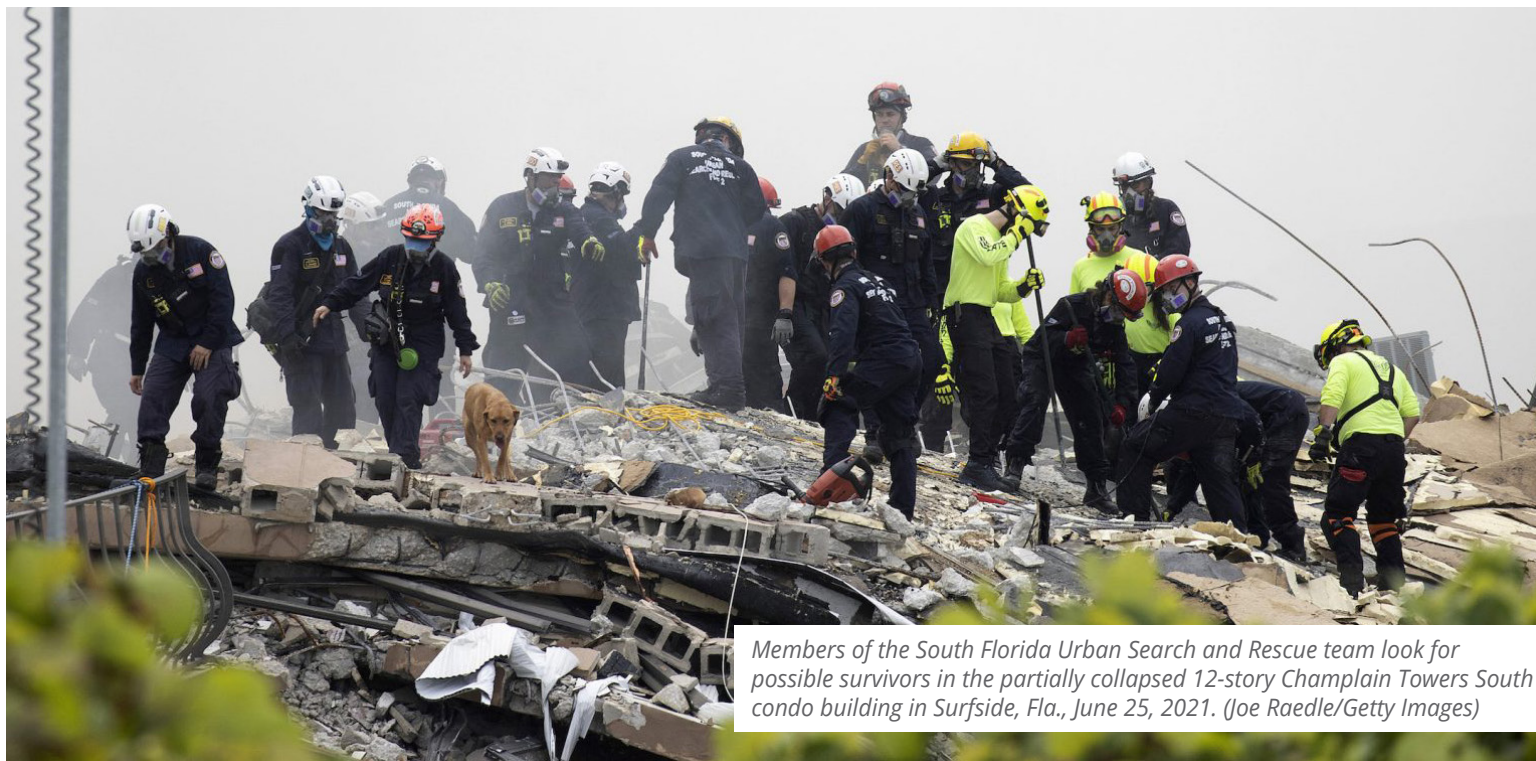


# The New York Jewish Week/end

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Members of the South Florida Urban Search and Rescue team look for possible survivors in the partially collapsed 12-story Champlain Towers South condo building in Surfside, Fla., June 25, 2021. (Joe Raedle/Getty Images)

## Must read

Curtis Sliwa Rejects Accusations of Antisemitism / Page 3

This Manhattan Rabbi Is a Bitcoin Guru / Page 3

Yankees Make Jewish Woman Batgirl 60 Years After Turning Her Down / Page 6

Everything Old Is New Again at Jewish Comedy Contest / Page 6

Editor's Desk / Page 7

Opinion / Page 9

The View From Campus / Page 12

Sabbath Week / Page 14

Musings, David Wolpe / Page 15

Q & A / Page 16 • Events / Page 19

## ● NEWS

# For Jewish Burial Societies, Surfside Building Collapse Presents a Grim and Complex Task

By Shira Hanau

Among Rabbi Mayer Berger's first thoughts on seeing the 12 stories of the Champlain Tower South pancaked upon themselves: This is like Sept. 11.

Then as now, destruction of unimaginable proportions claimed many lives without warning in a manner that rendered traditional practices for burying the Jewish dead impossible to perform.

Those practices call for bodies to be buried as soon as possible following death after undergoing a purification ritual called tahara. But with both Jewish and non-Jewish victims, and bodies difficult or impossible to identify, catastrophes like 9/11 or what happened in Surfside, Florida, complicate the work of those

who volunteer to carry out the traditional practices.

"You have just kind of layers and layers of concrete and you know tiny spaces in between them. And that's where you have to find the bodies," said Berger, who leads the New York-based Chesed Shel Emes, one of the largest Orthodox burial societies in the country.

"You see the pictures of those bunk beds at the edge, it's heartbreaking. I have eight children of my own, and thinking that children were sleeping in those beds over there, it's heartbreaking. But somebody's got to do the work, so that's what we're here for."

Dozens of local burial society volunteers are on standby in Surfside now in case a body is found, Berger said, and hundreds more in New York have signed up to travel to Florida if they are needed. The local efforts are being coordinated by the organization's local leaders.

For now, the volunteers are praying from the sidelines for the missing people to be found alive. But they are preparing to be called in when the search and rescue mission becomes a recovery mission, and remaining on standby during Shabbat so they can give non-Jewish workers instructions on proper handling of any bodies recovered then according to Jewish law.

Because rescuers do not know what state the bodies will be in when they are found, the burial society members are preparing to deploy lessons learned from tragedies like 9/11 and the bombings that wracked Israel two decades ago.

Due to the amount of concrete and other building materials at the site, bodies may be buried under heavy layers of material, meaning they may not be found completely intact. They also may be harder to identify, making it more difficult to determine which bodies require a Jewish burial and which do not. And if any blood or other bodily materials are found disconnected from the body, those have to be collected and buried according to Jewish law.

Berger said the authorities in Florida were still working to determine the best way to proceed with the recovery effort. But he was confident that Chesed Shel Emes, which has a longstanding relationship with Florida's police and medical examiners, would be included throughout so that the bodies of Jewish victims will be treated

appropriately according to Jewish law.

"They don't know yet if they'll do it like 9/11, bucket by bucket, or if they'll do it with a different approach," Berger said of the Surfside site. "Whatever project, we'll be included in it."

Recovering bodies quickly is important under Jewish law. In the recent tragedy at Meron, in Israel, where 45 people died in a stampede during holiday celebrations last month, funerals began hours after the incident.

That isn't possible in Surfside, where it is expected to take days, if not longer, to safely sift through the debris without putting the rescuers at risk or causing more of the building to collapse.

For families of the victims, recovering the remains of their loved ones as quickly as possible is important to the grieving process, according to Rabbi Simkha Weintraub, a social worker and rabbinic director of the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services in New York City who ran a support group for the families of 9/11 victims for 9 1/2 years.

"It's both a terrifying state and a numb state for people: sleeplessness and irritability, not eating. It's a really difficult place to be," Weintraub said. "Once there is retrieval of the body they can proceed to go on the mourner's path, to ready the body for burial, to speak to loved ones, to prepare a eulogy, all the things that are meaningful."

Over the last year and a half, Chesed Shel Emes was kept busy with a more slow-moving tragedy in the form of the pandemic. During the first wave, which hit New York City's Orthodox communities especially hard, the group's volunteers sometimes performed taharas for as many as 50 bodies each day.

That experience has made Berger even more attuned to the trauma that can come with preparing many bodies at once. When the recovery effort begins in Surfside, Berger expects that teams of volunteers at the site will rotate in and out so that no one works too long a shift.

Volunteers shouldn't underestimate the trauma they can experience working on a recovery like this one, he said, and they should take care of themselves so they can be good stewards for traditions that can bring comfort at a time of grief.

“People ask me: Did I get immune to death?” Berger said. “I say maybe [you can] get immune to death, but you can never get immune to the feelings of the survivors.”

## ● NEWS

# In Non-apology, Curtis Sliwa Rejects Accusations of Antisemitism

*The GOP nominee for mayor of New York City invites Orthodox Jews to meet and “resolve our differences.”*

By Shira Hanau

In a video message June 25, Curtis Sliwa responded to criticism of a 2018 speech in which he warned residents of the New York suburbs that Orthodox Jews were trying to “take over your community” and are a drag on the tax system.

The Guardian Angels founder declined to apologize in a video shared with media, instead inviting Orthodox Jews to sit down with him to “resolve our differences.” He also reminded potential supporters of his work on behalf of Jews.

“My two youngest sons have been raised Jewish. They need to read this? To say to themselves, my father is an antisemite? Come on, even my worst critics out there would recognize that’s a shanda,” said Sliwa, who became the Republican nominee for New York City mayor on Tuesday. “So I’ll reach out to meet with you and hopefully we’ll be able to resolve our differences.”

The original video, which resurfaced Thursday, showed Sliwa at a meeting of the Reform Party in October 2018, speaking to residents of upstate Rockland and Orange Counties. In his speech, Sliwa derided the Orthodox “bloc vote” and suggested they control politicians because of their money.

“They don’t vote the way normal Americans vote ...

They’re being told by the rebbe or rabbi this is who you vote for,” Sliwa said in the 2018 speech.

Agudath Israel of America said it was “outraged” at his remarks, calling them “age-old misrepresentations and distortions that those who hate Jews have used for centuries.”

Nowhere in Friday’s response did Sliwa apologize or take back his statements about Orthodox Jews being a drag on the tax system and diverting public school funding to yeshivas.

“For 42 years, I’ve been there with the Guardian Angels when Jewish people were in need. Are you forgetting Crown Heights in 1991 when David Dinkins ordered the police to stand back?” he said. “I and the Guardian Angels were there 30 days and 30 nights to protect the Lubavitchers.”

A growing Orthodox community has become an influential constituency in Rockland and Orange; the state’s attorney general recently affirmed that one Orange County town used underhanded tactics to keep Orthodox Jews from moving in, while a court ruled that an Orthodox-dominated school board in Rockland effectively discriminated against people of color.

Sliwa was a member of the Reform Party at the time of the 2018 video, switching to the GOP in February of 2020.

“I’ve been your friend, I’ve been there always so look I’ll reach out to you and let’s sit down and discuss our differences but please,” Sliwa entreated. “Don’t call me an antisemite.”

## ● NEWS

# This Manhattan Rabbi Is a Bitcoin Guru

*Strangers ask Michael Caras for advice and spiritual guidance on both Judaism and cryptocurrency.*

By Leigh Cuen

Many of Twitter’s cryptocurrency zealots are often notorious trolls, but one particular thought leader stands out

from the rest. He happens to be a rabbi.

"Twitter people either use it to scream at each other and not be nice, which I don't like," says micro-influencer Rabbi Michael Caras, also known as @thebitcoinrabbi. "I enjoy connecting with my two communities through Twitter, both Jewish Twitter and Bitcoin Twitter."

Caras, a rabbi associated with the Hasidic Chabad-Lubavitch movement, is fascinated by the way that Bitcoin, both the network and the asset, relates to halacha (Jewish law). And since he's quite vocal about it online, Caras says that strangers slide into his Twitter messages each week to ask for advice and spiritual guidance on the topic.

Before serving as a public bridge between the two worlds, he studied at Yeshiva Ohr Tmimim in Israel and now teaches both Judaism and technology classes at Maimonides Hebrew Day School in New York. Caras has been interested in Bitcoin since 2017, and in 2019 he published a children's book about it that has sold more than 10,000 copies.

The book, a secular introduction to basic economics for kids, tells a tale of children learning about how to use Bitcoin as money by running a lemonade stand in a town called Bitville.

Caras has also spoken at synagogues and Jewish youth groups about Bitcoin and Judaism, including how the history of money is discussed in the Torah.

"There are people who are Jewish but not observant who have never talked to a rabbi any other time," he says. "Because they feel some type of kinship with me through Bitcoin Twitter, they'll feel comfortable that I will give them relevant information without lecturing them."

"I also have a WhatsApp chat where people often ask me privately for guidance as well. Sometimes they have a Bitcoin question, in some way, and I'm happy to help. I'm happy to be that resource for the community, especially for things like private key management."

Although there are thousands of things now called cryptocurrency, Bitcoin is the world's oldest and most decentralized blockchain network, with the most diverse population of users as of 2021. People can store, send and receive currencies like Bitcoin without a third party,

like a bank.

Most avid cryptocurrency users keep track of transactions with a public network and a ledger called a blockchain. For example, the Bitcoin ledger is a record of all transactions with bitcoin (the asset). However, many cryptocurrency traders prefer to use mainstream financial marketplaces (such as Fidelity or the Israeli company eToro), which don't necessarily need to use the public blockchain for all transactions.

Caras is among the avid users who prefer to participate in the grassroots Bitcoin network, transacting with open source tools rather than merely trading cryptocurrency like stocks.

Caras, like many rabbis, is a huge fan of old records, ledgers and sacred secrets. With regards to the "private key management" he mentioned, bitcoin users keep track of their bitcoin using a unique password called a private key — protect that key, and the bitcoin will remain in your custody. That's why knowledge related to private key management is so important to Caras.

The public blockchain ledger is not unlike the way Jewish communities maintained written records about their societies for thousands of years. This combination of history and technology fascinates Caras.

"We have a 'the chain of tradition' quite literally in Hebrew, this point of following the tradition back in written history," he says. "We are continuing a chain, and it is a continuous chain. There are soft forks and hard forks within Judaism, different customs, like protocols, that are compatible with each other."

Caras, 31, was raised in a "fairly secular" household, he says, and considered a degree in computer science before switching to rabbinical school. His brother, also a well-known Bitcoin advocate, became more religious after visiting a Chabad house as a teenager and Caras followed suit.

Now a father of six and observant member of the Chabad movement, Caras finds many similarities between the cypherpunk ethos and Judaism. He's not alone, as there are numerous WhatsApp groups for Jewish crypto fans, including the "Jewish Crypto Chat" where Caras is among nearly 190 participants.

"Judaism has a lot of legal frameworks for how money is used. A Jewish wedding is a transaction. The groom puts a ring on her finger because he needs to give her something of value under the huppah. [In private DMs] I address questions like, could that wedding transaction be done with bitcoin?" he says.

As a family, Caras and his wife see Bitcoin stewardship as part of their household virtues.

"Hopefully, the majority of the time, we use this technology for good," he says. "That's what I like to encourage people to think about."

There's always a way to apply guidance from the Torah to new conundrums in the modern world. Some people have asked Caras about running trading bots or bitcoin mining on Shabbat, or if checking the always fluctuating bitcoin price (it's value compared to the dollar) disrupts from a day of rest.

Bitcoin is often used for donating to charity and securing savings. On the other hand, there are, of course, controversial and harmful ways to use bitcoin. For example, Hamas — the militant group that rules the Gaza Strip and is deemed a terrorist organization by the U.S. and Israel — has reportedly fundraised using the cryptocurrency.

Caras, who lived in Israel for four years of rabbinical school and has a brother who lives there, says he's been thinking a lot about the Holy Land since the most recent conflict. It's impossible to say exactly how many bitcoin users there are in Israel, although some local exchanges have garnered more than 55,000 users (each) and thousands of people work in the local crypto industry, including some companies that expanded globally to serve millions. (On a much smaller scale, some Palestinian bitcoin dealers also get their wares from Tel Aviv's same crypto hubs.)

Caras strongly believes in Israel's right to defend itself, and hopes that Bitcoin could present economic opportunities that could lessen the stranglehold he says that Hamas has on the population of Gaza. Before the pandemic, in 2019, several Gazan Bitcoin dealers were reportedly transacting with more than \$5 million worth of cryptocurrency each every month for civilian use cases like international shopping, paying tuition abroad or accepting freelance payments without PayP-

al or credit cards.

"I'm not concerned about Hamas using relatively small amounts of bitcoin to fund their terrorism, as it seems rather insignificant compared to their other funding methods," Caras says. "Terrorists use cellphones and electricity and every other type of technology that most people use for good peaceful purposes."

"I am glad that individual Palestinians can use a money which can't be easily controlled or taken from them by the Palestinian Authority or Hamas."

This sentiment is common among Caras' Twitter compatriots. Israeli investor Eylon Aviv of the crypto-savvy fund Collider Ventures, who knows Caras and enjoys his Twitter feed, says "the promise here is for Palestinians to not be dependent on the financial services provided by these terrorist organizations."

Aviv also agrees with Caras that the Bitcoin ethos complements Jewish ethics.

"Basically every holiday is 'insert an overpowering someone who tried to kill us,' they fail, and we celebrate. The celebration is about the freedom and liberation that happens around the unsuccessful elimination attempt," Aviv says, adding that censorship, resistance, loss and liberation are all recurring themes throughout Jewish history.

As a tool for self-sovereign transactions, people fleeing a dictatorship or freely transact despite persecution often use bitcoin.

And some Jewish users like Aviv wonder if Bitcoin would be useful if a Holocaust-like situation were to arise again, with governments and armies seizing assets from Jewish communities. Bitcoin would be easier to escape with.

Israeli crypto industry veteran Danny Brown Wolf thinks so, saying that "being Jewish, we pretty much all have in our family history some form of immigration story that involves being forced to leave assets behind."

"Given this history, Jews of all peoples ought to appreciate financial sovereignty," she says.

To be clear, Caras isn't an advocate for any "blockchain revolution." He only answers questions when asked and firmly considers himself a "maximalist," meaning he only uses Bitcoin, no other cryptocurrency. He thinks users'

energy is best spent on Bitcoin rather than exploring new token experiments.

"I'm a hardcore maximalist. I don't believe the blockchain has any use case outside of Bitcoin and securing the Bitcoin blockchain," Caras says. "My brother in Israel tells me about every blockchain thing under the sun, but I've yet to see anything positive that it's useful for beyond that."

Instead, Caras prefers to contemplate what Jewish law says about loans and earning interest, for example, so he can learn for himself and help others learn how to apply Jewish ethics to the way he manages his Bitcoin.

"Every piece of technology in this world, it's up to us to choose for ourselves," Caras says, "whether we use technology for good or bad."

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## ● NEWS

# Yankees Make Jewish Woman Batgirl 60 Years After Turning Her Down

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

If Gwen Goldman had been named a batgirl for the New York Yankees and not been given the honor of throwing out the first pitch, it would have been enough.

A retired social worker from Westport, Connecticut, Goldman, 70, got to be a batgirl at a Yankees game Monday night, 60 years after the team turned her down because she was a girl.

General Manager Brian Cashman proffered the invite after hearing that she had been rejected for the position in 1961. Goldman still has the letter she received that year from then-GM Roy Hamey, who explained that "a young lady such as yourself would feel out of place in a dugout."

This week, Goldman not only got a turn in the dugout, but threw out the first pitch, wore the classic Yankee

pin-striped uniform and met the players.

"It just kept coming and coming," she said of the honors, adding "dayenu," the Hebrew word meaning that just one of the gestures would have been sufficient.

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## ● NEWS

# Everything Old Is New Again at Jewish Comedy Contest

*Amateurs compete for 'tight-five' minutes of glory at Broadway Comedy Club.*

By Alan Zeitlin

Nagging wives. Disappointed parents. Insistent bladders.

Twenty-three years and one pandemic later, The Funniest Jewish Comedian Contest returned to Broadway Comedy Club, proving that some Jewish jokes are as traditional as Jewish prayers.

Producer, comedian and teacher Geoff Kole ran the contest, which had its finals Monday night, continuing a tradition that had at one point between run in conjunction with The Jewish Week. (The contest has been on its own for a number of years now.)

Between the pandemic and other complications, Kole said he wasn't entirely sure the contest would go on.

"It was touch and go and then of course comedy clubs opened up again in April," said Kole. "I would say given everything it was a smash and I'm proud we were able to continue the contest."

Contestants were asked to present their best "tight-five minutes of shtick" and bring five guests (Golan Heights provided the kosher barbecue chicken wings.)

The winner was Sol Auerbach, 36, of Far Rockaway, who said he worked at several funeral homes. He joked about sobriety, saying, "It's easier to find drugs on the

streets than parking spaces.”

He said he asked his parents to play “Stairway to Heaven” by Led Zeppelin at his funeral but they said they would play “Highway to Hell” by ACDC.

He also said Hurricane Katrina should have been named after Yankee great Alex Rodriguez, because Hurricane A-Rod “would never have hit a thing in October.”

Taking second place was Arnold Willence of Queens, a former attorney who deadpanned that it’s a good night if he only has to get up once to go to the bathroom. He added that his father could never get a driver’s license in Florida because he “knew how to make a left turn and could see over the steering wheel.”

He said his first of two divorces was due to religious differences.

“She worshipped money,” he said. “I didn’t have any.”

The lineup also included guest comedians, including Tino Romero, a Black Latino from Panama who apologized for not being Jewish.

“I don’t have Covid,” he said. “I got Ebola.”

He also said that when he found out his neighborhood became gentrified, he “turned white.”

Past contest winner David Weinbach stood out by being the only comedian wearing a suit and a yarmulke. The Orthodox comedian said he had to adjust to the times when dating under quarantine.

“I’ve mastered Zoom dating,” he said. “After every date, I invoice them for Internet fees. Ya know AOL dial-up does not pay for itself.”

The show was hosted by Howard Newman, known as “High-Powered Howard,” who was also a past contest winner. He treated the crowd to a large number of puns.

In his own set, Kole joked that his synagogue is the best open bar in town and described how he once got a job working in sheet metal.

“I went over to the guy who was hiring, and I said ‘Dad, give me the job.’”

## ● EDITOR’S DESK

# This Jewish Charitable Tradition Is Brought to You By...

*Putting the names of donors on the things they donate is an old tradition — like, really old.*

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

We visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art for the first time in over a year, which meant I could visit an old friend. Just to the left of the grand staircase is a home-ly marble plaque, about the size of a placemat. It’s inscribed mostly in Greek, but there is a little Hebrew too, as well as pictograms of a menorah, a shofar and what appear to be a lulav and an etrog, the Sukkot symbols.

The inscription, in Greek, reads, “Through the providence of God I, E...s, together with my wife and my children have renovated the forecourt of the sanctuary using the gifts of God.” The Hebrew reads, “...established the house of prayer. Peace.” The plaque is described as Roman and dated 400-600 CE.

Anyone who has ever set foot inside a synagogue knows what’s going on here. The object is a 1,500-year-old version of those signs reading, “The Spielvogel Vestibule, in honor of the bat mitzva of Rachel Spielvogel, from her parents.”

I find this incredibly moving. For as long as Jews have been building synagogues, they’ve been fundraising; and for as long as Jews have been fundraising, they have thanked donors with what are known in the trade as “naming opportunities.” It’s touching to consider that Jews have been reciting the same prayers for centuries; it’s hilarious and wonderful to imagine a synagogue administrator in a toga asking E...s for a donation in exchange for immortality. (Ironically, a crack in the marble obscures E...s’s full name.)

I thought of the plaque again when I saw a tweet from

My Shul Called Life. If you don't know the account, you should: Written by two synagogue administrators calling themselves @RogueShul, it is one of the most reliably funny satires of synagogue life on the web.

Last week they asked readers, "What's the most outdated item in your shul?" The answers ranged from waggish ("The rabbi!") to the obvious (the "old electronic equipment ... in various storage rooms") to the politically informed ("Brotherhoods" and "Sisterhoods" and "other unnecessarily gender-specific activities").

No one mentioned the donor acknowledgements, which, in my shul, anyway, plaster the sanctuary walls, are embroidered on the Torahs, printed on bookplates, attached to seat backs and arranged as leaves in the lobby's Tree of Life. This surprised me, because complaining about naming opportunities seemed to come on strong among Jews raised in the anti-materialist '60s and '70s. I can still remember the baby boomer in the tie-dyed kippah who told me that the only name that should be inscribed on a synagogue's walls is God's.

Then he probably quoted Maimonides, who said the highest form of charity is giving anonymously. Or maybe Rabbi Eleazar: "A man who gives charity in secret is greater than Moshe Rabbeinu."

Of course, I could have quoted another bit of Torah right back: "im ein kemach, ein Torah; im ein Torah, ein kemach." "Without bread there is no Torah; without Torah, there is no bread." (Ethics of the Fathers 3:21) I take that to mean that everything costs money, even the privilege of attending a synagogue. The same goes for synagogue dues and High Holiday tickets. Maybe you consider them gauche, but somebody has to pay for the heat, the lights, the bricks and the mortar (or, in the case of the Romans, just the bricks and the mortar).

Giving the donors credit – and a stab at posterity – seems a fair trade-off.

There is actually a Jewish literature about whether or not to publicly thank donors, summarized in a 2008 responsum by Rabbi David Golinkin. Golinkin summarizes the opposition to naming opportunities, including the example of Rabbi Hershel Matt of Troy, N.Y. (1922-1987), who banned synagogue plaques to prevent "the cheapening of a precious mitzvah by holding out the incentive

of attaining glory, credit or publicity."

In response, Golinkin notes that 500 such inscriptions have been discovered in ancient synagogues in Israel and the Diaspora.

His conclusion: The "normative Jewish practice for some 2,200 years has been to record gifts and to inscribe the names of donors because this serves as a memorial to the donor and encourages others to give tzedakah."

***"One danger of naming is that the donor may suffer a blow to his or her reputation, and you find yourself one Yom Kippur seeking forgiveness in the Bernie Madoff Chapel."***

One danger of naming, not mentioned by Golinkin, is that the donor may suffer a blow to his or her reputation, and you find yourself one Yom Kippur seeking forgiveness in the Bernie Madoff Chapel. (To get meta for a moment, the label on the donation plaque at The Met says it is a loan from the collection of Judy and Michael Steinhardt, philanthropists whose names adorn a raft of Jewish and other institutions, which got dicey after Michael Steinhardt was accused by women of making inappropriate sexual remarks.) But there's a fix for that, as the Sacklers are learning.

I for one like how synagogue plaques and whatnot preserve the history and continuity of the community, starting with the old names (Hyman! Peshe! Lucius Domitius Abbas!). The name on our sanctuary reminds me of the sweet couple who sat in the second row all those years. Or I'll see a prayer book donated in honor of some kid's bat mitzvah, realize I was actually in the pew that day, and then remember that she just had a baby.

The plaque in The Met is a little like the parable of the tailor, whose coat wears away so he makes a vest, which wears away so he makes a scarf, until all he has left is a button. All we have from that ancient synagogue is a plaque. And a deep familial connection with E...s, whoever he was.

***Andrew Silow-Carroll (@SilowCarroll) is the editor in chief of The Jewish Week.***



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**● OPINION**

# The Surfside Tragedy Recalls South Florida's Long Hold on the Jewish Imagination and Reality

*A beachfront community synonymous with snowbirds and survivors, widows and Hasids.*

By Thane Rosenbaum

Until the other day, when a 13-story building inexplicably collapsed in the middle of the night, placing the whereabouts, and lives, of 159 residents in doubt, few gave Surfside, Florida very much thought. The town was, after all, a South Florida misnomer. There's no surfing. The white caps on the Atlantic Ocean never provide enough tubular lift. The people of Surfside skew older. Nearly half of its 6,000 residents are Jewish, and of those, many are Orthodox.

You can call Surfside sleepy, but even that wouldn't describe it. Until this week, nothing truly special ever happened there. Now, with a tragedy so titanic — and still unfolding — its name will become synonymous with misery.

To the casual observer, Surfside was a breakaway township from its more widely known neighbor, Miami Beach, just to its south. Those over the border on Miami Beach, and in Bal Harbor, the village to Surfside's immediate north, for many decades had good reason to regard themselves as South Florida's very own Old City of Jerusalem — a mixed enclave with a major Jewish quarter, and a bit more decadence.

Surfside didn't have the Art Deco jazz-age sparkle or swinger elegance that the Eden Roc and Fontainebleau hotels offered back in from the 1950s into the '70s. In

Surfside, the Americana was the swankiest hotel. It once showcased a very young Jackson 5, long before any Billie Jean took notice of Michael. A rare excitement, but the town's residents didn't beg for more. Surfside enjoyed the stillness — on land and sea.

I know about Surfside. I grew up on 74th Street on Miami Beach. The horrific spectacle that FEMA has now declared to be a national emergency site is on 87th Street. By the time the Champlain Towers was built in 1981, I had long decamped for college and then New York.

I frequently return to Miami Beach, but mostly in my imagination. Many of my novels have featured scenes with Miami Beach as the backdrop. My last one, "How Sweet It Is!," selected by the City of Miami Beach as its Centennial Book, is a nostalgic return to 1972 — a valentine, I call it — when Miami Beach was, oddly, the center of the world.

During that summer, Miami Beach hosted both the Democratic and Republican nominating conventions. Unlike the infamous Democratic convention in Chicago in 1968, Miami Beach police somehow avoided clubbing the heads of anti-Vietnam War protestors.

Jackie Gleason, who no longer had his TV variety show — once filmed live on Miami Beach — was palling around with his buddy, Frank Sinatra, who had recently retired — for the first time. You could find them drinking in hotels along Collins Avenue, recapturing the easy camaraderie of their younger days at Toots Shor's saloon, near the Theater District in Manhattan.

The cavalcade of stars did not stop there. Muhammad Ali sparred at Angelo Dundee's 5th Street Gym and did speed work on the quicksand of the beach — in heavy sweat clothes. He was trying to reclaim the heavyweight championship, forfeited when he conscientiously objected to fighting the Viet Cong.

Meyer Lansky, the notorious Jewish gangster who two years later would be fictionalized in "The Godfather Part II," had in 1972 just been extradited from Israel back to Miami Beach to stand trial for tax fraud. He would spend his days at Wolfie's Restaurant on 21st Street, surrounded by an aging crew of Jewish wise guys still smarting over Fidel Castro's takeover of their Havana casinos in 1959.

All of them appear in "How Sweet It Is!" (yes, Gleason's

signature signoff), reimagined, of course — along with one more special guest. The Yiddish novelist, Isaac Bashevis Singer, not long thereafter a recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, was spending the winters in Surfside. While there he unsparingly fictionalized the Jews of Poland before the Holocaust, and those who survived and lived in New York thereafter, capturing their comical lives of heartbreak, betrayal and loss.

Ensnared just over the Miami Beach city line, situated right in between two Jewish enclaves populated with those who had fled or escaped one hardship or another, he made a canny choice for a writer with a gravitational pull for the shortcomings and desperate moral choices of humankind.

One wonders what he might have written about the Champlain Towers today, a short distance from his own apartment.

All the avenues of Surfside were named for American and British authors. (Just west of the Champlain are Carlyle, Dickens, Irving and Emerson Avenues.) Eventually a street would be named for him. He must have enjoyed the irony that some of the hotels of Surfside once restricted Jews. One shamelessly boasted, “Always a view, never a Jew.”

He strolled the sunbaked landscape in a white suit and impish teardrop fedora. Always taking notes, he fiercely studied and measured the patterns of these transplanted Jews: melting snowbirds and Holocaust survivors looking to the sun to cure memories of more ashen, cloudier days; widows and divorcees, looking for a male ticket back to the northeast or out of loneliness; young families tired of the transit strikes and crime waves of New York; Hasidim who dressed in the sweltering Sunshine State as if still in Lublin; vaudevillians wearing makeup suitable to the burlesque surroundings of Miami Beach.

All of them immortalized in Kodak color, or in the pages of “My Love Affair with Miami Beach,” a book of photos by Richard Nagler, for which Singer wrote the introduction in 1990. Imagine them as Singer once did: plotting affairs, swatting tennis balls, staring at stock tickers, clacking mah jongg tiles, gliding discs along shuffleboard courts, and gesturing wildly about socialism.

“For me, a vacation in Miami Beach was a chance to be

among my own people,” wrote Singer. He found them sitting on the Broadway medians and inside the cafeterias on the Upper West Side, too, of course. But the Jews from Miami Beach were somehow of a different species — and not only because they were more prone to skin cancer.

It was a Shangri-La of Jewish misadventure, a shtetl still trembling but without Cossacks, the Chosen People out of choices, the detour of a once wandering tribe — finally at rest in and around sleepy Surfside.

***“At times like these, disasters, whether unnatural or manmade, leave the same feelings of loss.”***

And now it is home to new waves of Jews, reflecting the area’s diversity: retirees, of course, but also younger and wealthier Jewish families, many drawn to a booming Chabad; a large cohort of Hispanic Jews with feet in North and Latin America; a smattering of Israelis, and more Sephardic Jews than the national average.

The residents of the Champlain Towers were asleep until a nightmare roused them. Will any survive to tell this tragic tale? In time, this beachside plot will become another reminder of senseless Jewish death in America — acts of hate, or negligence, or of God: the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in Manhattan and the massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida; the Leo Frank lynching, the Temple bombing in Atlanta and the Crown Heights riots; and the antisemitic shootings: at the Jewish Community Center of Los Angeles and Jewish Federation of Seattle, and then at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh and Chabad synagogue in Poway, California.

At times like these, disasters, whether unnatural or manmade, leave the same feelings of loss.

Miami Beach has served as a refuge for some, and as a playground for others. An infinite coastline of condos always seemed to be rising from the sand. Today, unimaginably, we know that one can come crashing down.

***Thane Rosenbaum*** is a novelist, the author of “How Sweet It Is!,” “The Golems of Gotham,” “Second Hand Smoke” and “Elijah Visible,” among other works of fiction and nonfiction.

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**● OPINION**

# There Is More Than One Way To Look and Be Jewish

By Mary Jimenez-Gutkovitch

I was attending a Woman's Circle in Crown Heights, a gathering for Jewish women, when someone asked me a version of what I'll call "the Question."

"You look very exotic," she said. "Do Jews in the Philippines look the same as everyone else there?"

I didn't really know how to respond.

"There's usually, like a look — you know what I mean?" she repeated. I felt the attention of the room on me. "I didn't know they had synagogues there," she said.

"Well, there was Temple Emil..." I began — only because I had been reading a book, "Philippine Sanctuary: A Holocaust Odyssey" by Bonnie M. Harris. Harris writes about how during World War II, the United States government and many Western democracies limited or closed themselves off entirely to the Jewish refugees, while the Philippine Commonwealth provided safe asylum to more than 1,300 German Jews. It mentioned Temple Emil, though it was burned to the ground during the Japanese occupation in 1945.

Thankfully, the program facilitator responded: "Jews come in all different colors and sizes." Another girl who had an English accent wearing a tichel, or headscarf, added, "Yeah, I've seen Jews like her."

Time again, my fellow Jews need reminders that there are Mizrahi Jews, Sephardic Jews, Ashkenazi Jews, Black Jews, Asian Jews — basically all kinds. And now, at a time of rising antisemitism, it's important to highlight the validity of Jewish diversity and to also stand together collectively in solidarity against antisemitism.

The Talmud states (under the mitzvah of Onat Devarim) that you're not supposed to oppress a ger tzedek — a Jew by choice — by reminding them of their past. I am

already hyper-aware of converting. I've never been to a synagogue in the Philippines, where I was born and lived until I was seven. My Jewish journey started in a small shul in the Lower East Side of Manhattan and continued over three years ago on the Upper West Side through a beit din and mikveh, the rabbinical court and ritual immersion that seals a conversion.

But that's not where my journey ends.

Judaism is constant learning, analyzing, interpreting, and bringing kedushah, or holiness, to the mundane by ritual acts of awareness. We pay extra attention to certain things and that's what makes them holy and set apart. Feeling different seems like a pretty Jewish sentiment — and so does not feeling Jewish, or worthy, enough. Even Moses felt that way leading the Exodus from Egypt.

I've experienced quite the spectrum of Judaism, from spending Shabbat with people who identify as frum to hearing Megillat Esther at the House of Yes through Lab/Shul, a Jewish space that is artist-driven and God-optional. Though the majority of my interactions have been extremely positive, I still hear variations of "the Question" when people hear my last name, which sounds Spanish, or puzzle how I look, which is sort of Asian.

Ironically, my experiences with microaggressions in Jewish spaces reinforce my sense of belonging in the room. As the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks said, "Dead fish go with the flow. Live fish swim against the current. So it is with conscience and courage."

Last month I went on a trip to Hyde Park, New York with my husband (who I met three years after I already converted). On our way to spend time at a farm with alpacas and llamas, I called the local Chabad of Mid-Hudson Valley since Shavuot was coming up. One of my favorite things about the Jewish community is that with a call, you have a home.

We showed up at the rabbi's house. We were their first guests in the home in over a year due to Covid-19. They were very warm and welcoming. They asked me what my name was. "Miriam," I said, using my Hebrew middle name.

I felt my internalized marginalization and imposter syndrome begin to stir. What if they ask me about my history? How do I summarize my life, past experiences of

displacement as an immigrant and why I connected to Judaism in the few words that will never do it justice? I feel the need to recite my Jewish resume, which includes an internship on the clinical team at Footsteps — the self-help organization for Jews leaving or exploring outside the haredi Orthodox community — through my graduate program at NYU Silver School of Social Work, where I was president of the Silver Jewish community.

“Where are you from?” they asked. I responded vaguely, “Short Hills, New Jersey.” We tell them we currently live in Williamsburg. They joke and ask if we are Satmar Hasidim and I said no, but we do live close enough to hear the 18-minute warning siren for Shabbat and that we shop for meat there.

With relief, I realize that they are not prying, but are just happy to have us over. They invite me to light candles for Yom Tov and to say the Shehecheyanu. I recite the blessings by heart.

We stayed for dinner and returned the next day for Shavuot services. The small community gathered in the backyard and a part of me wondered if it was safe. Just like I wonder if it's safe to wear a Star of David, or if my husband can wear a kippah to shul on Saturdays, and how there have been safety plans in the event of a bomb during graduation at the private Jewish school where I work. I reflected on the shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in 2018 and how the killer was obsessed with HIAS, the Jewish agency where I volunteered that same year, working with refugees from Russia.

Judaism is an active practice of choices we make and spaces that we enter or create based on shared values — which are not only bound to ethnic makeup. It's collectivist, and I'm in those spaces constantly. When my community is in danger, I am in danger — no matter where in the spectrum.

On that Shavuot, like all the Shavuots that came before, we read the Book of Ruth, about the convert who not only adopted a Jewish identity, but a Jewish destiny. (Kveller)

**Mary Jimenez-Gutkovitch** is a New York based writer and social worker.

## ● THE VIEW FROM CAMPUS

# ‘Never Again’ Means Standing Up for China’s Uyghur Minority

*My Jewish education prepared me for advocacy on behalf of a repressed people.*

By Avi Ackermann

One of my life's central texts is my great-grandmother's account of her life in Nazi-controlled Berlin. My family reads it every Passover, and each time I return to it, her descriptions of what her family endured grow more painful.

In a sequence permanently stamped into my consciousness, a policeman arrests my great-grandmother's brother while complaining that he “can't stand” the crying of the “innocent people” around him. My great-grandmother asks why, in that case, he's still arresting her brother. In response, the policeman informs her that he “has to obey” his orders, and then shows her “a crowd of hundreds of young and old arrested people” — soon to include her brother — destined to be sent east.

“But you,” he tells her husband, “I did not see, and I have no orders ... for your arrest.” Shortly after, what remains of her family finally departs for the only country in the world that would take them: not the United States, where I was born, but Uruguay.

Knowing I'm alive today only thanks to the flippant mercy of a policeman infused my day school discussions of “never again” with a furious personal urgency. As a child, I rarely doubted that, one day, I would have to speak out against genocide. I thought I was ready for this challenge. But the story of my refugee family did not prepare me for what it is like to be on the other side, now as a college student, as a spectator to genocide.

In high school, I was vaguely aware of the Uyghur Geno-

cide. Once, I was in D.C. with friends and wanted to try Uyghur food. The only thing I knew of Uyghur culture was that it was being brutally suppressed by the Chinese government. I didn't reveal it to my friends, but this was why I picked a Uyghur restaurant.

I wondered if our waiter had heard from his family in China recently; this thought made me realize that I was experiencing what a faintly concerned American gentile of the 1940s might have felt upon meeting Jews for the first time. I left the restaurant knowing I was one step closer to the Uyghur genocide, but still wondered what it had to do with me.

I continued to pay attention to the news out of Xinjiang, the Uyghur region of China, as I finished high school. I went to Poland on the March of the Living and returned changed. Genocide was on my mind often and, with increased reporting, before my eyes: the Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other Muslim groups in Xinjiang were being rounded up into camps and prisons, enslaved, forcibly sterilized, and systematically raped. They suffer mass disappearances, confinement of children in residential schools, and the destruction of sacred sites.

Chinese officials in charge of the Uyghur region openly plan to erase Uyghur identity, with officials called on to "break their lineage, break their roots, break their connections and break their origins." I knew, by doing nothing, I was not fulfilling my personal responsibility — or my Jewish responsibility. Was this not what my Jewish education had prepared me for?

Starting at the University of Texas in 2019, I pursued my linguistics major, focusing on endangered and marginalized languages. I studied Tuvan, a language related to Uyghur. While researching for a class, I found a documentary on policies of mass surveillance and incarceration in Xinjiang. My own inaction, even as a people were imprisoned by a totalitarian government, disappointed and frightened me.

But this past summer, a group of Jewish college students started the Jewish Movement for Uyghur Freedom. I was elated at the thought of finally taking action, and got involved. The JMUF is now an international group mobilizing the Jewish community to stand against the Uyghur Genocide and build solidarity with Uyghurs in the diaspora.

Among other things, the JMUF lobbies lawmakers to ban the importation of goods made with slave labor and raises money for language schools and shelters for Uyghur children in the diaspora. JMUF students have organized public readings of Uyghur poetry in addition to preparing a Uyghur Freedom Haggadah.

In my time with JMUF, I have come to know and befriend Uyghurs and discover for myself the beauty and dignity of their culture. I have even begun learning the Uyghur language. I have been told directly by those with family and friends in the camps (which, by now, is most Uyghurs) that specifically Jewish solidarity gives them hope that they are not forgotten. While much of the world continues to ignore or even condone what is being done to the Uyghurs, many Jews are standing up for the Uyghur people.

It is terrible to realize that again, an ethno-religious minority is the target of a totalitarian government that seeks to destroy it. At the moment, the methods of choice are forced assimilation and sterilization; this alone should be enough to demand unceasing Jewish outrage. We know what comes next. The Chinese state has ruled out total physical annihilation — for now — in favor of 'cleaner' solutions to the "Uyghur Question." We must not wait for it to abandon the pretense.

I came into JMUF barely knowing anything about the Uyghur Genocide. Now, knowing more but still not enough, I am afraid. I am seriously terrified at how easily the camps went up, and how little the average American cares about the slaves who pick the cotton they wear. I am afraid because I am young, because I can see where the future is heading: backwards. JMUF may be a group of idealistic college students, but idealism is not naiveté. Uyghur Freedom is a necessary end in itself, but is also one of the many monumental tests facing Jews today. It is not up to us alone to achieve it, but we will never be free to abandon it.

**Avi Ackermann** is a sophomore studying linguistics at the University of Texas at Austin.

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● **SABBATH WEEK / PARSHAT PINCHAS**

# The Hurt of Hurting Another

*Acts of violence may leave a permanent scar on those who commit them.*

By Rabbi Aaron Portman

Last week's portion, Balak, ends on a dark cliffhanger. If the narrative were a TV show, the end of last week's episode would be particularly climactic and gruesome. Pinchas, a priestly descendent of Aaron, commits an act of double homicide in an attempt to curb idolatry brought on by cohabitation between Israelites and Midianites. His act of zealotry ends a divine plague, which killed 24,000 Israelites. Fade to black.

This week, we find Pinchas seemingly blessed for his act of violence:

God spoke to Moses, saying, "Pinchas, son of Elazar son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the Israelites by displaying among them his passion for Me, so that I did not wipe out the Israelite people in My passion. Say, therefore, 'I grant him my brit shalom.'" (Numbers 25:10-12)

One might choose to read Pinchas's act in its context, recognizing the jealous nature of God when it comes to disobedience, especially when idolatry is involved. One could even say Pinchas was acting justly for his time, responding to an immediate need of his tribe by setting a strong and forceful standard through a display of violence.

Despite these apologetic readings, it seems out of place for God to cosign a brit shalom — translated as "covenant of peace" — with Pinchas, who essentially conducts an act of war and aggression. Why would God choose this kind of covenant at this moment? What is accomplished by invoking peace in light of such violence? The paradox is striking.

When I spent a year studying in the Old City of Jerusalem after high school, my yeshiva participated in a number

of marches. Many of the marches were harmless displays of pre-Shabbat revelry, but some took on a more provocative tone. During holidays, we would occasionally march through the Muslim quarter of the city, where some students would shout and bang on storefronts. One holiday, we marched through Silwan, a Palestinian village adjacent to the Old City, guarded by scores of IDF soldiers as Palestinians looked on from a distance.

As an 18-year-old yeshiva student, I didn't fully understand what we were doing there. All I knew was that I felt uncomfortable and ashamed by what seemed like an unnecessary and provocative display of power. To this day, I feel deeply impacted by my participation in those marches.

Watching the news these past few weeks, I've been reminded of those days in Jerusalem. This year's postponed Jerusalem Day Flag March, which consistently provokes tension and violence in and around the Old City, was defiantly rescheduled and attended by thousands of participants just over two weeks ago, including by members of the Knesset. In many of the photos, I observed 18-year-old yeshiva students, who look just like I did, in front of a backdrop of Israeli flags and flags representing Lehava, a far-right party. In video clips, I hear some chanting "Death to Arabs." I feel the painful reminder of my past reignited.

In attempting to understand why God grants Pinchas a covenant of peace after he commits acts of violence, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, the 19th-century Polish/Lithuanian rabbi known by his acronym Netziv, provides a powerful interpretation:

Pinchas was promised he would not become an agitated and angry person, for the nature of the act he did — killing a person with his hands — leaves a strong impression." (Haamek Davar on Numbers 25:12)

The Netziv is pointing to the notion of moral injury, that one may be deeply and emotionally impacted especially by acts that have harmed others. Pinchas, reflecting on his own destructive past, would likely face a plethora of feelings: guilt, shame, anger, hopelessness. Many veterans experience severe PTSD due to the lingering effects of moral injury, as they consciously and subconsciously recognize the harm and damage they may have commit-

ted during their service.

*"I felt uncomfortable and ashamed by what seemed like an unnecessary and provocative display of power."*

In addition to the immense and ongoing pain experienced by victims of violence, it is evident that acts of harm leave a wide trail of suffering behind them. According to the Netziv, the brit is meant as a healing salve. God knows the ways committing acts of violence may leave a permanent scar on those who commit them. Perhaps God is speaking from experience.

When I see the violence of these past few weeks, I cannot help but reflect on the harm I may have caused. Whom have I harmed, whether by marching or staying silent? What acts of violence have I committed, whether actively or passively? In reckoning with our own complicity in causing harm, I hope we can all draw on Pinchas's brit shalom, a covenant of peace in our souls, so that we may do no more harm and pursue peace and justice instead.

**Rabbi Aaron Portman** is a recent graduate of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah in NYC, and has worked as a multifaith educator, prison chaplain, youth director and university professor. Prior to rabbinical school, he studied at Yeshiva University and the University of St Andrews in Scotland, after which he worked at Footsteps, an organization that provides economic and social support to formerly ultra-Orthodox Jews.

*This commentary was originally published by T'ruah as part of its (M)oral Torah series. Sign up to receive (M)oral Torah in your inbox each week at <https://truah.org/moral-torah>*

#### CANDLELIGHTING, READINGS:

**Tammuz 22, 5781 | Friday, July 2, 2021**

- **Light candles at:** 8:13 p.m.

**Tammuz 23, 5781 | Saturday, July 3, 2021**

- **Torah reading:** Pinchas, Numbers 25:10–30:1
- **Haftarah:** Jeremiah 1:1–2:3
- **Shabbat ends:** 9:21 p.m.

## ● MUSINGS

# The Assumption of Ill Will

By David Wolpe

In decades of serving as a rabbi, I cannot tell you for sure which phenomenon in the synagogue is most commonly helpful, but I can tell you which is the most commonly destructive: the assumption of ill will.

Disagreements are expected. Even arguments can be salutary. God knows the Jewish people have a decided tendency to argue. But the belief that the other person is advancing a position because they are driven by nefarious motives contributes to the deep divisions within communities.

The issue can be about masks or about minyan; it can be about staffing or about schooling; it can be about Jewish law or parking spaces. No matter the seriousness of the question, if you believe the person opposing you has the best of intentions, it changes the argument and often, the outcome. If on the other hand, you are convinced that any decent person would think as you do, you will be unable to overcome the divisions that any community inevitably faces. I'm not asking you to agree with me; I just want you to believe that I am not evil for disagreeing with you.

*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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● Q & A

## Sarah Schulman: ‘Forget About the Folks Who Don’t Want to Fight’

*The author of “Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987–1993” has some advice for today’s young organizers.*

By Adam Eli

*Sarah Schulman’s “Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987–1993” has been called “a masterpiece of historical research.” Based on more than 200 interviews with members of ACT UP — an international, grassroots political group founded in 1987 working to end the AIDS pandemic — Schulman offers an expansive and long-overdue exploration of the coalition’s inner workings, achievements and conflicts. Here, Schulman talks with fellow Jewish community organizer Adam Eli about the book and what young activists today can learn from the ACT UP generation.*

***A fundamental aspect of ACT UP’s media strategy was to talk through the media — the idea that the news media are a vehicle to talk to the general public or people in power who are watching. How does that change when we can completely craft the message ourselves via social media? How can social media effectively be used as an activist tool?***

I have no answer to that because every generation has to use their own technology. For the ACT UP generation, the new technology was video. So that’s what they grasped. We all know the danger of social media is that people end up in bubbles, and there’s no common source that everyone is looking at, like the evening news or something like that. We’re very siloed, but I absolutely do not have an answer for that, sorry.

***I appreciate that. Is it true that ACT UP members used to bring camcorders to actions and create their own***

***reels which they would send home and also to news organizations?***

Well, it actually started earlier than that. When AIDS first began, the main way of recording was with film. The earliest AIDS media was shot on 16 millimeter and super eight film, and there was no technology for recording off the television set. People were literally aiming their cameras at the screen and filming what was on TV. Then the camcorder was invented right as ACT UP came into being. So, it was the first time that a movement had control of their media.

ACT UP did shoot their own footage and bring it to television stations and things like that, but there were also a number of video collectives inside ACT UP. They would make their own reels and mail them to people around the country, and around the world, as a way of getting our news out because the mainstream media did not cover AIDS or gay news.

***When I hear stories like that, I always think, “Can you imagine if these incredible people had access to Instagram?”***

I’m not saying that things would have been any better. I don’t see that organizing is any better now. I mean, certain things are possible, but other things are lost. One of the main organizing structures was that people spent all their time together. They lived together, they worked together, they had affinity groups. ACT UP was a way of life. And by spending so much real time together, people became very educated on the experiences of people with AIDS, and were able to brainstorm all the time, as part of daily life, about how to find solutions and how to have creative responses. Not having that intimacy is a real disadvantage for organizing.

***You’ve spoken often about the sense of urgency driving ACT UP. This urgency still exists in parts of the current queer rights movement where people are actively dying, namely in the trans rights movement, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the intersex movement. However, in my experience, for many white gay American men, that sense of urgency is not there, yet those with more privilege are needed now especially. Like you talk about in your book, we need their access and resources. How can we activate people who feel like their personal lives are not on the line?***



You know, I look at this whole question really differently... so let me rephrase it in my way.

***Please!***

Right now, the most radical movements in America are the movements against police violence, the movements for Black lives, Palestinian solidarity, and the movement for immigrants' rights — all of these movements have openly trans people within leadership. So that is where the liberation politics, queer liberation politics, live in those movements. There is a very rarefied gay rights highly funded sector — groups like GLAAD and HRC; I don't even know who these people are. I couldn't even tell you their names. I've never met them.

It's true that in the ACT UP era, gay white man was not a privileged category. Gay white men were a profoundly oppressed group. Gay sex was illegal, gay people had no basic rights, you could be kicked out of a restaurant — which was something that happened to me, and to many people. You didn't have the right to public accommodation. Familial homophobia was the norm. There was a sport called gay bashing, where straight people used to come into gay neighborhoods as entertainment and beat us. Beat up, especially, gay men. It was a state of high and profound alienation.

If you asked me, "What is the most important queer issue today?" I would say poverty. The fact that there's an elite who are aligned with the state at this point ... one of the lessons of ACT UP is that you don't need everybody to make change. The changes are made by a small group of people who are committed to being effective. Most people do not participate in change, and never have. Even most oppressed people. Most people with AIDS never did anything to fight AIDS. Most gay people never did anything to fight for gay liberation. And the same thing is true for every other group. I would say: Forget about them, forget about the folks who don't want to fight.

***In your book, you speak about how the gay male image and the gay male hero narrative is used over and over again in the representation of ACT UP. Your book thoroughly and eloquently disproves that idea. Did you receive pushback about this? How has that been received?***

This is a very interesting question. ACT UP has been mis-

represented. What people are saying is that I have foregrounded women and people of color, but that is not true. I just said what they did, and that apparently is shocking information. Most white men in ACT UP did not have their work historicized. In my book, I go into depths of white male activists and leaders who started movements for homeless people with AIDS, worked on needle exchange, and were involved with the Haitian underground. And they did all kinds of incredible work that they never got credit for, or that people don't know about.

It's not just that white men's stories were told, and now I'm foregrounding women and people of color. White men's stories were not told. What happened was that five or so individuals were singled out and decontextualized to fit into the heroic white male narrative that America always uses, which obstructs the fact that it's not individuals that lead enormous paradigm shifts, it's community. And in America, it's coalitions of communities.

***You talk about how Isaac Bashevis Singer's "Enemies, A Love Story" (1989), which you adapted into a play, really influenced the way that you structured this book. Could you talk to me a little bit about that?***

Singer wrote about the Jews of Europe before the cataclysm and then when he saw them again in America after. Of course, he missed the Holocaust, as he was in the United States. What was revealed by this juxtaposition of before and after is that these were not pure, clean, primitive beings who were decimated by this evil force. These were complex human beings who had their own flaws and contradictions, who then had a cruel cataclysm imposed on them, and then emerged with many of their human contradictions still intact. And that is the most sophisticated depiction of victims I have ever seen, because when you stigmatize a group — whether it's Jews or people with AIDS — you dehumanize them, and the only way that their destruction can be seen as wrong is if they're clean. But if you actually see human beings for who they are, they're never clean. And so, cruelty is never justified.

When I did the stage adaptation of "Enemies, A Love Story," I got so deeply into how [Singer] depicted this. It's very different to the way the Jews of Europe are normally depicted. For example, he has a womanizing man who abandons his family before the Holocaust. Then, his children are murdered. He suffers profoundly. He ends up

as a refugee in New York, but he's still a womanizer, because he's still a person! And this burden of perfection was put on people with AIDS. The press, when they finally did start to cover AIDS, divided people into innocent victims and guilty victims. Those were actually two literal categories. A guilty victim was a person who had sex or used needles. An innocent victim was like a hemophiliac.

This concept of having to deserve compassion pervades all of our histories of cataclysm. So that's why Singer was so influential on the way that Jim and I theorized this. That's why I show all the flaws, because if you want to learn from ACT UP, you have to see people as human beings, and human beings act out, especially when under that much pressure of constant dying and suffering in their 20s. They have contradictions and do things like steal money and shoot drugs and pretend they're HIV positive when they're not. It's not respectability politics, it's human. It's human beings. This is also imposed on Palestinians. Palestinians are supposed to be clean and perfect, or else they don't deserve rights.

***Another thing that you say in the book, and I'm not sure if it was a joke or not, is, "I always felt that one of the reasons people spoke so openly to me was because they wanted to make record of their achievements and were truly interested in discussing their ACT UP experiences, and since so many New Yorkers have been in therapy, they were used to telling their thoughts and feelings to a middle-aged Jewish woman."***

It's a joke, but it's also true. I was just amazed! If I was a man, people might've been more defensive, I don't know. But no, in 17 years, nobody ever refused to answer a question. People were really happy to be able to tell what they did, a lot of people had never been interviewed before. It was a very New York kind of relationship.

***Avram Finklestein's iconic "silence = death" poster has a clear reference to the Holocaust — the pink triangle turned upside down. However, the creation of this poster originally had a different concept that also pertained to the Holocaust — the tattooing of the number — can you talk a little about that?***

That's because of William Buckley. He was a very powerful conservative who had a prime-time television show, and his brother was a New York senator. He was in the mainstream of politics and he called for people with

AIDS to be tattooed. That was a literal demand. In response, ACT UP, in their first pride parade in 1987, had a float showing people with AIDS in a concentration camp as a response to this demand to be tattooed.

Right before ACT UP was founded in 1987, there was a zap organization called The Lavender Hill Mob. Zap is a tactic that came from the gay liberation movement; it is something that only people who are excluded from power can do, because it's about bursting into the room and fucking up everything. Michael Petrelis and Marty Robinson dressed up in concentration camp uniforms and disrupted a meeting of the CDC to demand why they weren't doing anything about AIDS.

These images had been in place from the beginning and it's because of our generation — Jews who were born right post-Holocaust. A lot of people in ACT UP were born in the '40s, '50s, and '60s. I was born 13 years after the end of the Holocaust. We experienced the Holocaust as the central metaphor. I also think that Jews were very overrepresented in leadership in gay liberation and in feminism, because we had been trained in that post-Holocaust generation with some kind of social justice orientation, and sense of responsibility, but our own community didn't want us. Our families were so homophobic, and the Jewish community had no place for us. That [Jewish] leadership got transferred to the gay movement. That's why you have [leaders] like Marty Duberman, Adrienne Rich, Lillian Faderman and Larry Kramer. And on and on and on. The Holocaust was a central metaphor in the lives of that generation, and in the early AIDS days, it was very present. As younger people got involved, that changed.

***Is there anything else that you want to talk about? Specifically to a younger Jewish audience?***

If only lesbian novels could get the support and attention as books about men, my life would be complete. (Alma)

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## UPCOMING EVENTS

July 6 | 11:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m. Free

**Gazoz: Sparkling Inspirations with Adeena Sussman & Benny Briga**

Benny Briga of Tel Aviv's Café Levinsky and cookbook author Adeena Sussman join Streicker Center Temple Emanu-El NYC to discuss their new cookbook, "Gazoz: The Art of Making Magical, Seasonal Sparkling Drinks." Learn how Briga layers herbs, flowers and fruit into a glass topped with sparkling soda for phenomenal visual and flavor sensations.

Register at <https://bit.ly/3jxvhL0>

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July 6 | 1:00 p.m. – 2:00 p.m. Free

**Book Talk: 'Lamentations: Faith in a Turbulent World'**

Join My Jewish Learning for a talk with author and scholar Dr. Yael Ziegler about her new book, "Lamentations: Faith in a Turbulent World." Dr. Ziegler will address the biblical book's primary themes, such as: How do people progress from despair to hope? How can people maintain faith in God's justice in a world that seems cruel and unfair?

Register at <https://bit.ly/3hcnfG6>

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July 8 | 4:30 p.m. \$10 suggested donation

**Yiddish Ethnography and An-Ski**

A YIVO talk, presented by Gabriella Safran, explores the connections between S. An-ski's ethnographic work, his play "The Dybbuk" and the Russian politics of his era. This event is part of YIVO's 2021 Yiddish Civilization Lecture series and will take place on Zoom.

Register at <https://yivo.org/YCLS2021-Safran>

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July 8 | 5:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m. Free

**The History Of American Jewish Summer Camps**

Join the Museum of Jewish Heritage for a program exploring the history of Jewish summer camps with Dr. Gary P. Zola, co-editor of "A Place of Our Own: The Rise of Reform Jewish Camping" and Dr. Jenna Weissman Joselit, curator of the 1994 exhibition "A Worthy Use of Summer: Jewish Summer Camping in America."

Register at <https://mjhnyc.org/events/the-history-of-american-jewish-summer-camps>

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**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)**