

# The New York Jewish Week/end

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Residents examine the damage at their home after it was hit the day before by a rocket fired from the Gaza Strip, in the southern Israeli city of Ashdod, May 18, 2021. (Avi Roccah/Flash90)

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## ● NEWS

### NYC's mayoral candidates aren't saying much about Jews or Israel. The Pew study suggests why.

*The decline of non-Orthodox ethnic clout reflects a generational shift.*

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

The Pew Research Center's latest study of American Jews came out last week, with few bombshells. That's probably because the study confirms what anyone paying close attention has probably already suspected.

For example, the study felt right to me in its description of the most rapidly growing cohorts of young Jews: the Orthodox and what Pew describes as Jews who do not identify with Judaism as a religion.

Not only are the ranks of these divergent cohorts growing but, says Pew, the Jews of no religion “feel they have not much or nothing at all in common” with Orthodox Jews. Pew noted this in 2013, “[b]ut it is especially evident in the 2020 survey, conducted during a polarizing election campaign.”

Between the frum and the “nones” is a shrinking middle – that is, Reform and Conservative Jews who identify as Jews by religion, but whose politics and religious observance tend to skew centrist or liberal. “Roughly four-in-ten Jewish adults under 30 identify with either Reform (29%) or Conservative Judaism (8%), compared with seven-in-ten Jews ages 65 and older,” according to Pew.

In most things, New York offers a new spin on the old joke: We’re just like the Jews, only more so. That the Orthodox community is larger here than anywhere else is self-evident, and an important study of New York Jews in 2011 showed a growing secular, marginally affiliated community. “In the past, [synagogue] membership was more of a given,” Rabbi Angela Buchdahl of Central Synagogue told Pew this year. “People felt they had to join a synagogue in order to belong and affiliate. Now I would say, there’s a lot more ‘do-it-yourself Judaism’ and internet Judaism and virtual Judaism.”

The current mayoral race is a reflection of this softening middle. To the degree that candidates have explicitly courted the “Jewish vote,” it has mostly been a bid for the haredi Orthodox blocs. Frontrunners Andrew Yang and Eric Adams have been the most assertive in appealing to the concerns of haredi voters, especially their fears that the state and city will demand more rigorous standards for secular education at yeshivas.

City Comptroller Scott Stringer, currently trying to fend off a #MeToo accusation, is the only Jewish candidate in the race, but he hasn’t really hit that very hard.

Unless asked, no one is talking about antisemitism, a topic that only last year galvanized some 25,000 mostly non-Orthodox Jews to march across the Brooklyn Bridge. No candidate headed to Riverdale after a vandal smashed windows at four synagogues, including a Conservative one.

I’d suggest that outside the Orthodox community, there is no real “tribal” issue that would inspire Jewish voters

and make them vote any differently than similarly situated gentiles – and candidates know this. The younger “nones” will take an interest in either progressive issues or the quality of life concerns that have been a big part of the mayoral forums, and will not vote according to any distinct Jewish interest. The “middle” voters – older, centrist, Jewishly affiliated — probably are thinking mainly about crime and economic recovery, the two big issues in the race. When two big nonprofits – UJA-Federation of NY and Met Council – held mayoral forums this year, the focus was largely on their sponsors’ secular concerns: social service delivery, COVID relief and assistance to nonprofits.

The conflict between Israel and Gaza would normally be the kind of issue that a candidate would use to establish his or her pro-Jewish bona fides across the Jewish spectrum. But only four of the eight candidates issued statements of the “we stand with Israel” variety. (Only progressive candidate Dianne Morales appeared to criticize Israel, condemning “state violence.”)

***“Only the Orthodox, with their closely aligned self-interests, crowded precincts and bloc-voting, arouse much attention from candidates seeking specifically Jewish votes.”***

Andrew Yang even had to walk back a one-sided statement of support for Israel, after criticism from Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and, he said, members of his own staff. Although a centrist, Yang heard the concerns of progressives, and didn’t feel it would cost him many Jewish votes to acknowledge “the pain and suffering on both sides.”

Contrast that with what is happening in Congress: While the mayoral candidates were quiet on the Israel-Hamas conflict, Democrats were growing increasingly impatient with the violence and more willing to criticize Israel.

And it’s not just the far-left: Pro-Israel stalwart Rep. Jerry Nadler, whose Upper West Side district is considered the most Jewish in the country, joined 11 Jewish colleagues in the House on a letter urging an “immediate ceasefire.” Sen. Jon Ossoff, the Jewish freshman from Georgia, led a call by 28 Democrats in the Senate for a ceasefire. Gregory Meeks, the Queens congressman who chairs the House Foreign Affairs Committee, came close to asking for a delay in an arms deal between the U.S. and Israel.

Perhaps the candidates are wary of alienating Jewish voters on either side of the Israel divide, especially this close to the primary. But in an increasingly diverse city, the decline of non-Orthodox Jewish ethnic clout is undoubtedly a factor: In a 2012 article noting that there were no Jews running for mayor that year, the New York Times reported that the Jewish proportion of the citywide primary electorate had declined to 20 percent from twice that in the 1950s and 1960s. That's why only the Orthodox, with their closely aligned self-interests, crowded precincts and bloc-voting, arouse much attention from candidates seeking specifically Jewish votes.

(Why, you may ask, are Orthodox voters significant in a Democratic primary when, according to Pew, some 75% of the community votes Republican? Because the next mayor of New York is almost guaranteed to be a Democrat, and the community wants to be heard in City Hall.)

Pew says "these generational shifts toward both Orthodoxy and secular Jewishness have the potential, in time, to reshape American Jewry." I'd say the time is already here.

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## ● NEWS

# Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez leads push in Congress to block arms sale to Israel

By Asaf Shalev

A trio of progressive Congress members is about to propose a resolution to block a \$735 million weapons sale to Israel over concerns about its actions in Gaza, Jewish Currents reported, citing an early draft of the resolution.

The sponsors of the legislation targeting the transfer of precision-guided missiles to Israel are Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Mark Pocan of Wisconsin

and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, all Democrats.

The arms deal has made headlines as Israel and Hamas exchange fire in a round of fighting that started 10 days ago and has left hundreds dead, mostly Palestinians living in Gaza.

"At a time when so many, including our president, support a ceasefire, we should not be sending 'direct attack' weaponry to prime minister Netanyahu to prolong this violence," says an email obtained by Jewish Currents that was sent out by Ocasio-Cortez's office to ask other lawmakers for support. "It is long past time to end the US policy of unconditional military arms sales, particularly to governments that have violated human rights."

The progressive lawmakers appear to be picking up where the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Rep. Gregory Meeks, a fellow Democrat, left off.

Meeks had considered sending a letter to the White House asking for a delay in the transfer of the arms shipment in light of the hostilities, but ultimately decided against it. His momentary consideration marked a shift in how congressional leaders have traditionally related to Israeli security matters.

## ● NEWS

# New York sees anti-Israel protests as war on Hamas escalates

By Jewish Week Staff

Bella Hadid, the well-known Palestinian-American model, took part in an anti-Israel protest in Bay Ridge on Saturday afternoon, Pix11 reported.

The Brooklyn neighborhood has a large Arabic-speaking community. Social media showed people climbing street lights to wave Palestinian flags and others setting off fireworks, Pix11 reported. Protesters shut down traffic on Interstate 278 in at least one direction, according to video posted online.

Separately, hundreds of members of the anti-Zionist

group Jewish Voice for Peace – NYC marched in Brooklyn Friday evening, starting in Grand Army Plaza and ending up near the Brooklyn home of Senate Majority Leader Schumer demanding the he “work to end U.S. support for the Israeli military violence against Palestinians.”

Many thousands of people protested against Israel in major America and European cities over the weekend as the latest Israel-Gaza conflict reached new heights.

Rep. Jerry Nadler (D-Manhattan) called on the Biden Administration Friday to “do more to stop the pain and suffering of Israelis and Palestinians.” He led a group of Jewish House members on a letter to urging “immediate de-escalation and diplomatic engagement.”

By contrast, influential progressive Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-Bronx-Queens) called Israel an apartheid state in a tweet on Saturday that marked an inflection point in her increasing criticism of Israel.

“Apartheid states aren’t democracies,” she wrote in a tweet that garnered 275,000 likes.

On Sunday, Israel’s Acting Consul General in New York, Israel Nitzan, issued a statement, saying, “We ask our friends in New York and all over America to stand strong behind Israel. The world must stop Hamas terrorism. Our human outrage over these deaths and injuries needs to fall squarely on Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and those who support them.”

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## ● NEWS

# ‘I Don’t Believe in God, but I Am Jewish’

*Nearly a quarter of American Jews — 1.5 million people — identify as “Jews of no religion.”*

By Gabe Friedman

Jesse Wilks had a bar mitzvah — just not a religious one.

His parents raised him in a secular home in New York City but still instilled him with a strong sense of Jewish

identity. His mother — who worked for the Workers Circle and is now on the editorial board of the left-wing Jewish Currents magazine — hosted holiday dinners, minus the religious prayers. Instead of attending Hebrew school at a synagogue, Wilks grew up going to a “shule,” or non-religious school that taught him Yiddish.

The pattern continued with his coming-of-age ceremony, which gathered family and friends at a synagogue he never attended.

“It did not involve a Torah reading but instead involved picking any topic related to Judaism that interested me, and then working with a tutor ... doing research and basically reading the equivalent of a 13-year-old’s paper” during the ceremony, he said. He chose to explore social justice in Judaism and Jewish history, with a focus on labor movements.

Now a 34-year-old architect living in Philadelphia, Wilks does not believe in God and defines himself explicitly as atheist — but also Jewish.

That makes him squarely a “Jew of no religion” according to the survey of U.S. Jews released last week by the Pew Research Center.

As it did in 2013, Pew researchers broke American Jews into two broad categories: “Jews of religion” and “Jews of no religion.” People in the second group, the researchers wrote, “describe themselves (religiously) as atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular, but who have a Jewish parent or were raised Jewish, and who still consider themselves Jewish in any way (such as ethnically, culturally or because of their family background).”

Out of the survey’s 3,836 total respondents, 882 identified as Jews of no religion, suggesting that nearly a quarter of American Jews — 1.5 million people — fall into the category.

Becka Alper, a 2021 study co-author, said the term captures a large and diverse part of the Jewish community that can’t be summarized by other terms such as “cultural Jews” or “ethnic Jews.”

“It really wouldn’t be sufficient to simply ask people about their religion and categorize [only] those who said Jewish as Jews,” she said. “We’d be missing a really big and important part of the Jewish community, those who are

Jewish but not namely or at all as a matter of religion.”

Critics of the term say it draws a distinction where there should be none. “The fact that 24% of ‘Jews of no religion’ own a Hebrew-language prayer book should give us pause,” Rachel B. Gross, a professor of Jewish studies at San Francisco State University, wrote in an essay for the Jewish Telegraphic Agency after the study was released.

Gross argues that the study’s categories reflected a division that makes sense to Christians, but not in Judaism, where practice has always shifted over time.

“American Jews continue to find meaning in emotional connections to their families, communities, and histories, though the ways they do so continue to change,” she writes. “Expanding our definition of ‘religion’ can help us better recognize the ways in which they are doing so.”

That argument resonated with “Jews of no religion” who told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency about their Jewish identities.

### MANDY PATINKIN AND BAGELS

Sophie Vershbow knows exactly who she is: an atheist cultural Jew.

The 31-year-old social media manager, who works for one of the “big five” publishing houses in New York, has a deep connection to Jewish culture. She pointed to two things off the top of her head she feels a particular affinity for: actor Mandy Patinkin, and bagels.

Patinkin is an Emmy and Tony winner who became a minor icon this year for weaving Jewish and social justice themes together on social media. People like him in pop culture create a sense of community for other Jews, Vershbow said, and help familiarize non-Jews with Jewish culture.

That’s something the born-and-bred New Yorker said she realized was needed after she left the city for Hamilton College in upstate New York. Jews make up close to 15% of the population of New York City, where she grew up in the Chelsea neighborhood. While Hamilton’s student body was still far more Jewish than the general U.S. population, both the college and the surrounding area felt decidedly non-Jewish to her.

“I called my mom and I was like, ‘What just happened?’

And she goes ‘Sophie, what percent of the country do you think is Jewish?’” Vershbow said. “I studied the Holocaust in college, and learning about our history and how much we’ve been persecuted certainly makes me feel more connected to [my Jewish side]. And makes me feel like it’s important to carry these things on.”

But when it comes to religion, she describes participating in holidays — she still does some of the big ones with her parents, such as Passover and Hanukkah — as “going through the motions,” because she doesn’t believe in God. She grew up attending a Reform synagogue but had an early existential crisis of sorts, just before her bat mitzvah — “a pre-teenage change of heart,” in her words.

“I realized that I didn’t believe in God, and was like, I’m not going to go ahead and do my bar mitzvah. This doesn’t feel right to me,” she said. “Sort of the same way that you figure out you don’t believe in Santa and the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy. It didn’t really work for me.”

Her love of Jewish food (she’s extremely excited to be living near Zabar’s on the Upper West Side these days) is straightforward. Bagels on Sundays, latkes on Hanukkah, kugel around Yom Kippur — that’s something she sees herself instilling in her kids, if she has any in the future.

“I don’t think you have to go to temple for it to be passing [Judaism] down to your kids,” she said. “But if one ever said, you know, ‘Mommy, I want to go check it out, I want to see, I will certainly take my kids to temple and show them.’”

Vershbow said she sees no contradiction in her identity — and that being Jewish is at the center of it.

“My family is Polish, Russian, all of that, but ... I don’t feel personal connection to any of that. I feel a connection to the American Jewish experience. And that is a huge part of my identity,” she said. “But I think that’s an amazing thing about Judaism is that, for so many people in my own life, it seems to be pretty acceptable in a lot of communities to say: ‘I don’t believe in God, but I am Jewish.’ And these can perfectly coexist within me. And they’re not conflicting.”

### HOLIDAY DINNERS, HOLD THE DEITY

With decades of grassroots and congressional politics experience under her belt, 89-year-old June Fischer can

list an endless list of accomplishments. She has been a delegate from New Jersey in every Democratic National Convention since 1972; she has worked on Joe Biden campaigns since 1974, including his successful presidential run (and became a close friend of his); she worked in the offices of former Sen. Jon Corzine and current Sen. Robert Menendez.

She's also on the board of her local Jewish community center and in 1990 was a founding member of the National Jewish Democratic Council (now the Jewish Democratic Council of America).

But despite that portion of her resume, she's not affiliated with a synagogue — showing that the “Jews of no religion” category is not a 21st-century invention.

Fischer grew up in Weequahic, the section of Newark that Philip Roth made famous in his many novels based there. In fact, she graduated from high school with Roth, after sitting next to him in homeroom class for four years.

When she was 15, she went to a speech by Henry Wallace, Franklin Roosevelt's first vice president. She caught the politics bug because of his inspiring performance — not because of any sense of Jewish morality ingrained in her. “I was smitten,” she said.

Although the National Jewish Democratic Council, which she characterized as a liberal response to the AIPAC lobby, and many of the politicians she's worked with dealt often with Israel-related issues — Biden and Menendez both specialize in foreign policy — Fischer is not a zealous follower of the news in Israel.

And holiday dinners were — and still are for her — more about sticking to tradition than observing religious ritual.

“I do the traditional things, without the deity, as I say,” she said on the phone from her home in Clark. “I'm an atheist, I guess. But I'm fiercely, fiercely traditionally Jewish.”

### FEELING JEWISH EVERY DAY

Certain things trigger Jesse Wilks' sense of Jewishness — for instance, watching the Netflix show “Unorthodox,” about a woman leaving her Hasidic community in Brooklyn. While most days Wilks' knowledge of Jewish customs, rituals and history stays in the “background” of his mind, “Unorthodox” brought it to the “foreground.”

And when he traveled to Berlin during college, he felt his Jewishness turn to visceral vulnerability, in an uncomfortable way.

“I couldn't walk around and get out of my head that, you know, if I had been there 70 years before, I would have been murdered. And that colored my entire visit there,” he said. “And that was surprising to me that, you know, that my Jewish identity rose and bubbled up there.”

That experience mapped to one finding in the Pew study: 75% of American Jews overall said that “remembering the Holocaust” was important to their Jewish identity, including two thirds of Jews of no religion.

On the other hand, Pew found that while 60% of American Jews say they are strongly or somewhat emotionally attached to Israel, only a third of Jews of no religion described such an attachment. Wilks said he never thinks about the country, where he is entitled to citizenship because of his Jewish lineage.

“I feel zero connection to Israel. To me, it's the same [as] any country that I haven't visited,” he said.

Right now, he is still figuring out what kind of Jewish identity he wants in his life as an adult. Growing up, his mother projected a strong sense of non-religious Jewish identity built on her family history, as a descendant of secular Jewish socialist activists from Eastern Europe.

“[I]t's hard for me to articulate what role [Jewishness] plays in my life,” says Wilks.

But now living apart from her, and being married to woman who is not Jewish, Wilks feels more disconnected from Jewish culture. (Jews who are married to people who are not Jewish identify are three times more likely to identify as Jews of no religion, according to Pew.)

Wilks admitted he would be forced to deal with the issue more head on if he had kids, but he and his wife aren't planning on having any.

“There's no question I feel Jewish every day and would always identify myself as that. But I don't know, it's hard for me to articulate what role that plays in my life,” he said.

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**● ANALYSIS**

# The next round will be worse, unless Israel reasserts control of its destiny

*The Hamas terror-state is causing violence on many fronts, fueling internal Israeli hatreds, harming us globally. The IDF response, however effective, is no substitute for strategy.*

By David Horowitz

Ten days into the battle, Israel's subterranean barrier against Hamas's cross-border "terror tunnels" has proved effective. The IDF has thwarted Hamas attempts to attack from the sea. It has intercepted unmanned explosive-carrying drones. It has repeatedly bombarded Hamas's network of tunnels within Gaza — the so-called "Metro" — through which Hamas moves its forces and weaponry, and from where it intended to emerge and kill and kidnap Israeli soldiers in any IDF ground offensive.

Several key Hamas commanders have been killed; others are on the run; innumerable rocket launchers and weapons stores have been destroyed. In short, Hamas has "received blows it didn't expect" and been set back "years," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu asserted on Tuesday, even as the rocket fire and Israeli counter-strikes raged on.

Which may well be true. But the IDF's tactical successes are no substitute for a strategy. And as this latest, terrible conflict underlines, Israel has no strategy for dealing with the Hamas terror-state. By contrast Hamas knows exactly where it is heading strategically, and has made deeply worrying progress over the past 10 days.

It opened this round of conflict on Monday, May 10, by launching a barrage of rockets at Jerusalem — at a stroke staking a claim among the Palestinians as the ostensible

defender of the contested city, where tension and violence had been building at and around the Al-Aqsa mosque atop the Temple Mount. At a stroke, too, by extension, it marginalized the West Bank Palestinian leadership under Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

Its rocket fire forced the evacuation of the Knesset plenum. It played havoc with Israel's Jerusalem Day celebrations. It delayed a court decision on evictions in Jerusalem's Sheikh Jarrah district, and forced the extension of a ban on Jews visiting the Temple Mount. Its incessant rocket fire subsequently necessitated the intermittent closure of Israel's main international airport, and the cancellation of most foreign airline flights to and from Israel. It closed our schools, stopped some of our trains. It has rained rockets and mortar shells upon a widening swath of southern Israel, and sent longer-range, more potent rockets deeper into the center of the country than ever before.

It has prompted minor rocket and mortar fire toward Israel from two other neighboring countries — Syria and Lebanon — and stirred up fresh hostility to Israel in a third, Jordan.

Perhaps most significantly, and worryingly, it has helped escalate tensions within Israel — between Israel's own Arab and Jewish citizens — to murderous heights, with mob violence raging for days in several Arab-Jewish cities and beyond.

As the very wise Arab affairs analyst Shimrit Meir noted in a television interview on Tuesday, when Israel's Arab sector held a general strike and thousands rallied and rioted across the West Bank in a so-called "day of rage," Hamas sees itself as having "unified 'Palestine from the river to the sea' in a collective protest" against Israel... It sees itself as the trigger that has unified the 'Palestinians of 1948' — Palestinian citizens of Israel — together with Gaza, the West Bank, and Jerusalem, into a single entity, protesting as one, acting as one."

Beyond our immediate neighborhood, the complexities of attempting to thwart a terror-state's rocket fire, cynically launched from the midst of a civilian population, have undermined Israel's international standing, with numerous world leaders and opinion-shapers maliciously or lazily comparing death tolls and concluding that because Israel's is lower, it must be the aggressor.

The likes of US talk show host John Oliver, whose views influence millions, seem to be blaming Israel for devoting resources to the protection of its citizens, while Hamas subverts Gaza's resources for war and, with heartbreaking consequences, uses Gazans as the human shields for its indiscriminate rocket fire. How dare Israel have an Iron Dome rocket defense system, these critics object, implying that if only Israel were suffering more fatalities, this might be a fairer fight and Israel might merit less castigation.

Doubtless to Hamas's further delight, Israel's public diplomacy efforts remain as lamentable as they have been for decades, if not more so. Today, we lack so much as a polished English-speaker as our ambassador to the United States; the prime minister has no coherent frontline English-language spokesman; and the IDF — which notoriously failed for hours with the Mavi Marmara incident a decade ago to produce the footage showing violent activists beating Israel naval commandos on the deck of a vessel running the Gaza blockade — has all too evidently learned little about the need for rapid explanation and response. If there is a military imperative to demolish a Gaza tower where several leading foreign media outlets have their offices, it is not sufficient to warn and give them time to leave before detonating the explosives. It is also necessary to immediately provide credible evidence that the building is indeed a Hamas military asset.

Also to Hamas's delight, the tide of hostility to Israel, which even the best public diplomacy could only partially alleviate, is playing out in displays of antisemitism, deeply troubling and discomfiting Diaspora Jewry.

While much of the world has clamored for Israel to accept a ceasefire, the United States, under the Biden administration, has clearly given Israel at least a few more days to continue to weaken Hamas militarily — the better to try to deter it from the next round of hostilities. But Biden is fighting a rising tide of Israel-criticism within the Democratic Party. Five, 10 or 15 years from now, it is far from fanciful to worry that a Democratic US presidency would be less dependable.

IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kohavi has spoken in the past of the unique challenges the Israeli army faces with so many active and potentially active fronts. And that reality goes to the heart of the dangers facing an Israel that

lacks a strategy for Hamas and Gaza.

This round of conflict may now be moving toward its conclusion. If so, deeply problematic though it has proved for Israel, it could have been considerably worse. The internal Israeli protests, one hopes and it would appear, may be subsiding, though the scars will take a long, long time to heal, and the root causes extend far deeper than this conflict. West Bank violence and terrorism have not reached First or Second Intifada dimensions, but that threat remains. Massed ranks of Palestinian refugees did not march on the Lebanese or Syrian borders. Crucially, Iran chose not to unleash Hezbollah, whose missile capabilities dwarf even Hamas's upgraded arsenal.

Forced to mobilize its security forces on three principal fronts — against Hamas in Gaza, in the West Bank, and to defuse violence within — Israel could be stretched further in the subsequent round of hostilities, for which Hamas will begin to prepare the moment this round is declared to be over.

Does Israel need to reconquer Gaza, oust Hamas, at a likely terrible cost, and remain there? Should it initiate a negotiating process with the Palestinian Authority, boosting the deeply problematic Mahmoud Abbas and seeking to vindicate Palestinian diplomacy over Palestinian terrorism? Would it be wise to encourage the internationally funded development of Gaza, with significant infrastructure projects to rehabilitate the Strip, giving Gazans more to lose and thus potentially complicating further Hamas assaults on Israel?

None of these strategic options is good. But the current absence of a strategy is worse. From round to round of conflict, Hamas has grown from a dangerous terrorist organization to the ruler of a terrorist state with what amounts to an army — funded in part by the money that Israel has allowed Hamas's Qatari patrons to deliver. It is increasingly dominating the Palestinian cause, harming Israel's international standing, and demonstrating the capacity to stoke violence against Israel on multiple fronts.

It is indeed possible that the IDF, as Netanyahu said, has set back Hamas militarily for years. But intermittent hostilities, launched at the enemy's convenience, battering the Israeli home front, with pauses in which the enemy develops a capacity to wreak still greater havoc, add up to an untenable reality. And when that enemy, deter-

mined to destroy this country, proves capable of galvanizing a widening array of hostile forces, it becomes a strategic, not just a military, threat.

In Ashkelon's Yad Michael synagogue on Sunday afternoon, parts of a Hamas rocket smashed a hole in the wall, spreading debris through the building hours before the start of Shavuot prayers. Within two hours, locals had completed an instant cleanup, washing and dusting and sweeping. "Nobody is going to destroy our festival," the synagogue cantor, Shalom Biton, declared as the brooms worked behind him and the ad hoc cleanup crew cheered. "The people of Israel are strong and courageous. Our enemies need to know... they won't beat us. Even if there are 100 more rounds of conflict, they're wasting their time."

The people of Israel are indeed strong and courageous, and disciplined and resilient under relentless fire.

But our enemies in Gaza have not yet concluded that they're wasting their time. To use the metaphoric fable, they think of Israel as a frog in slowly boiling water. They must be disabused. What's required is a sea change in which, rather than allowing Hamas to cast us into rounds of chaos at moments of its choosing, with ever-widening repercussions, Israel determines its long-term goals, sets about achieving them, and reasserts control of its own reality and destiny. (Times of Israel)

## ● OPINION

# Jews are being attacked in the streets of Israel's mixed cities. But are they victims of a 'pogrom'?

By Henry Abramson

The term "pogrom" is unfortunately back in our lexicon.

Last week, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin described attacks by "a bloodthirsty Arab mob" in the mixed Jew-

ish-Arab city of Lod as a "pogrom." A Jewish vigilante in Lod told The Washington Post that he was defending its Jewish residents "from a pogrom."

On the other side, when a video captured Jewish rioters beating what they took to be an Arab man in Bat Yam, a Pakistani writer tweeted, "This is what a pogrom looks like."

So what exactly is a pogrom? And are Jews the inevitable, exclusive victims?

It's been over a century since the Russian word "pogrom" entered the English language, but the civil unrest in Israel is unfortunately bringing the term back into current usage.

The New York Times, using the Yiddish plural "pogromen," first cited the term in 1882 to describe the wave of anti-Jewish violence that followed the assassination of Czar Alexander II, and provided a helpful inline definition: "riots against the Jews."

The Slavic root of the term, derived from the evocative word "to thunder," adds tone but otherwise gives little indication of its meaning. Pogrom was one of many words, including "riot," "upheaval" and "disorderly conduct," used to describe the horrific attacks that plagued Jewish villages in the Russian Empire from 1881 to 1884 as transient Russian workers rode the rails from shtetl to shtetl, stopping at every station to beat, rape and occasionally murder.

In the wake of the violence, some 1.75 million Eastern European Jews migrated to the United States, the numbers tapering off only in the 1920s when restrictive immigration quotas were imposed. The term pogrom migrated with them, from Russian to Yiddish to English.

In the late 19th century, many Jewish activists believed that Alexander III, the new czar, had given his blessing to the pogroms by directing police to turn a blind eye to the violence. This view was famously captured in Sholom Aleichem's writings and in the musical "Fiddler on the Roof," based on his stories, when the local police chief lets Tevye in on the secret plans for an upcoming pogrom.

Toward the end of the 20th century, archival research led historians to dismiss that interpretation of the pogroms. The 1881-1884 pogroms were not organized by the bureaucratically inept Russian government, which viewed the uncontrollable violence as a threat to the

stability of the regime as a whole.

By contrast, the far more brutal pogroms of the 20th century, including the notorious Kishinev pogrom of 1903 and the bloody pogroms that engulfed Ukraine during the chaos that followed World War I, showed much clearer signs of coordination by authorities at various levels. The last czar, Nicholas II, tacitly encouraged the violence by openly supporting the violent Black Hundreds organization and even underwriting the publication of the antisemitic work “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion.”

The definition of the word pogrom thus has come to include three essential elements: a violent mob, Jewish victimhood and at least the appearance of some level of central planning or incitement, although the attacks themselves seem more spontaneous.

Although the word pogrom first emerged in the late 19th century, it was later applied anachronistically to incidents in the distant past. Social upheavals directed against Jews are virtually as old as Jewish history itself, with the street violence of Alexandria, Egypt, in the year 38 C.E. considered the earliest example.

Throughout the medieval period, a combination of religious fervor and bloodlust motivated ordinary citizens to rise up and attack Jews in hundreds of crusades, blood libels and false charges of host desecration, often with the tacit or explicit approval of ruling authorities.

The term pogrom is rarely used to describe the events of the Holocaust, on quantitative and qualitative grounds: The Nazis murdered millions in a hierarchical, organized and bureaucratic manner unlike the erratic and spontaneous attacks by pogromists. Nevertheless, certain specific incidents from World War II might qualify, such as the notorious Petliura Days of Lviv or the massacres of the Jews of Jedwabne. Kristallnacht, the “night of broken glass” that presaged the genocide, is often described as a pogrom.

The word may be borrowed for other purposes — the authoritative Oxford English Dictionary relates a few citations — but they often sound wrong, like dark examples of cultural appropriation. Non-Jewish populations often suffered very similar attacks — Mennonites were horribly brutalized by anarchist bands in Ukraine, for example, and their woes compounded by deeply held pac-

ifist beliefs that prevented self-defense — but pogrom is deeply rooted in Jewish history and narrative, no less than “intifada” is rooted in the Palestinian narrative.

Two of the classic elements of the historical pogrom are sadly present in the streets of some Israeli cities, namely mob violence and Jewish victims. The appearance of central planning, however, is hard to identify, and the term doesn’t account for the fact that the government and law enforcement are predisposed to defend Israel’s Jewish citizens. Historically, pogroms are synonymous with Jewish powerlessness. Is it possible to speak of a pogrom when the state authorities responsible for maintaining public order are Jewish?

As for the use of the term pogrom by the pro-Palestinian side: Is that a fair label, with its ironic connotation that the former victims of pogroms have become its perpetrators? Or a foul appropriation meant to erase Jewish history and “flip the script”?

The debate is similar to the ones over how to describe urban unrest in this country: Are they “race riots”? “Rebellions”? “Police riots”? “Uprisings”?

Perhaps none of this discussion is helpful from a practical standpoint. When neighbors rise up and physically assault each other, especially after decades of peaceful coexistence, perhaps it doesn’t really matter what term we use to describe the violence.

But the language we use shapes our response to a crisis — words matter. From the standpoint of history, naming the violence a pogrom, a riot or an intifada will have implications for how the State of Israel chooses to contain the threat.

*Henry Abramson is a specialist in Jewish history and thought who currently serves as a dean of Touro College in Brooklyn, New York.*

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**● OPINION**

# It's Time to Reopen. Synagogues Should Lead the Way.

*People need signals from institutions they trust that it is time to reemerge.*

By Rabbi Joshua M. Davidson

We all know the tale: Two seeds lay side by side in the fertile spring soil. The first seed said, "I am afraid. If I send my roots into the ground below, I don't know what I will encounter in the dark. If I push my way through the hard earth above, I may damage my delicate sprouts. No, it is much better for me to wait until it is safe." And so she waited.

The second seed said, "I want to grow! I want to send my roots deep into the soil beneath me and thrust my sprouts through the earth's crust above me. I want to unfurl my tender buds like banners to announce the arrival of spring." And so she grew.

Most every day of our lives, we choose the path of one of these seeds: either seeking shelter in the familiar or taking a chance on a more fulfilling way of experiencing the world. Given the risks of disappointment and hurt, of jeopardizing what we have by reaching for something more, much of the time we opt for the way of the first seed.

We all know anxiety and fear, our constant companions these last 14 months. Even as the prognosis on American health improves, the prospect of poking our heads out into the world and returning to the rhythms of life frightens us.

I am anxiety prone. When COVID first struck, I scoured the local markets for all the disinfectant and sanitizer, all the wet wipes and paper towels I could find. I scrubbed my hands raw. And any belongings that grazed objects I had not cleaned myself...I washed those, too.

Thankfully, my wife tracked closely the ever-evolving

medical guidance. And just as we monitored it at the start of the pandemic to know what would likely keep us safe, as the months passed, we allowed the science to direct us on what not to fear. Slowly we began to re-emerge, experiencing some aspects of life that bring us joy and strength.

But it is much easier to fall into the pit of anxiety, than to climb out of it. We are always more inclined to take extra precautions than to scale them back. So now, when experts suggest those vaccinated can relax a bit, we demur. That reaction is completely understandable, of course. We all witnessed communities in our country (and beyond) ignore the advice on masking and social distancing and suffer skyrocketing infection rates. God forbid we should allow that to happen to us. The pandemic is not over. Many Americans are still getting sick, and in some parts of the world the situation is desperate.

For some Americans though, this past year, as frightening as it was, posed less of a hardship than it did for others. Many had the luxury of retreating to weekend or summer homes away from the big city crowds. Many of our children attend schools with resources sufficient for effective online learning, even with the hiccups they may have encountered as their systems got up and running. And many of us have jobs that allow the flexibility to work from home or wherever else we choose.

Of course, this was not the case for the majority of Americans. Recall how, as the pandemic began, we thanked over and over again not just the healthcare professionals, but all those others on the frontlines – the bus drivers, the grocery store clerks, the teachers – whose livelihoods placed them at risk every day, for whom retreat was impossible. So many of them got sick and died. We wept for them. But for many of us their day-to-day experiences were foreign.

We who have the option to remain in retreat need to determine whether we rejoin them, or whether we allow our workplaces, our schools, our society to become divided in ways we had not contemplated before. Certainly, we have learned there can and should be changes in our work patterns. For example, now we know how many industries can accommodate the needs of working parents without jeopardizing productivity. That is important, particularly as we strive for gender equity in professional advancement and pay. But if the overriding

factor becomes personal convenience, a risk exists to social cohesion.

*“People need signals from institutions they trust that it is time to reemerge, to poke our heads out into the sunlight, and return to the rhythms of life.”*

I believe houses of worship have a role to play walking people through this moment of decision. In fact, it is a moment to fuse two forces that too often seem in competition with each other: science and religion. We, as faith leaders, have an opportunity – and a responsibility – to use the data and science provided by researchers and medical professionals to lead our congregations away from anxiety and fear toward growth and renewal. This means allowing people to air their anxieties and know they are not alone in feeling them. It means talking openly about the vaccine and the benefits of receiving it.

And it means reopening. I admit that early in the pandemic, I resented those faith communities that filed lawsuits against local governments when their freedom to congregate was curtailed for legitimate health and safety concerns. But now, in areas where medical guidance suggests it safe for in-person gathering, I believe it vital that houses of worship open their doors – with all appropriate and necessary precautions – not simply to offer worshippers the space to pray for strength during anxious moments, but to demonstrate that it is, in fact, safe to do so. People need signals from institutions they trust that it is time to reemerge, to poke our heads out into the sunlight, and return to the rhythms of life.

**Rabbi Joshua M. Davidson** is the Senior Rabbi of Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York.

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## ● SABBATH WEEK / PARSHAT NASO

# What All Parents Can Learn from a Priestly Blessing

*Three verses describe three stages of life: yesterday, today and tomorrow.*

By Rabbi Noah Arnow

The journey of parenthood is strange and winding. At first we are responsible for these tiny, precious bodies that rely on us completely. Then, they slowly grow, and become increasingly independent, and somehow don't need us anymore. They become our peers, looking us eye to eye, borrowing clothes, debating us. And before we know it, they have surpassed us — in height and accomplishment. Eventually we find they are taking care of us.

I think of myself and my children in these three stages every time I bless them with the Priestly Blessing (Numbers 6:24-26) on Friday nights (well, every time I bless them and no one is crying, which, thankfully, is happening more frequently).

This blessing, known in Hebrew as Birkat Kohanim and detailed in this week's Torah portion, is part of our daily liturgy, appearing in the morning Amidah (standing prayer). In some communities, the priests or kohanim (descendants of Aaron, the first high priest) bless the congregation with these words, whether each day (in Israel) or on festivals (outside of Israel). And parents often bless children with these words every Friday night, as my wife and I do.

How do these three stages of parenthood and childhood flow from the three verses of this blessing? It took Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim ben Aharon of Luntschitz (Prague, 1550-1619) in the Keli Yakar, his commentary on the Torah, to help me see it, but I can never see it any other way now. Nor would I want to.

“May God bless you and protect you” is the first line of the Priestly Blessing. God is taking care of us, above us,

and we are below, like a parent taking care of a child. When I say this verse, I think of my children when they were smaller, babies perhaps, requiring my care and protection. And I see them as they are now, as school-age kids, still needing snuggles and hugs, reminders to brush teeth, tuck-ins to bed, Band-Aids and milk poured. And I see myself as I am now, a young(ish) parent.

“May God cause God’s face to shine upon you, and may God be good to you.” The Hebrew word “upon you” is *ay-leh-cha*, which literally means “to you,” not “looking down to you,” or “looking up to you,” but “to you” in an eye-level kind of way. So here, God is shining God’s face at you, from the same level as you. God and we have become equals. Parent and child are peers.

This verse makes me imagine seeing my children grown, and standing, looking at them eye to eye, them being independent people, debating with me, matching me point for point. It also reminds me of my relationship with my own parents nowadays.

“May God lift up God’s face to you and grant you peace.” The directionality here is most clear. God is looking up to us, up at us, as an aging parent looks up to an adult child, admiring of everything our grown child has become, we hope, yet the parent still has wisdom left to impart. While saying this verse I think of my hopes for how my children will surpass me in exciting ways, and will care for me when I’m elderly, when the roles have really reversed. I think too of the perspective and peace old(er) age may offer me, enabling me to bless them with the peace I may have found.

“I think of my hopes for how my children will surpass me in exciting ways, and will care for me when I’m elderly, when the roles have really reversed.”

It’s worth speaking theologically for a minute to unpack what this interpretation of this blessing could mean vis a vis God. How could God take care of us, be our peer, and, most surprisingly, look up to us? The *Keli Yakar* suggests that early in the people Israel’s history, before Egypt and while in Egypt, Israel is like a daughter to God, whom God has to take care of. Later, Israel is a sister or a bride to God — a peer, in some sense.

The receiving of the Torah is seen in rabbinic theology as the wedding of God and Israel. And starting from the days of the rabbis of the Talmud up to today, we have

the ability to make law and interpret God’s decrees. In a sense, we rule over God, so God now is looking up at us. We, the Jewish people, are God’s mother, suggests the *Keli Yakar*.

The Jewish people have been blessed to experience all three of these stages of relationship with God. May all of us who are parents each be blessed to care for and protect our children when they are small. May we be blessed to enjoy our children as independent adults and peers to us, to look at them eye to eye. And may we be blessed, too, to look up at them as they care for us in our old age.

**Rabbi Noah Arnow** serves *Kol Rinah*, a Conservative congregation in St. Louis, Missouri, and previously served *Congregation Beth El in Voorhees*, New Jersey. This essay originally appeared in *My Jewish Learning*.

## ● MUSINGS

# A True Hero

By David Wolpe

In 1930 Winston Churchill asked, “Can a nation remain healthy, can all nations draw together, in a world whose brightest stars are film stars?”

That question is far more cogent today than it was when Churchill first asked. We are a culture that lionizes people who create clever mini-videos or run faster than the person next to them. Skill is confused with character, and children revere people who, whatever their gifts, are not role models.

Athletes and singers exist in the Torah as well. There is

### CANDLELIGHTING, READINGS:

**Sivan 10, 5781 | Friday, May 21, 2021**

- **Light candles at:** 7:54 p.m.

**Sivan 11, 5781 | Saturday, May 22, 2021**

- **Torah reading:** Naso, Numbers 4:21–7:89

- **Haftarah:** Judges 13:2–25

- **Shabbat ends:** 9:01 p.m.

a great physical prodigy in the Torah, whose name is Samson. But he becomes a hero only when his spiritual stature matches his strength. There is a woman whose singing draws an entire nation into song. Her name is Miriam, and her song exalts not appetite, but God.

The Rabbis advise us that a hero is one who can conquer himself. Heroism is shaped by accomplishment and moral force. Historian Daniel Boorstin writes: "The hero was distinguished by his achievement; the celebrity by his image or trademark. The hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media. The hero was a big man; the celebrity is a big name." To bring light and life to God's world, to struggle for goodness, such things are the stuff of heroism.

*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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## ● ARTS AND CULTURE

# Memoirist turns to fiction with tale of Arab, Jewish women's unlikely friendship

*Haviva Ner-David's 'Hope Valley' weaves a story of Israeli and Palestinian histories in the verdant setting of the Galilee.*

By Jessica Steinberg

Writing a book wasn't a new concept for author Haviva Ner-David, who has two memoirs under her belt, including one about her journey to becoming the first woman to be publicly ordained by an Orthodox rabbi.

But a work of fiction? That was, well, novel.

Call it part of Ner-David's decade-long adjustment to liv-

ing in the Galilee.

"Hope Valley," Ner-David's recently published novel, is about two women, one Jewish, one Arab, who live in adjoining villages and take the path of friendship in a corner of Israel's northern region.

The book tells the intertwining stories of Tikvah, an American-born Israeli living in a northern moshav with her husband, and Ruby, a Palestinian woman of a similar age who has returned home to her village for cancer treatment after many years abroad.

Their friendship develops during foraging walks in the valley that separates their villages, while their life stories are told in connecting chapters.

Tikvah is the child of Holocaust survivors who immigrated to Israel on her own to live in the Jewish state, while Ruby, a well-known Palestinian artist, left Israel and is now anxious to find her father's diary — buried somewhere in Tikvah's house, which was once Ruby's father's home before his family was expelled in 1948.

The book plays out over the months prior to 2000's Second Intifada, which would reshape Israeli-Palestinian relations for decades to come. Tikvah discovers new information about her husband, who suffers from PTSD due to his role in one of Israel's wars, as well as the history of her moshav and home. Ruby, meanwhile, struggles with her unexpected friendship with Tikvah, while anxious to find the diary before her health fails.

It's a tale Ner-David wrote over the course of many years and numerous drafts. She started work on it after moving from Jerusalem to northern Kibbutz Hanaton with her husband and kids 11 years ago. They had immigrated to Israel from New York more than a decade earlier, and the move up to the Galilee offered new experiences for the family.

Ner-David found herself meeting more Arabs through a joint community group and one of her children's schools. She also began attending alternative Independence Day events at a nearby Arab village, where Jews and Arabs attempted annually to hold a conversation about Israel's struggle for independence in 1948 — the event that Arabs call "nakba," or disaster, for the exodus and displacement of many of their people during that period.

In recent weeks, as events escalated between Gaza and Israel, and between Jews and Arabs in mixed Israeli cities, Ner-David has kept in touch with her Arab friends, who are often touched that she reached out to them.

"It made me realize how important it is to stay connected through all this because there's this feeling in the Arab sector that we're all against them," she said. "My hope is that this will wake people up and that demonstrations are not enough. It's about really sitting and listening to people and acknowledging their pain. You have to listen to what is behind the rioting, to understand where it's coming from."

After the bat mitzvah of one of her daughters, Ner-David began writing "Hope Valley." At first it was more of a memoir, as she was trying to work through some of her own familial issues. She then met a local Arab shepherd and his wife who frequently foraged in the nearby valley, and in one of their first conversations, heard about their daughter who had died of cancer. Details like those became the core of Ner-David's novel.

In some ways, Ner-David's life forms the basis of Tikvah, although the author feels she shows up in more than one character. Ner-David, who suffers from fascio-scapular muscular dystrophy, a genetic degenerative neuromuscular disorder, wanted her two protagonists to bond over illness. Tikvah has multiple sclerosis, a disease Ner-David has always been fascinated by given its similarities to her own affliction.

"I wanted to explore the idea of illness but did something to distance myself from it," she said. "The goal was not to be too attached to my details. It may have been good therapy for me, but it didn't need to be in the novel."

There are also large chunks of the novel that are fictional, which offered her more freedom to create drama.

"It's a story of a woman who is awoken," said Ner David. "She's a Zionist who comes to this country, makes the choice to live here, still believes we have the right to be here, but starts to slowly learn about and acknowledge the Palestinian narrative, but still doesn't claim to have any political solutions. She's trying to figure out her place and responsibility in all of it."

Ner-David was concerned about backlash to the novel from the Jewish world with which she has been inter-

twined for her entire life. Yet she feels the book is balanced and moderate in tone.

"It's not for people who won't even say the word 'nakba,' but I don't go to anti-Zionism, either," she said. "I think it shows both sides." (Times of Israel)

## UPCOMING EVENTS

May 23 | 1:00 p.m. – 2:15 p.m. Free

### Discussion and Bilingual Reading of 'The Canvas and Other Stories' by Salomea Perl

In 2021 BenYehuda Press published a bilingual edition of "The Canvas and Other Stories" by Salomea Perl, translated by Ruth Murphy. Workers Circle presents an online discussion these stories and the author, and present a bilingual reading of her work. With translator Ruth Murphy and Sheva Zucker, Yiddish scholar and Workers Circle instructor.

Register at <https://bit.ly/2S9xEYU>

May 25 | 1:00 p.m. Free

### Heartache and Happiness on the Islands of Palms: The Story of the Jews of Majorca

Kulanu presents a look into Majorca's Chuetas community, including their history, beliefs, and traditions as returned and converted Jews.

Register at <https://kulanu.org/rsvp>

May 25 | 6:00 p.m. Free

### Chaim Gross's 100 Years in the Village

Village Preservation celebrates 100 years since sculptor and educator Chaim Gross came to New York City. Sasha Davis, executive director of the Renee and Chaim Gross Foundation will discuss his work, legacy and the historic home at 526 LaGuardia Place where the Gross family resided beginning in 1963.

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