Star of David.

“I've never seen anything like this in my entire life,” my father said upon seeing them.

My father put me in touch with a distant cousin in Turkey, who sent me a page of her Sephardic recipe book—not for bollos, but for boyikos. The measurements on the recipe read as if they'd been transcribed by my grandmother herself: a glass of cheese, a glass of oil, some water, and as much flour as the mixture can hold. The difference with boyikos is that instead of wrapping the mixture in dough, the paste is rolled out and then shaped by hand before going straight into the oven. It has no outer layer, and the result is a harder, firmer biscuit.

After trying repeatedly to shape the dough by hand, as was traditional, I folded and ordered a multi pack of Star of David-shaped cookie cutters from Amazon.

The consistency of this batch was closer, but, according to my father, the taste was off. The problem was that no recipe for boyikos seems to include potatoes, and perhaps the only thing my dad and uncle agreed on was that the bollos they knew from childhood had potatoes in them.

My third attempt was a hybrid: What if I combined the technical biscuit-like approach of boyikos, but added boiled potatoes to the mixture, almost like gnocchi.

As the hybrid biscuit sat in the oven, suddenly my apartment was filled with the familiar scent of walking into my grandmother's apartment on 98th Street. It was a smell that I never even knew I'd cataloged in my mind, and strange as it was to me then, I knew now that what I'd been smelling were bollos.

I had the recipe. Now for the shape.

The difficulty with working with a gnocchilike dough is that it moves almost like a non-Newtonian fluid. It seems to fit nicely into a Star of David cookie cutter mold, but then sticks to the side and needs to be poked out. Standing over my kitchen counter, I felt my grandmother's decadeslong desperation coursing through me. Poking the dough out of the mold leaves behind it a mushy, Dr. Seussian shape, and any attempts at pinching the stars back into shape only further deform it. Neither butter nor olive oil allowed the mold to release the dough gracefully.

To solve this problem, I turned to yet another solution that did not exist in 1950s Egypt, and which my Ottoman great-grandmother would never have used: a copious amount of nonstick cooking spray applied directly to the side of the cookie cutters.

The result was six, golden brown Stars of David the size of my palm. Neither bollos nor boyikos, really, they might perhaps be best described as a thing of their own—boyikones, or big little bollos.

I do not know what exactly my great-grandmother's trick was. In all likelihood, the knack for bollos probably came from a kind of patience that neither my grandmother nor I seemed to have; star-shaped bollos seem almost like a recipe designed to clash against our shared foibles, and so naturally I had to find some other path toward it. To some, nonstick spray might even count as cheating, but my grandmother's entire life had been composed of stratagems to outwit and outmaneuver her own weaknesses; if Pam had been available to her in Egypt, she would have used it, thrilled to have found a way of imposing her will onto this recipe, and more importantly, onto a mother-in-law who did not think a deaf woman was good enough for her hearing son. But bollos remained one of her lone culinary blunders. And this year, on both of my grandmothers' birthdays, I'll bake the elusively shaped bollos in remembrance and to let her know we've finally vanquished them. ■

*This article was originally published on June 20, 2023.*

# Bollos

BY ALEXANDER ACIMAN

## INGREDIENTS

- 5 medium russet potatoes**
- 120 grams all-purpose flour**
- 4 tablespoons olive oil (3 for the recipe, 1 for a cookie sheet)**
- 100 grams feta**
- 100 grams grated Parmesan**
- 1 egg yolk**
- sesame seeds**

## PREPARATION

### Step 1

Set a pot of salted water to boil. Peel the potatoes, and cut them into evenly sized cubes about 1 1/2 to 2 inches across. (To prevent the potatoes from browning, put them in a bowl of cold water until the water is boiling.) Boil the potatoes for about 10 minutes, or until they can be easily pierced with a fork.

### Step 2

While the potatoes are boiling, combine the feta and Parmesan into a paste. Add a pinch of salt, and roughly a tablespoon of boiling water so that the cheese melts and emulsifies just slightly.

### Step 3

Strain the potatoes and add them to the cheese mixture with the 3 tablespoons of olive oil, and combine until it looks like mashed potatoes. (Be careful, however, not to overwork the potatoes. If the potatoes turn into a gummy paste, then the bollos will turn out too firm.)

### Step 4

Incorporate the flour into the mixture.

### Step 5

Preheat your oven to 350.

### Step 6

Heavily grease the inside of a cookie cutter mold, and on top of an oiled cookie sheet, pour the dough into the mold until it's about 1 cm thick. Level out the dough so that it is a uniform height, and gently jiggle the mold off of it.

### Step 7

Lightly brush the dough in egg yolk, and sprinkle with sesame (optional).

### Step 8

Bake until golden brown (about 20 minutes).

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