

# The New York Jewish Week/end

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Women walk through the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, N.Y., April 10, 2019. (Spencer Platt/Getty Images)

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## ● NEWS

# RSV, a Childhood Illness That Had Receded During COVID-19, Is Surging in Orthodox Brooklyn

By Shira Hanau

Hundreds of infants in Orthodox Jewish neighborhoods of Brooklyn are sick now with a common respiratory virus that typically does not circulate during the spring, raising fears as to whether the infections in those communities could again become an indicator of what's to come elsewhere in New York City and the country.

At least 15 patients from Dr. Israel Zyskind's pediatrics practice in Borough Park are hospitalized currently with respiratory syncytial virus, or RSV, a virus that manifests as little more than a common cold in adults but can be dangerous for infants and toddlers.

Typically, Zyskind said, no more than a handful of children from his practice would be hospitalized at any given time because of RSV. And those hospitalizations would come during the winter, not as the weather warms.

The recent explosion of RSV cases in Orthodox Brooklyn is on New York City's radar. According to the city's Health Department, there were 10 documented cases of RSV in Brooklyn during the last week of February. During the week of April 4-10, there were 294.

The cases are appearing in Williamsburg, Borough Park, Bensonhurst, Kensington and Midwood.

"Parents and guardians are encouraged to keep sick children at home and prevent anyone with cold-like symptoms from coming in contact with young children," the Health Department is advising. "If children are having difficulty breathing, wheezing, not eating or drinking, parents should contact their health care provider immediately."

The unusual pattern of RSV in Orthodox neighborhoods of Brooklyn comes slightly more than a year after the area hosted some of the earliest outbreaks of COVID-19 in the city. At the time, the community's communal practices and multigenerational families were seen as creating ripe conditions for the disease's spread, particularly before guidance was given to halt gatherings and stay home.

Those same conditions could make the communities early indicators for patterns of disease that emerge after COVID-19 recedes.

RSV is one of the typically common illnesses that have receded during the pandemic, surprising many doctors. The virus, which causes symptoms like runny nose, cough and fever, and can cause a child to eat less, spreads easily in schools and day care facilities. Most children will have contracted the virus by the age of 2 and, for most of them, the virus is not dangerous. But RSV can lead to more serious illness in babies, whose airways are smaller and who have no immunity to the virus.

According to the CDC, more than 57,000 children below the age of 5 are hospitalized with RSV each year. Between 100 and 500 children die of RSV each year. There is no vaccine.

This winter, a time when RSV normally circulates widely,

doctors in Brooklyn said they saw few or no cases. But that has changed in recent weeks.

Earlier, RSV had spread out of season elsewhere. Australia saw a similar outbreak in the fall, when the weather is warm there. Doctors in the country speculated that lockdowns last year kept people from contracting RSV, therefore lowering the level of immunity to the virus in the general population as it emerged from lockdown.

Zyskind thinks there may be something similar happening in Brooklyn.

"Nursing mothers, who would [typically] protect their children through passive immunity, aren't able to give that robust immunity to their children this year because the mothers were not exposed to these viral illnesses last year as they usually are," the doctor said.

"Also, a lot of the toddlers who get mild illness skipped the typical RSV season last year, have no immunity to RSV, and thus pass it to their siblings or neighbors."

Dr. Ben Katz, a professor of pediatrics at the Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine and an expert in infectious diseases, suggested another theory.

"When one virus comes into a community, others usually go away," Katz said, explaining that one virus will crowd out the others.

That theory has also been used to explain why this year's flu season has been nearly nonexistent, bypassing the nightmare scenario some feared if the flu and coronavirus spread simultaneously.

Why the virus is circulating so quickly through Orthodox communities and appearing far less frequently in other communities in New York City is unclear.

The larger families in Orthodox communities may explain the increased spread as more children per household are able to pick up the virus in school and bring it home to younger siblings. The cramped living conditions in some Orthodox neighborhoods also may be a contributor.

While most schools in the United States are either being taught online or meeting in person with precautions like masks and social distancing, many Orthodox schools, particularly in Hasidic neighborhoods, have been far

more lax about COVID precautions. That laxity may be creating an environment in which other viruses, not just the coronavirus, can spread more easily.

But the question of why cases are spiking now, when schools in Orthodox communities have been open since the beginning of the school year, remains unanswered.

"We're trying to figure out why we're seeing it here first," Zyskind said, noting that day cares across the country have been open for months. "But I really don't know why it's happening in our community."

Doctors already are anticipating the possibility of a more intense flu season next year due to the fewer number of people who contracted the illness this year.

"We live in a very delicate ecosystem in balanced equilibrium," Zyskind said. "The lockdowns were necessary to stop COVID, but there's going to be a cost on the other end for other viral illnesses that were skipped during the lockdowns." (JTA)

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## ● NEWS

# Councilman Chaim Deutsch Pleads Guilty to Tax Fraud

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

Chaim Deutsch, a Brooklyn politician who chairs the Jewish Caucus of the New York City Council, pleaded guilty to tax fraud.

Deutsch, a Democrat, filed a 2015 tax return that included "false and fraudulent information" related to outside income from his real estate management company, according to the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York.

Appearing Thursday in Manhattan federal court, he pleaded guilty to one count of filing a false tax return and agreed to pay back \$82,076 in taxes, plus interest. He faces up to one year in prison and maximum fine of \$100,000 at his sentencing on July 29.

Deutsch did not return media requests for comment and did not say whether he would be stepping down from the City Council before term limits end his time in office after November.

Deutsch ran unsuccessfully for Congress last year in a campaign that relied on cultivating Orthodox Jewish and Russian immigrant voters in the southern parts of his district, which includes the heavily Jewish neighborhoods of Brighton Beach, Sheepshead Bay and Midwood.

Earlier this year he successfully pressured New York City to include kosher food in a meals program launched to keep city residents fed during the pandemic. He also defended Orthodox Jews after Mayor Bill de Blasio criticized members of the community for flouting COVID-19 safety rules. (JTA)

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## ● NEWS

# Brooklyn Man, 19, Charged with Breaking Into Capitol on Jan. 6

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

The FBI has charged a 19-year-old Brooklyn man for breaking into the U.S. Capitol during the Jan. 6 riot.

Dovid Schwartzberg confessed to breaking into the building along with the pro-Trump mob and recording several videos. A tipster informed the FBI after security cameras and social media video captured images of Schwartzberg, wearing a red "Make America Great Again" cap, inside the Capitol building.

He turned himself into the FBI in New York on Tuesday and was released on bail.

Schwartzberg told FBI agents that he "wanted to be where the action was" and willingly entered the building on the day that Congress was meeting to affirm the results of the 2020 presidential election. The charges

include violent entry, disorderly conduct and knowingly entering a restricted building.

Other New Yorkers arrested for their participation in the insurrection include the pelt-wearing son of a Jewish state Supreme Court justice. (JTA)

## ● APPRECIATION

# Isi Leibler Spoke Out When Few Would Listen

*Remembering an advocate for Soviet Jewry who exposed financial wrongdoing at major Jewish organizations.*

By Gary Rosenblatt

Some people make their mark in Jewish history by heading a major organization and championing an important cause. Others gain recognition as whistleblowers, calling out wrongdoings within a group and striving to restore ethical behavior and policies despite powerful resistance.

Isi Leibler, who died at 86 in Jerusalem on April 13, was unique in that he was both – an outspoken establishment leader and, as a man of conscience, someone willing to expose corruption, even within groups where he held top posts.

He was bright, opinionated, feisty and never one to back down from a challenge. We had our differences at times, particularly during the Trump years. But I count myself among Isi's longtime admirers, having worked closely with him over a period of several years in reporting extensively on two major stories. Both of his initiatives were focused on bringing more transparency to well-respected international Jewish organizations where he was serving in top lay positions. In both instances he found out along the way that there were serious financial and other problems that needed to be addressed, and he

pursued them, despite major pushback and threats.

Accounts of these major confrontations with the World Jewish Congress (WJC) and the Conference on Material Claims Against Germany – better known as the Claims Conference, the Jewish group which deals with Germany in seeking compensation for Holocaust victims – take up more than 70 pages of an important biography of Isi that was published a few months ago.

“Lone Voice: The Wars of Isi Leibler” (Gefen) is a majestic piece of history from Suzanne D. Rutland, a highly respected Australian Jewish historian. She spent two decades researching and writing this compelling and carefully documented work, with extensive footnotes on almost all of its 650 pages.

The book describes the life and career of a man who, in addition to being highly successful in business, played an outsized role in Jewish communal life for more than six decades. Born in Antwerp, he moved to Melbourne with his family when he was five. He served three terms as president of the Executive Council Australian Jewry and chaired the WJC governing board before his aliyah in 1999 to Jerusalem, where he became a widely read and highly opinionated columnist in The Jerusalem Post.

Rutland sheds light on both the global diplomatic front, where Isi was instrumental in establishing ties between Israel and China and India, and the sometimes brutal backroom politics he became embroiled in within influential Jewish organizations.

There is a measure of comfort in knowing that Isi lived to see the publication of the book and the favorable reviews that followed. The last several times we spoke, he glossed over his serious medical issues and focused on recounting some of our shared “battles” in taking on some powerful adversaries.

No doubt Isi will best be remembered as an early and influential advocate for Soviet Jewry, which included traveling to the USSR and meeting with refuseniks. He is credited with being among the few who made the issue into an international cause in the 1960s, bucking the establishment Jewish community's preference for quiet diplomacy by advocating public protests and rallies.

I knew him best, though, after the remarkable success

of the Soviet Jewry movement. We began to meet for breakfast in Manhattan once or twice a year in the early 2000s, when Isi chaired the governing board of the WJC and would travel from his home in Israel to the U.S.

Edgar Bronfman was the head and chief financial backer of the group, and his top professional and close confidant was Israel Singer.

As Isi became more involved in the workings of the WJC, he sought to apply standard business practices and democratic methods, which Singer resisted strongly. And with good cause, it turned out, because he was found to have a secret Swiss bank account, and millions of WJC dollars were unaccounted for.

### TROUBLING FINDINGS

Isi would share with me some of his troubling findings about the WJC and put me on the trail of others who were privy to damaging information. He recognized that press coverage in *The Jewish Week* could galvanize a public outcry against the WJC's elaborate cover-up. Based in large part on the factual information that Isi provided, the paper published a number of editorials and news stories raising questions about how the WJC operated.

Over time, the general press here and in Europe also covered the brewing scandal, which resulted in the New York State Attorney General's office issuing a legal filing critical of the WJC. Israel Singer's financial escapades were curtailed and Isi's allegations of lack of oversight were borne out.

But it took several years for the drama to play out fully, and along the way, the WJC in Israel sued Isi for \$6 million dollars for defamation. *The Jewish Week* and several European Jewish publications were threatened as well.

Isi had been removed from power at WJC during this time, but he waged a strong legal and public relations defense as more revelations about Singer's financial improprieties came to light. Without fanfare, the WJC finally withdrew its libel case against Isi.

In March 2007, Edgar Bronfman, recognizing that he had been betrayed by Singer, whom he later described as "the man I called my rabbi, my friend and even my son," fired him.

These events closed a sad chapter in the proud history of the WJC. But while Singer became persona non grata there, he remained president of the Claims Conference and chair of the World Jewish Restitution Organization, which pursued claims for recovery of Jewish property in much of Europe.

***"Isi was a leader, and his compass was consistently pointed toward justice."***

Ever the maverick, Isi, now speaking out primarily through his opinion column in *The Jerusalem Post*, called for reform at the Conference. He advocated for new leadership, asserting that aging survivors were not being helped sufficiently and that funds were being diverted for non-Holocaust related causes.

The chorus of critics grew when it was learned in 2010 that at least \$42 million set aside for survivors had been stolen from the Claims Conference through an elaborate scam by a group of its employees over a period of years.

But the leadership fought back and went on offense, accusing Isi of being a vindictive "scandal monger" and worse. They managed to hold on to the reins, though some employees were prosecuted and convicted.

Reading Rutland's biography and recalling the details of those fierce conflicts, it became even more clear to me why her title for the book, "Lone Voice," was so appropriate. As was the subtitle, "the wars of Isi Leibler," whose battles ranged from decrying the anti-Semitic Kremlin to resisting efforts to squelch his criticism emanating from the very organizations so dear to him.

Isi was a leader, and his compass was consistently pointed toward justice. We need more like him. May his memory be for a blessing.

**Gary Rosenblatt** was editor and publisher of *The Jewish Week* from 1993 to 2019. Follow him at [garyrosenblatt.substack.com](http://garyrosenblatt.substack.com).

**Do you have an event coming up? Submit your events online at [www.jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/contact/submit-an-event](http://www.jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/contact/submit-an-event)**

## ● IN OTHER NEWS

### UJA quizzes mayoral candidates

UJA-Federation quizzed seven NYC mayoral candidates on homelessness, public safety, Israel and reimbursing nonprofit contractors.

The candidates — Eric Adams, Shaun Donovan, Kathryn Garcia, Ray McGuire, Scott Stringer, Maya Wiley and Andrew Yang — were interviewed for 15 minutes each by UJA CEO Eric Goldstein and UJA Board Member Merryl Tisch during a video event on April 20. (Candidate Dianne Morales is no longer taking part in candidates' forums, Goldstein said.)

Most of the candidates were asked about the city's process for reimbursing nonprofits and agreed that the bureaucracy needs to be streamlined. They also outlined their fiscal plans for the money that is expected to flow into the city from the federal government for COVID-related relief. All of the candidates asked about Israel said they would be happy to visit the country as mayor.

Candidates also emphasized their Jewish bona fides. Donovan noted that he is the "grandson of an Ashkenazi Jew" and that his sister is a Jew by choice. Yang said Israel would be "my first official trip as mayor." Garcia noted that "Israel is our fourth largest trading partner with the city of New York." McGuire, speaking moments after the guilty verdict in the Derek Chauvin trial was announced, quoted at length from a 1963 speech by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who said "Justice is charged with the omnipotence of God." And Adams, the Brooklyn borough president, said, "I like to say that Brooklyn is the Tel Aviv of America."

A video of the forum is available on UJA-Federation's Facebook page.

### Jewish groups welcome Chauvin conviction

Jewish groups welcomed the April 20 conviction of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd. Some reactions:

UJA-Federation: "We hope today's decision brings some measure of justice, healing, and peace to our nation. We will continue to work with our broad network of nonprofit partners to help address inequities across our community in the months and years ahead for the benefit of all New Yorkers.

Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, Congregation Beit Simchat Torah: "The triple conviction [of] George Floyd's killer is the beginning of accountability, and we hope that it brings a small measure of relief to his family, to his community, and to all who have been watching and waiting for this moment."

New York Jewish Agenda: "Tzedek, tzedek, tirdof. (Justice, justice, you shall pursue.) Justice prevailed today in Minneapolis, but the pursuit of justice is ongoing." (NYJA postponed last night's forum with NYC candidates for district attorney, which had been scheduled for shortly after the verdict was announced.)

Ann Toback, CEO of the Workers Circle: "Today's guilty verdict is a critical counter to the culture of impunity and white supremacy that infects law enforcement in the United States."

Jonathan Greenblatt, CEO and National Director, Anti-Defamation League: "It is long past time for our country to tackle systemic racism, reimagine what public safety looks like, and create transformational change to ensure justice and fair treatment for all people. Black Lives Matter, and our society's laws, practices and institutions must reflect that."

Rabbi Sandra Lawson, Reconstructing Judaism's Director of Racial Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: "Waking up thinking we still have so much work to do. I don't feel celebratory, but I do feel a small level of relief. Yesterday the arc bent towards justice. Today we keep fighting for justice and accountability for all who are killed by our racist system."

### Kosher pantry opens in Westchester

UJA-Federation of New York opened the first kosher food pantry in Westchester County.

The HOPE Community Services Kosher Food Pantry,

located at 50 Washington Avenue in New Rochelle, offers Westchester residents free, pre-packaged bags that are available for pick up every other Thursday, beginning April 15, from 10:00 am to 12:00 noon. Delivery is available for homebound residents as well.

A partnership with HOPE Community Services, Feeding Westchester and Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty, the pantry is expected to serve approximately 100 kosher households in need in its first year.

"This pantry is a game-changer for local kosher residents," said Eric S. Goldstein, CEO of UJA-Federation of New York. "Individuals and families who struggle all year-round or have been impacted by the pandemic now have a new local resource to bring home nutritious, essential kosher food."

## ● OPINION

# A House Bill on Israel is Flawed, but Our Jewish Civil War is Worse

By Yehuda Kurtzer

In the partisan changeover that resulted from the 2020 U.S. elections, there were bound to be some tests and challenges for those of us who identify within the broad spectrum of "pro-Israel." The first is now upon us: a proposed bill emerging in the House of Representatives that places a set of limitations on how U.S. aid to Israel is used.

The bill, introduced by Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn., and endorsed by a growing number of progressives, would prohibit American dollars from being used for actions by Israel that involve the detaining of Palestinian children, the appropriation or destruction of Palestinian property, the forcible removal of Palestinians or toward unilateral annexation. The measure would put in place a new level of oversight.

There is reason for the pro-Israel world to be concerned about this legislation. The bill's principal authors and its first sponsors are lawmakers with a track record of outspoken criticism of the State of Israel that at times has trafficked in anti-Semitism. Some of us who identify as progressive Zionists would support a good-faith attempt to criticize Israeli policy while genuinely supporting its security. This bill does not strike that balance.

Moreover, the bill takes some of the most extreme and egregious moral failures of the occupation – the detention of minors, for instance – and makes them emblematic of Israeli policy rather than exceptional.

In this context, some Israel advocates fear that even a bill with limited scope and no chance of passing represents a slippery slope — namely toward conditioning U.S. aid to Israel, as some lawmakers are proposing, or even eventually cutting the aid entirely. Israeli government policy has been shifting rightward, and American political attitudes are changing. The consensus bipartisan support that Israel enjoyed for two generations is eroding. If Congress is willing to question the historically sacrosanct commitment to Israeli military aid based on the question of home demolitions, will this pave the way toward more grievous sanctioning?

Meantime, on the other side of the aisle, some progressives view these legislative efforts as the only available lever. Frustrated with Israeli policy, and believing that the status quo entrenches unsustainable injustices, they are grasping at an obvious tool – even if this change in policy challenges a deeply held orthodoxy.

Now some of this divide – AIPAC opposes, J Street supports – is just reflective of partisan instincts. Some of it is just good old politics, using legislation that is not likely to pass in order to plant a flag. Besides, the Jewish community likes a good public fight, especially as it relates to Israel. Our controversies are witnesses to our values.

But beyond the political theater, two separate issues about the future of support for Israel are being conflated. The first is the importance of this particular legislation and the "red line" it appears to cross, and the second is whether or not we can brook legitimate dissent on Israeli policy *within* the framework of our community. Unfortunately we give all our attention to the first, even as the second is more important for the future of our

relationship with Israel.

Effective Jewish support for Israel depends on some notion of Jewish community. Without it, we are vulnerable on both sides of the political spectrum: The narrower your subcommunity, the less effective it will be in the long run at mobilizing wider support for its position, and the more dependent it becomes on building unwieldy coalitions. If the American Jewish community is going to remain broadly supportive of Israel, it must maintain within its big tent a wider range of policy positions than are currently tolerated under the banner of “pro-Israel.” This means, in turn, that the organized Jewish community has to open a wider lane than what now exists for political progressives to stay engaged with Israeli policy and for them to express their values.

Many of us who identify as Zionist or pro-Israel believe in the fundamental legitimacy of Palestinian self-determination and advocating for Palestinian human rights as part and parcel of our commitment to the State of Israel. These dual commitments should find their home in our political discourse. To argue that any gesture toward Palestinian human rights and dignity constitutes a *prima facie* security risk to Israel — as many in the organized Jewish community do — is horrifying, inaccurate and self-defeating to the objective of building as big and broad a coalition as possible that supports the State of Israel.

When it shuts out progressive values — including, most importantly, a concern for Palestinian human rights — the pro-Israel camp may win the political fights in this generation and lose the entire next generation. More important, we also will be complicit in turning human rights for Palestinians into the inverse of political rights for Jews.

Every time you close down one pathway for dissent on a communal orthodoxy, you need to open another. Dissent over Israeli policy is a legitimate expression of Jewish participation and engagement with Israel. Pro-Israel voices sometimes acknowledge this with platitudes, but more often than not dismiss political *strategies* associated with dissent as disloyalty. This is untenable. Not every issue that puts AIPAC on one side and J Street on the other demands a knockdown fight.

Outspoken criticism of Israeli policy will remain a feature of the Jewish and American political conversation.

Much of this criticism is becoming more shrill, and the days of bipartisan support are behind us. We are going to be tested with new “slippery slopes.” But when you are on a slippery slope, sometimes the best thing is not to try to reach the top of the mountain but simply to gain secure footing.

I doubt this legislation will pass, and it should not. American military aid to Israel is vital for the long-term security interests of both countries. But not every disagreement calls for internal war. We need to notice how much we lose when we follow the belligerent instinct indiscriminately. All the wins, over time, may bring about a bigger loss. (JTA)

*Yehuda Kurtzer is the President of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America, editor of the recently-published “The New Jewish Canon” and host of the Identity/Crisis podcast.*

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## ● OPINION

# My Father Was an Owner. He Taught Me to Value Organized Labor.

*A Brooklyn rabbi remembers a generation of Jewish business leaders who considered unions as essential.*

By Rabbi Rachel Timoner

Earlier this year, when my father was in the last weeks of his life, he told us a story that none of us knew or remembered. In the 1960s, when he was running a regional roofing company in Florida that became a multistate, multimillion-dollar conglomerate, he saw that his unions were weaker because they were racially segregated.

“It didn’t make any sense,” he told us. “These guys would have been stronger if they worked together.”

So he went to the head of the Black union and then the

head of the white union and told them they needed to integrate. And they did, he said, making his company the first in its industry and in the South with an integrated union.

Some unions were integrated in the late 19th century, so I have no idea if my dad's story was really a first in his industry. But what I do know is that as a business leader in Miami 60 years ago, my Jewish father was a staunch supporter of labor unions — even though he was management, not labor. Throughout his business career, which included founding an airline in the 1970s, he championed the rights of workers to organize. It was evident to him that the success of his companies was dependent on the success and satisfaction of his workers. This position strengthened his bottom line by creating a loyalty and devotion among his workforce that is rare today. Air Florida employees — from flight attendants to pilots to receptionists — continue to hold reunions where they speak of him with love, and many lit candles and came to his memorial service when he died.

I'm now a rabbi, and I can quote the Mishnah about our obligation to workers, but the truth is that my father was my primary teacher here. My dad taught me that businesses thrive when the dignity of every human being is honored — workers, customers and shareholders alike. He taught me that there is no contradiction between being pro-business and pro-union. He taught me that our economy and society can be both prosperous and caring. He taught me that standing for the rights of workers is what it means to be a proud Jew.

I thought about my father's lessons several times this month, especially after labor leader Randi Weingarten in a JTA interview used language to suggest that the modern Jewish community was less likely to support unions than it had in generations past. In response to criticism, Weingarten conceded that she could have expressed her point more artfully, but her essential point stands: that "historically, there was much less equivocation about whether to be pro-union in the Jewish community."

As we've just watched Amazon spend huge sums to defeat a union-organizing effort in Alabama, and as we debate the Jewish community's changing relationship with labor organizing, let's remember the entire generation of Jewish business leaders, like my father, for whom unions were essential. We often tell the stories of the

immigrant generation who were the labor leaders. Their children, many of whom went on to sit on the other side of the negotiating table while valuing labor rights, are also part of the Jewish people's legacy and identity. Not just mine, but ours.

As I mourn my father, Eli Timoner, "zichrono livracha," one way to honor his memory is to champion labor organizing efforts as he did, and especially to stand with all front line workers — everyone from teachers to nurses to delivery workers — all those who keep the world moving even in a pandemic. Another is to hold up his example and the promise it contains — of businesses that care for people, an economy that values workers, and a society that works for all. (JTA)

*Rabbi Rachel Timoner is senior rabbi at Congregation Beth Elohim, a Reform congregation in Park Slope, Brooklyn.*

## ● SABBATH WEEK / ACHREI MOT-KEDOSHIM

# Rabbis Need to Teach the Torah of Public Policy

*This week's portion demands that we engage in questions about justice, fairness and the economy.*

By Rabbi Michael Rothbaum

When do you call the rabbi?

Sometimes to complain. (We're Jews, after all.) But usually, a life cycle event has taken place. A birth, thank God. An impending wedding. An illness. Too often in the last year, a death.

Over the past 13 months, tragedy has demanded rabbis step forward to provide a steady shoulder, open ears and a guiding hand. It's been deeply painful, but it's been a privilege. The calamity of COVID represents a challenge that rabbis are seen as uniquely equipped to help confront. Even more so than in normal times, we've walked with our communities in the pain that accompa-

nies untimely death.

For me, this raises a question: if rabbis are qualified to attend to those suffering pain, loss or grief, are we not also qualified to address the brokenness in our land that *results* in pain, in loss, in grief?

For some Jews, the answer is an unequivocal *no*. Even Jews who call upon rabbis in times of crisis sometimes share open contempt for those of us who teach the Torah of public policy, social justice and – that dirtiest of words – “politics.”

What business, they ask, does a rabbi have talking about such things?

The second of the two portions we read this week is Kedoshim. In it, God makes a simple but urgent demand: *K'doshim t'hiyu ki kadosh Ani*. “Be holy, because I am holy.” God’s holiness is not for God alone, unattainable to the lowly mortal. Rather, human beings can embody that holiness, becoming personifications of the Divine.

While some traditions allow for this possibility, they ask the ostensible holy person to be cloistered or physically apart from their kin. It wouldn’t be surprising if the Torah followed suit; after all, in some contexts the word *kadosh* means “apart” or “separate.” But the holiness of Kedoshim is not reserved for the ritual functionaries, the priests. Instead, God commands Moses to speak to *kol-eidat*, the entire community, regarding what is holy.

The insistence that every one of us participate in holiness-making is an essential element of Jewish theology. How we perform this holiness is the subject of Kedoshim. Yes, there are instructions for ritual holiness: Offer sacrifices to God, not idols; make sure they’re consumed and not left to rot; keep Shabbos. But the bulk of the teachings involve how we construct society, and how we interact with each other in that society.

Many of the instructions involve imbalances of power. Kedoshim enumerates laws regarding relatively weaker groups: the elderly, consumers, immigrants, workers. Those who have accrued power through land ownership, for example, must leave some of their produce for those who are poor and landless. Those who have the power to hire and fire employees are warned not to oppress their workers. For those empowered as judges, stealing, lying and false denials are forbidden, as is the

avel *b’mishpat*, the “violent injustice” of discrimination.

Even those who have power by reason of what they know are bound to certain standards. If one possesses information about a certain person, the Torah instructs them not to be a *rachil*, a “peddler” walking about spreading this information; conversely, if the information may prevent danger to others, the individual possessing such knowledge can no longer stand around while their neighbor’s blood is shed.

Which brings us, again, to the matter of death. When there is a death, you call the rabbi. But with so much needless death in this country, I can’t help but wonder: Why didn’t you call sooner?

How many American deaths would’ve been entirely preventable had we only observed the teachings of Kedoshim? Like the deaths of our unhoused neighbors who perish under overpasses, while those with wealth continue to accrue more of it, fighting taxes that ask them to leave even the tiniest corners of their fields?

Or the deaths of undocumented immigrants, afraid to seek life-saving healthcare lest ICE agents nab them in the bright light of the emergency room?

Or the deaths of workers who collapse from unsafe working conditions, exposed to COVID in unventilated overcrowded workplaces — or simply overworked — left vulnerable by a political system that values corporate campaign contributions over human life and dignity?

Or the deaths of those like George Floyd and Daunte Wright and Breonna Taylor and countless more — a shameful *yahrzeit* list of the victims of a criminal justice system built upon nothing if not *avel b’mishpat*, the violent injustice of a racial caste system?

#### CANDLELIGHTING, READINGS:

**Iyar 11, 5781 | Friday, April 23, 2021**

- **Light candles at:** 7:26 p.m.

**Iyar 12, 5781 | Saturday, April 24, 2021**

- **Torah reading:** Acharei-Kedoshim  
Leviticus 16:1–20:27
- **Haftarah:** Amos 9:7–15
- **Shabbat ends:** 8:29 p.m.

*“And what of rabbis? Are we just spiritual sanitation workers, called in to sweep up in the aftermath of a disordered society?”*

None of this is news. None of this information is unavailable to us. Are we not accomplices, standing in silence while our neighbor’s blood is shed?

Does Torah really have nothing to teach us regarding these all-too-common American atrocities? If so, what then is this tradition of ours? A faded scrapbook of pleasant memories? A vague sense of connection to a beloved grandparent?

And what of rabbis? Are we just spiritual sanitation workers, called in to sweep up in the aftermath of a disordered society that prizes profits over God’s crowning creation, the human being?

In Torah, the opposite of holiness is not secularity. There is no “secular” in Torah. The opposite of holiness is idolatry. It is wickedness.

Rabbis stand by your side, uphold you while you peer into the depths of the grave. We’re humbled and honored to do so. But it’s time we stood together outside the gates of the cemetery, learning the Torah of holy society, building holy economy, partnering in the cultivation of holy justice, the cornerstone of holy civilization.

**Rabbi Michael Rothbaum** is spiritual leader of Congregation Beth Elohim in Acton, Massachusetts. He serves on the advisory boards of the Jewish Alliance of Law and Social Action and the New England Jewish Labor Committee, and is a member of *T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights*. He lives in Acton with his husband, Yiddish singer Anthony Russell.

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## ● MUSINGS

# Why do some people hate Jews?

By David Wolpe

Hatred of Jews is the most intractable and sustained hatred in human history. Moreover, it is a hatred for which many reasons have been given by the haters, all of them demonstrably untrue.

Jews have been hated when they were poor and when they were rich; when they were communists and when they were capitalists; when they were stateless and when they had a state; when they were religious and when they were secular; when they “invaded and took jobs” and when they were rootless and barred from the marketplace; when they were phenomenal achievers in the world and when they stayed in the study hall and did nothing but learn; even when they were present and (often after expulsions and murders) when they no longer lived in the country that still bore hatred for them.

In other words, Jews have been hated because they remained Jews. Because they refused, in the face of the most furious persecutions, to cease being who they were. Because they reflect back on the world the reality of its own brutality. Because, as Maurice Samuel once put it, “no one loves his alarm clock.”

Those who have embraced and welcomed the Jewish people have been blessed, as the Bible predicted. And this tiny tribe, 0.2% of the population of the world, endures, a testament to the phenomenal resilience of the Jewish spirit and the imperishable promise of God.

*Named the most influential Rabbi in America by Newsweek Magazine and one of the 50 most influential Jews in the world by the Jerusalem Post, **David Wolpe** is the Rabbi of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles, California.*

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● **THE VIEW FROM CAMPUS**

# A Gap Year in Israel Restored My Faith in Dialogue and Compromise

*If people on opposing sides of the Arab-Israeli conflict can find common ground, so can our warring political camps.*

By Abby Miller

Last spring, as I stood before 100 individuals to present about government and private entities' responsibility in combating misinformation, I glanced at the sea of placards in front of me: Indonesia, France, Algeria, Venezuela. As high school students, we entered our Model United Nations conference with the same mission: to represent a nation and its values, putting our own beliefs aside, to discuss conflicts that plague our world today.

After hearing others' viewpoints, we wrote resolutions to pressing global issues. To be surrounded by teenagers, impassioned to create solutions to the world's problems, was inspiring. I sensed that through this kind of ambition and willingness to compromise, issues from human rights abuses to climate change would fade away.

But shortly after this conference, COVID-19 entered the U.S. As I watched protests break out against lockdown restrictions, the unemployment rate spike and elected leaders fail to contain the virus, the faith in diplomacy and cooperation that I had built up throughout my Model UN experience started to fall apart.

I remember scrolling through social media posts during the first few weeks of quarantine, reading completely different theories as to how the coronavirus started, how it was spread, and how to best "flatten the curve." I was unable to discern between what was true and what wasn't. The internet was becoming an overwhelming

hub of contradictory statements that were dividing us into groups based upon which theories we believed.

I felt frustrated and confused. It would take an unexpected detour from the high school-college pipeline — a gap year from Harvard in Israel — to help me regain faith in the world.

When universities decided to move instruction online, and my older brother told me to consider taking a gap year, I laughed. I was so mentally prepared to go to college in the fall that this path seemed so foreign to me. Nonetheless, as weeks went by and the thought of online classes daunted me, the idea of a gap year kept resurfacing in my mind.

And eventually, I made one of the scariest decisions of my life: Before I knew it, I boarded a plane to Israel for a gap year program run by Aardvark Israel.

My experience was filled with excitement, even amid the pandemic restrictions. I shopped for groceries in the shuk, explored this wondrously diverse country from the holy streets of Jerusalem to the cosmopolitan neighborhoods of Tel Aviv, interned in software development at a startup, and celebrated Jewish holidays with Israelis.

In addition to this cultural and societal immersion, I was exposed to Israel's unique political atmosphere. Living in another country reminded me that although nations face common issues, they all have different battles at home. For Israel, one of these battles is the Arab-Israeli conflict.

When Aardvark Israel took me to areas of the West Bank like Hebron, I saw this divide through my own eyes, and it initiated the same feeling of hopelessness that I felt when reflecting on the pandemic. How could we cooperate to solve international crises when people who live together are unable to resolve their own internal conflicts?

Questions circled in my mind until we visited Gush Etzion, where I learned about an organization called Roots, or "Shorashim." Roots fosters dialogue between people on opposing sides of the Arab-Israeli conflict. I heard from two representatives, one Palestinian and one Israeli. They explained the importance of using dialogue as a means to promote mutual understanding. And they discussed how they empower future generations by

bringing together Israeli and Palestinian children. But it was seeing these two men shake hands after hearing each other's stories that gave me hope.

Model UN had been the last time I'd seen something like this. I couldn't help but feel nostalgic as I saw opposing sides empathize with each other and listened to alternative approaches to solving such a contentious issue.

"How could we cooperate to solve international crises when people who live together are unable to resolve their own internal conflicts?"

After entering March 2021 with my first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine and watching the distribution of vaccines worldwide, I'm steadily regaining hope. Although our world has been torn down by the pandemic, it has given people an opportunity to both fight against COVID-19 together and to initiate political, economic and social growth.

Back in high school, I ended each Modern UN conference with a feeling of accomplishment. What I've come to realize is that this feeling of accomplishment was never about feeling as if I'd solved all the world's problems; it was about knowing I could bring together people with different opinions and values to collaborate.

I will always remember the thoughtfulness I saw from my peers at Model UN conferences, the bravery and compassion I witnessed from the members of Roots, and the collaboration I noticed as people of different backgrounds and cultures gradually began to work together to fight COVID-19. And, as I enter college this fall, I will keep my mind open, ready to listen and learn from others, remembering that no matter how bad things get in the world, there's always hope and the ability to work for better.

**Abby Miller** will be a freshman at Harvard University in fall 2021 after deferring for a year.

*Debates over Israel, mental health challenges, anti-Semitism, creating a strong Jewish life — young Jews experience a lot in college. The View From Campus is a column for them to tell The Jewish Week, and you, all about it. Want to write for us? Send a draft or pitch to Lev Gringauz at lev.jewish-week@gmail.com.*

## UPCOMING EVENTS

APRIL 23 | 6:00 p.m. Free

### Virtual Shabbat Service with Israel's Minister for Aliyah and Integration

Temple Emanu-El's Friday Night Virtual Shabbat Service welcomes Pnina Tamano-Shata, Israel's Minister for Aliyah and Integration to discuss the 30th Anniversary of Operation Solomon and the rescue of Ethiopia's Jews. The program will include a performance by musicians Idan Raichel, Yahalom David and Avi Wogderas Wassa, as well as remarks by David Harris, CEO of the American Jewish Committee.

Register at [streicker.nyc/events/a-sweet-song-of-zion](https://streicker.nyc/events/a-sweet-song-of-zion)

APRIL 26 | 7:30 p.m. Free

### State of Play: The Political Future of the American Jewish Community

David Axelrod — political consultant, strategist, CNN political commentator, and former chief strategist and senior advisor to President Barack Obama — will deliver Fairfield University's Bennett Lecture in Judaic Studies on "State of Play: The Political Future of the American Jewish Community."

Register at <https://bit.ly/3sDOXOt>

APRIL 21 | 8:00 a.m. \$8-\$18

### Jews and Race

Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership's 2021 Critical Conversations series, "Jews and Race," includes presentations by anti-racism activist Yavilah McCoy, Dr. Marc Dollinger of San Francisco State University and Rabbi Mira Rivera of New York's Romemu. The two online sessions are "Talking Frankly about Race and Racism," on April 27, and a "Workshop on Equity and Allyship," on May 10.

Register at [www.spertus.edu/critical-conversations-jews-and-race](https://www.spertus.edu/critical-conversations-jews-and-race)