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Julia Haart, the CEO of Elite World Group, stars in the new reality show "My Unorthodox Life." The show documents her life as a fashion mogul after leaving the Orthodox Jewish community. (Courtesy of Netflix)

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● NEWS

Julia Haart Has a Message for 'My Unorthodox Life' Critics: Watch Before You Judge Me

The reality show's star rejects accusations that the show is antisemitic or anti-Orthodox.

By Shira Hanau

The day "My Unorthodox Life" premiered on Netflix, its subject Julia Haart was frustrated by the negative reviews — especially those from Jews who live the way she once did.

"Before you judge the show, maybe you might want to watch the show?" Haart told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency on Wednesday, responding to those who say the reality TV series is only the latest in a series of pop culture cheap shots against Orthodoxy.

“Because they had the word ‘unorthodox’ in it, people have made a thousand assumptions without actually taking the time to listen to what I actually have to say,” said Haart, the CEO of the global modeling agency Elite World Group. “If someone watches the show ... it’s going to be really hard for someone to say I don’t mention anything positive.”

What Haart has to say, though, might be hard to hear for those who defended Orthodoxy against Netflix’s previous forays into stories about people who have left Orthodox communities.

The title “My Unorthodox Life” pays homage to the company’s 2020 Emmy-winning hit “Unorthodox,” a series loosely based on the 2012 bestselling memoir by Deborah Feldman, who left the Hasidic community after marrying at 17 and having a son. That show was preceded by “One of Us,” a 2017 documentary following the lives of three formerly Hasidic Jews, one of whom grapples with the aftermath of sexual abuse, as they struggle to acclimate to the challenges of their new lives.

But while critics of those shows could make the case — and sometimes did — that the abuse and trauma prompting the subjects to leave stemmed from simply a few bad Orthodox apples, Haart says the problem is endemic to the haredi Orthodox world, where women typically marry young, have many children and rarely pursue higher education or high-power careers.

“What I would love to see is that women have an opportunity to have a real education, can go to college, do not get married off at 19 on a shidduch,” or arranged match, Haart told JTA. “I want women to be able to sing in public if they want or dance in public if they want. I want them to create. I want them to be doctors or lawyers or whatever they want to be. I want them to know that they matter, in and of themselves, not just as wives and mothers.”

A flurry of press surrounding the show’s premiere has already made the contours of Haart’s life familiar to many. She was born Talia Leibov in what was then the Soviet Union. Her parents were observant Jews — so much so that despite there being no mikvahs, or Jewish ritual baths, in the country at that time, Haart’s mother would still immerse in the Black Sea, even in the dead of winter.

The family came to the United States in the 1970s and moved to Austin, Texas, where Haart was the only Jew enrolled at her private school. When she was in the fourth grade, the family, having grown more religious, moved to Monsey, a town outside of New York City that is home to a large population of Orthodox Jews. Haart was enrolled in a religious girls’ school there and, for the first time, did not regularly encounter anyone in her daily life who was not an observant Jew.

She said the change induced a deep culture shock.

“I’d always been very proud of being Jewish, I loved my Jewish identity,” Haart said. “I just didn’t know that that meant I had to cut myself off from the rest of the world.”

Haart graduated from high school in Monsey and went on to attend a religious girls’ seminary in Israel for a year before returning to begin “shidduchim,” or matchmaker-arranged dating. At 19, she married Yosef Hendler and they moved to Flatbush, Brooklyn, where Hendler studied at a local yeshiva.

The couple later returned to Monsey and were part of an Orthodox community called “yeshivish” because of the centrality of yeshivas where men study Torah, sometimes full-time. In some ways the yeshivish community is less insular than the Hasidic communities that Feldman and the “One of Us” subjects left, with most people speaking English as a first language and some attending college and graduate school.

Haart’s husband was among them, graduating from the prestigious Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and settling into a career in energy. When he was offered a job in Atlanta in the 1990s, Haart jumped at the opportunity to move. “Out-of-town” communities, or Orthodox communities outside the metropolitan New York area, are considered more open-minded and often allow for a greater variety of religious practice than communities in New York and New Jersey.

“I was so ecstatic honestly, it didn’t occur to me to leave the world. But at least I thought, you know, out of town is a little more relaxed,” Haart said. “Atlanta was the beginning of everything.”

Haart became a leader in the local Orthodox community there, delivering widely attended lectures on Jewish topics and gaining a reputation as an engaging teacher. She

often hosted large Shabbat meals, feeding on average 40 people a week. Among them were local college students and others in need of a Shabbat meal or wanting to learn more about Shabbat.

Those encounters introduced her to secular Jews and exposed her to their ways of life. She started visiting the local Barnes and Noble and picking up secular literature, then bought a television and started going to drive-in movies with her husband. (She said they preferred drive-ins because there they weren't "mixing with non-Jews.")

But when Haart tried to import some of what she was learning about the secular world into her own life, she said she ran into brick walls.

"I just was tired of being told ... Julia, you're too noticeable, Julia, your clothes are too tight, Julia, your clothes are too colorful, Julia, stop attracting attention," she recalled. "I was so tired of being told to make myself invisible."

She tried speaking with teachers and rabbis about her struggles in her religious community. Rabbis told her to recite Psalms.

"My favorite one was someone who told me, Julia, where does it say you need to be happy? There's nowhere in the Torah that it says that," Haart said.

By the time her oldest daughter, Batsheva, was married at 19 in 2012, Haart had learned enough about the "outside world" to want to jump in. The week after the wedding, Haart left behind the Orthodox community, taking her younger daughter, Miriam. (An older son, Shlomo, later moved to New York City and continued to observe Shabbat, though he said he recently stopped wearing a kippah. Haart and her ex-husband share custody of their youngest son, Aron, who is 14 and attends an Orthodox school. All of the children appear on the show.)

Within a year of leaving, Haart launched an eponymous shoe company. Within a short time she had been tapped to become the creative director at the luxury lingerie brand La Perla, where she was influential in getting Kim Kardashian, whose family's reality show paved the way for "My Unorthodox Life," to don a bra as outerwear. In 2019, Haart assumed the top role at the talent management company Elite World Group, whose chairman is her Italian husband.

The show is thin on details about Haart's meteoric rise

from ex-Orthodox mother to globetrotting fashion CEO. For that, Haart said, you'll have to wait for her memoir, which is scheduled for release next spring. (The book figures heavily into the show's first episodes, as Haart disagrees with some of her children about whether she should be able to disclose personal details about them.)

"The show is thin on details about Haart's meteoric rise from ex-Orthodox mother to globetrotting fashion CEO."

But Haart said her religious journey was more gradual. She said she learned about the world beyond her Orthodox community for eight years before she left, slowly experimenting with some of the more stringent parts of her religious life along the way.

"People just assume that I walked out one day. That's not what happened," she said. "It took over eight years for me to leave, and in those eight years I became less and less fundamentalist. So people who know me from the last few years before I left know a very different woman than the woman [I was] until 35."

That doesn't mean she embraced the outside world in the way she is seen doing on the show, where she wears revealing clothing, freely dispensing advice about vibrators and eating nonkosher food. During her years in Atlanta before she left, Haart taught in a religious school and gave classes to women in her community. Recordings of some of her religious lectures can still be found online.

"When I say that we became more and more secular, it's still your nose pressed against the glass at the bakery door, but we're not going into the bakery, and we're certainly not buying the croissant," Haart said. "For those eight years I was looking."

Yael Reisman, director of field and movement building at Footsteps, an organization that helps those who wish to leave Orthodox communities to adjust to life in the secular world, said the story of Haart's journey could be inspiring. But she said it could also be dangerously misleading.

"Our members really struggle," Reisman said. "Leaving comes at such a tremendous cost, there's so much on the line. I worry that the show doesn't deal with the complexities of leaving everything you know behind."

Haart and her family members do allude to the challenges of leaving Orthodox communities. Her son-in-law Binyamin Weinstein said he entered real estate be-

cause only a high school diploma is required, and Haart frequently bemoans the poor education she and her children received in Monsey. Elsewhere, Shlomo has discussed having to make up lost ground at a local community college before being able to transfer to Columbia University.

But Haart and her children disagree about how to assist someone who might want to leave the Orthodox community. In one episode of the show, Haart invites a woman who wishes to leave her community to discuss the process of starting a new life. Instead of offering her career advice, as Batsheva and Ben think she should, Haart gives the woman a makeover complete with a new haircut, makeup and jeans. To her children's chagrin, she gives the woman a vibrator.

"It's clear that Haart would prefer her children to be in her world than in the Orthodox community."

"If you were coming from Monsey and you had never been in a big beautiful office and met a CEO, what would your next step be the next day?" Batsheva asks. "Mine would be, wow, that's really amazing, I want to be out in the workforce and the world. But I would still feel lost as to how can I get there."

Ben, speaking to Miriam, adds: "I think what Batsheva is saying is it would have been more practical if your mother sat down with her and looked for jobs and showed her a game plan as opposed to the hair and makeup and vibrator."

Batsheva confronts her mother, who defends her approach.

"I'm trying to promote self-knowledge, and knowing how to pleasure yourself as a woman is part of self-knowledge," Haart said.

It's clear that Haart would prefer her children to be in her world than in the Orthodox community and that she is uncomfortable with them embracing aspects of the life she left behind. The series shows Haart sometimes pushing her children to be less religiously observant, for example urging her youngest son to reconsider his decision not to talk to girls and chastising her son-in-law for his discomfort when Batsheva wears pants. But there are also scenes where she notes the presence of kosher food and celebrates the holiday of Sukkot with her chil-

dren and one of her sisters who is still observant.

"If you watch it, you see that we all love each other and even though my mom isn't religious ... she's extremely respectful, you know, does all the holidays with us, makes sure that there's kosher food options, respects our travel restrictions on Shabbat," Batsheva Weinstein, who now identifies as Modern Orthodox, told JTA.

Some Orthodox critics see the show as a malicious smear on the entire Orthodox community, and Haart's support for those seeking to leave as proof that she has an agenda beyond telling her own story. The Orthodox Jewish Public Affairs Committee has been critiquing the show on Twitter, and Orthodox women have even taken to social media to counter the portrayal of Orthodoxy offered by the show, posting smiling photos of themselves with their hair covered and wearing modest dress with the hashtag #MyOrthodoxLife.

"These salacious stories are actively making people hate Jews," Kylie Ora Lobell writes in the Jewish Journal. "And Orthodox Jews usually don't speak up because they are too busy living their lives and not paying attention to what the media has to say. If they do take a stance, mainstream publications typically won't publish their responses. The media doesn't want to hear it. And so we just get pummeled over and over again."

Writing in *Glamour*, Jenny Singer took issue with the idea that watching "My Unorthodox Life" would constitute a form of feminist activism. Instead, she said, the show could make Orthodox Jews even more vulnerable to antisemitism.

"It's not acceptable to castigate an entire minority group, no matter how much you disagree with them or how harmful some of their practices are. It doesn't help Orthodox women; it just puts all Orthodox people in danger," Singer wrote.

Reisman said the idea that stories like Haart's cause antisemitism are baseless.

"I can't say how problematic that is. These stories don't cause antisemitism, it's just another tactic to get people to be quiet," she said. "I think what needs to be addressed is these behaviors that make people leave."

Haart, too, rejects the criticism that the show is antise-

mitic or anti-Orthodox. She still believes in God, she said, and she cherishes the values of kindness and charity she said she takes from Judaism.

She just doesn't want any other women to feel the despair she experienced as a young bride and mother whose role in her community felt sharply circumscribed.

"Shabbos is beautiful. You think I want people to stop keeping Shabbos? Of course not," Haart said. "I do want them to stop telling women what to do."

● NEWS

Survey: A Quarter of US Jews Agree That Israel 'is an Apartheid State'

By Ron Kampeas

A survey of U.S. Jewish voters taken after the Israel-Gaza conflict finds that a sizable minority believe some of the harshest criticisms of Israel, including that it is committing genocide and apartheid.

Among respondents to the survey commissioned by the Jewish Electorate Institute, a group led by prominent Jewish Democrats, 34% agreed that "Israel's treatment of Palestinians is similar to racism in the United States," 25% agreed that "Israel is an apartheid state" and 22% agreed that "Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinians."

Among younger voters included in the survey released Tuesday, agreement with those statements was higher, though still in the minority. The poll found that 9% of voters agreed with the statement, "Israel doesn't have a right to exist." But among voters under 40, that proportion was 20%. A third of younger voters agreed that Israel is committing genocide, a position that even human rights lawyers who are critical of Israel say is extreme; more than a third agreed that Israel is an apartheid state.

The findings are striking as mainstream pro-Israel organizations struggle to make the case that Israel is central to Jewish identity and that criticism of it often veers into antisemitism. They suggest that many American Jews agree with statements by some of Israel's harshest critics on the left made during the Gaza-Israel conflict in May, including in some cases by a handful of Democratic members of Congress who were then criticized by their colleagues.

The survey of American Jewish political sentiment was wide-ranging, finding wide approval for President Joe Biden and deep concern about Republican efforts in Georgia and Florida to tighten access to the ballot booth. When it came to measuring criticism of Israel, the poll first asked respondents whether they thought each of the four critical statements was antisemitic; those who said a statement was not antisemitic were then asked if they agreed with it.

Of the four statements, only in one case, did a majority — 67% — agree that it was antisemitic to say, "Israel doesn't have a right to exist." For the other three questions, more respondents disagreed that the statement was antisemitic than agreed.

The survey of 800 voters, conducted by GBAO Strategies from June 28 to July 1 online and via texts, has an overall margin of error of 3.5 percentage points; the replies of those under 40 have a margin of error of 6 percentage points. (The margin of error for the Orthodox subgroup was 11.6 percentage points.)

While the proportion of respondents agreeing with critical statements about Israel was higher than many pro-Israel advocates have characterized, at least one finding is in line with that of another recent survey. Asked if they felt emotionally attached to Israel, 62% of respondents to the Jewish Electorate Institute survey said they did and 38% said they did not, numbers that matched those in the Pew study of 4,700 American Jews released in May.

The new survey presents the latest challenge as the new Israeli government endeavors to repair ties with a U.S. Jewish community that to a degree became alienated from Israel during the 12 years Benjamin Netanyahu was prime minister. Surveys have found that Israeli and American Jews know little about one another.

One statement in the survey, echoing a claim by former President Donald Trump, that “Jews who vote Democratic are disloyal to Israel” was also put forward to respondents to assess whether it is antisemitic; mainstream Jewish organizations have suggested that it is. However, while a vast majority of respondents, 77%, disagreed with the statement, only 26% said they believed it is antisemitic.

Asked about the two-state solution, 61% of survey respondents said it was their preferred outcome. But 19% said they preferred annexation of the West Bank that would deny Palestinians the right to vote in national elections, while 20% said they preferred “establishing one state that is neither Jewish nor Palestinian” and encompassing Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. Gaza is currently controlled by the Hamas terrorist group.

The Democratic lawmakers who lashed out at Israel during the conflict, including Reps. Cori Bush, Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib, have also raised the prospect of cutting aid to Israel. While a substantial majority of survey respondents, 71%, said it was “important” to provide financial assistance to Israel, a smaller majority, 58%, said it would be appropriate to restrict aid to Israel so it could not spend U.S. money on settlements. A majority, 62%, support Biden’s reversal of Trump’s policy of cutting off aid to the Palestinians.

The survey showed continued support among Jewish voters for Biden and for Democrats, commensurate with an American Jewish Committee poll taken just before the Gaza conflict. In the latest poll, Biden earned 80% job approval, and 74% approval on how he is “handling relations with Israel.” He got 62% approval ratings for how he handled the recent Israel-Gaza conflict.

Among the Orthodox, who largely voted Republican in the 2020 presidential election, Biden had 31% approval overall, but notably a higher number — 44% — for how he handles Israel relations. He earned 37% approval among the Orthodox for how he handled the recent conflict.

Asked whether they would prefer a Democrat to a Republican in a vote for Congress in next year’s midterm elections, 68% favored a generic Democrat and 21% favored a Republican.

Democratic leaders Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate

Majority Leader Chuck Schumer got 54% and 52% favorability ratings respectively and while Republican House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell each got 10%.

On domestic issues, respondents placed high climate change, voting rights, jobs, and the economy, and the coronavirus pandemic. Strikingly, 83% of respondents said they were concerned about Republican efforts in Georgia and Florida to tighten access to the ballot booth, which Democrats say are aimed at inhibiting minority voters. Some 76% of respondents backed federal legislation backed by Democrats that would block the state efforts to restrict voting rights, and 62% supported eliminating the Senate filibuster to allow the Democratic majority to pass the legislation.

Concern about antisemitism in the United States was high, at 90%, and more voters, 61%, believed the threat came from the right than they did from the left, 22%. Voters who felt said the threat was equal from both sides came in at 12%. Among the Orthodox, 69% said the threat came from the left, 10% from the right, and 18% from both sides.

● NEWS

Woodmere Pitcher Jacob Steinmetz Becomes First Observant Orthodox Player Drafted into MLB

The Arizona Diamondbacks drafted the 17-year-old 77th overall.

By Rob Charry

The Arizona Diamondbacks drafted Woodmere, Long Island native Jacob Steinmetz 77th overall in the third

round of the Major League Baseball draft on Monday. He's the first known observant Orthodox player to be picked in the league's draft.

MLB.com ranked the 17-year-old as the 121st best major league prospect, so he was picked far earlier than expected.

Steinmetz, a 6-foot-5, 220 pound pitcher, spent the past year at ELEV8 Baseball Academy in Florida, honing his pitching skills while attending The Hebrew Academy of the Five Towns and Rockaway in Long Island via Zoom. His fastball has reportedly reached as high as 97 miles per hour.

Steinmetz keeps kosher and observes Shabbat, but he also pitches on the Sabbath. To avoid using transportation on Shabbat, he has in the past booked hotels close enough to games that he can walk to them, the New York Post reported.

Starting pitchers in the big leagues only pitch every five days, so his schedule could theoretically be planned to skip Shabbat.

Steinmetz comes from an athletic family — his father Elliot played basketball at Yeshiva University and is now the New York school's basketball coach. He had coached the team to record success before the pandemic.

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● NEWS

Baseball Can Handle Orthodox Jewish Players If They Reach the Big Leagues. Here's Why.

Two top prospects may end up testing the Majors' tolerance for religious behavior.

By Ron Kaplan

The Arizona Diamondbacks made baseball history Monday when they made Jacob Steinmetz, a 17-year-old right-handed pitcher from Woodmere, New York, their third round pick in the Major League Baseball draft.

Steinmetz, who lists at 6-feet-5 and 220 pounds, is the first Orthodox Jewish player to be selected in baseball's annual talent hunt, which dates back to 1965. The media made a big deal that he "keeps the Sabbath and eats only kosher food," although the teen does play on Shabbat and holidays — he walks to the fields in those situations.

The next day, the Washington Nationals selected college prospect Elie Kligman as their final and 20th round pick, making the Las Vegas player the second Orthodox player to be drafted. Kligman, 18, won't play on Shabbat, as the Jewish Telegraphic Agency noted.

It's uncharted territory for Orthodox Jewish players and Major League Baseball. Eleven players who identify as Jewish have appeared in at least one major league game this season and none would consider himself "observant" in the traditional sense. The group includes pitcher Dean Kremer of the Baltimore Orioles, the first Israeli to be drafted.

To find an observant Jewish ballplayer, you need to consult a 2015 novel, "The Season of Pepsi Meyers" by Abie Rotenberg, in which the New York Yankees sign an Orthodox Jewish phenom. As one would expect, the bud-

ding superstar is faced with all sorts of challenges and temptations, from how to keep kosher on the road, to fitting in his daily prayers, to sitting out games on Shabbat and holy days.

Not that the majors haven't tried to accommodate a player's religion.

Roy Campanella, a three-time MVP for the Brooklyn Dodgers, did not play on Sundays early in his career in the Negro Leagues as a promise to his mother. In the mid-1980s, Edwin Correa, a Seventh-day Adventist, pitched for the Chicago White Sox and Texas Rangers. A starter, he refused to work on his Sabbath, which also fell on Friday night and Saturday. Happily for him, he was able to follow his code thanks to the flexibility of other members of the pitching staff. Sadly, injuries curtailed his career and he was finished by the age of 23.

Many of the children of Jewish immigrants dreamed of playing in the majors; whether their parents agreed is a different story. The sentiments of many immigrant parents who sacrificed so their children could reap the benefits of the "goldene medina" are captured in the classic movie "The Pride of the Yankees," whose screenplay is credited to two Jews, Jo Swerling and Herman J. Mankiewicz.

When Lou Gehrig's mother discovers her son signed with the Yankees in order to pay for her medical issues, she blasts his decision.

"Baseballers are good-for-nothings," she chides. "Loafers in short pants." (Mrs. Gehrig wasn't Jewish, but she might as well have been speaking Yiddish.)

It was not uncommon in those days for Jewish athletes to change their names to both hide their religion and not offend their families who considered such a profession a "shanda," a disgrace.

Hank Greenberg, the Hall of Fame outfielder for the Detroit Tigers, set the bar high when he not only kept his name but chose to sit out a crucial game that fell on Yom Kippur. It was not so much that he was observant, but that he wanted to honor the traditions of his people. That made him a folk hero — and not only among Jews.

Same for Sandy Koufax, who declined to pitch the opening game of the 1965 World Series for the Los Angeles Dodgers because the game fell on the Day of Atonement.

The way the game is played now, with players no longer in the lineup every day, Steinmetz and Kligman's teams could allow them to "keep the faith." In fact, their religious backgrounds might well make them drawing cards.

"We wish Steinmetz and Kligman plenty of mazel, but to mangle an old saying, many are called, few are 'Chosen.'"

Getting drafted, however, is no guarantee that a player will actually make it to the big leagues. Steinmetz was the 77th overall pick in the draft, a slot that could get him a signing bonus of over \$800,000. Teams are usually reluctant to sign teenage pitchers, owing to uncertainties around younger players, including how much more they might grow. Given his size, however, it's doubtful that Steinmetz has much more growing left.

Then there's the college factor. Steinmetz has already accepted a scholarship from Fordham University, a Jesuit Catholic school in the Bronx. Some drafted players stick with the college plan in order to gain experience.

There have been approximately 230 Jewish players out of more than more than 22,000 major leaguers, including the 3,400 men who suited up in the Negro Leagues. Aside from Greenberg, Koufax and, more recently, Ryan Braun and Ian Kinsler, few had a great impact on the game.

Naturally we wish Steinmetz and Kligman plenty of mazel, but to mangle an old saying, many are called, few are "Chosen." Out of the 1,000-plus players drafted in an average year, maybe one in five will make it to "The Show," according to Baseball America.

Before we start talking about Jacob Steinmetz as this generation's Sandy Koufax, we should also remember slugger Adam Greenberg, who had exactly two at-bats in the majors — a biblical seven years apart.

Ron Kaplan is the author of "Hank Greenberg in 1938: Hatred and Home Runs in the Shadow of War."

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● **36 UNDER 36**

The Jewish Week's '36 Under 36' Celebrates New York's Young Changemakers

Each year The Jewish Week celebrates 36 noteworthy New Yorkers, all 36 years old or younger, who make New York — and its many Jewish communities — better. Nominated by their peers and colleagues, these changemakers bring remarkable energy and new ideas to religion, philanthropy, the arts, Jewish learning, campus life, social action, inclusion and justice.

This week we announced the 2021 cohort of "36 Under 36." Below are just a few of this year's remarkable young New Yorkers. Meet all 36 leaders here: <https://jewish-week.timesofisrael.com/issue/36-under-36-2021>

Gabriel Seed is the Jewish chaplain for the New York City Department of Correction. Driven by a belief in teshuva, he has a passion for working with the incarcerated to provide spiritual care and learning.

As CEO of the Organization for the Resolution of Agunot, **Keshet Starr** helps individuals seeking a Jewish divorce through advocacy and education.

Ethan Marcus is the managing director of Sephardic Brotherhood, where he engages young Sephardic Jews from Ladino-speaking backgrounds through innovative educational offerings. During the past year, his organization ran over 350 classes that reached more than 50,000 people around the world.

Kylie Unell is an aspiring Jewish philosopher, who founded an organization called Rooted to support young Jews through social media content and gatherings. Kylie is also a writer, podcaster, and more recently (and unexpectedly) a comedy show producer.

Noa Baron, just 21, organizes young Jewish progressives at The Workers Circle.

As the executive director of Integrity First for America,

Amy Spitalnick fights for justice and accountability by suing neo-Nazis.

Liam Elkind is the co-founder and CEO of Invisible Hands, a nonprofit with thousands of volunteers who deliver food and medicine to those at-risk and in-need during the pandemic.

Hear directly from some of our honorees by attending The Jewish Week's 36 Under 36 Launch Event. Join us for a Zoom conversation about Jewish life, New York, and much more, moderated by The Jewish Week's Editor-in-Chief Andrew Silow-Carroll. Monday, July 19 at 6:00 pm. Register at <https://bit.ly/2U9Lbkk>

● **EDITOR'S DESK**

Why Unhappy Novels Make Me So Happy

Jewish tradition prepares us for sad, unsatisfactory endings.

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

You do not want me to recommend your next beach read.

The best novel I've read in months is also the most excruciating. "Shuggie Bain," which won its author, Douglas Stuart, the 2020 Man Booker prize, is about a Scottish boy being raised by an alcoholic single mother. Trapped in the Scottish version of the projects, preyed upon by indifferent neighbors and predatory men, the parent and child see their roles reversed. Shuggie is constantly trying to distract his mother from her worst impulses and, at times, to keep her alive.

It's a litany of misery, but told in such a singular, powerful voice that I never stopped to demand that the author ease up a little, or give me an "uplifting" ending.

I am also engrossed in a recent novel by Edna O'Brien, "The Little Red Chairs," which includes two shocking acts of violence and gets no happier from there. The story of displaced people and asylum-seekers in modern-day London, it takes place under the shadow of the genocid-

al civil war in the former Yugoslavia.

Some readers might not even bother; with limited time and infinite possibilities, why choose sadness or misery? I flatter myself by saying these dark tales make me more sensitive to the struggles of others. Or perhaps I am wallowing in someone else's misery just to make me feel better about myself.

The novelist Dara Horn writes about – actually against – those who read for “uplift.” In a Tablet essay, she objects that “even educated readers who appreciate tragedy still secretly expect a ‘redemptive’ ending, an epiphany, a moment of grace.” This is truly obscene, she writes, when applied to fiction about the Holocaust, where the real-life number of “happy” or redemptive endings is vanishingly small.

Horn expands on this idea in her forthcoming book of essays, “People Love Dead Jews,” which is exactly as uplifting as its title. She suggests that our impulse to expect redemption or grace at the end of a story is actually an inheritance of Western – that is, Christian – culture, where literature fulfills a need for readers to consider our world coherent and to find meaning at the end of every story.

“Happy endings and moments of grace have their place, but I guess don’t trust them.”

The Jewish literary tradition suggests exactly the opposite. The Five Books of Moses begins with a deeply flawed family and ends with the Jewish People on the brink of the Promised Land, their destiny unfulfilled. Moses, the hero, is denied his ultimate wish. In the Joseph novella, the hero lives to see his family reunited under his benevolent protection, but the victory is short-lived – the next thing we know there is a new Pharaoh and Joseph is quickly forgotten.

In the Torah portion Masei (Numbers 33:1-36:13), read this past Shabbat, the Jewish people’s long journey is about to reach a climax, and a war of conquest soon to get underway. But don’t cue the “Rocky” theme – the portion quickly swivels to discuss what to do when an unintentional murderer is committed and innocent blood is spilled. As Rabbi Avraham Fischer asks in a commentary on Masei, “Are there not more uplifting commandments to be dealt with than bloodshed?”

Fischer concludes that Torah hits a pause on the fanfare precisely because a triumphant “ending” might cause the people to desecrate the land at a moment when they are being commanded to conquer it in an “all-out, uncompromising war.” Because even “necessary and justified bloodshed can make a people callous towards the value of human life,” the Torah takes this moment to discuss the consequences of murder. It’s literally a cautionary tale.

Horn argues that this pattern of sometimes “grim reality” holds through the classics of Yiddish and Hebrew literature: novels with ambiguous endings or no endings at all. Or Holocaust novels that don’t require its dead Jews to “teach us about the beauty of the world and the wonders of the redemption.” I don’t mean to ruin “Fiddler on the Roof” for you, but Horn reminded me that in the original Sholom Aleichem stories, Golde and Motl the tailor both drop dead and Tevye’s daughter Shprintze drowns herself?

L’chaim!

So maybe my Jewish upbringing explains my tolerance for grim stories and unredemptive endings. Happy endings and moments of grace have their place, but I guess don’t trust them.

But if the only stories we tell ourselves are downbeat and existential, perhaps we are betraying another Jewish tradition – one that seeks a sense of hope and possibility even after the very worst happens. Writes Horn: Jewish storytelling is about “human limitations,” which means a story is not the end but the “beginning of the search for meaning.”

Sara Bloomfield, who has the decidedly un-uplifting job of directing the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, says it this way: “Destruction can teach us why freedom, justice, and human dignity are important — and fragile. And, that when freedom and justice are denied and dignity is threatened, we still retain certain powers over our own humanity.”

I’ll leave it there. Not a happy ending, necessarily, but a meaningful one.

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

● OPINION

Enough with the ‘Ex-Orthodox’ Drama. Many Who Leave Learn to Separate Dysfunction from Judaism.

The Netflix series “My Unorthodox Life” rolls out damaging clichés about a complex community.

By Allison Josephs

Last month, Pixar released “Luca,” the animated tale of a sea monster who becomes a boy on dry land. The protagonist must come to terms with the part of himself that makes him different, even reviled. And of course, by the end, Luca learns to love himself, bringing most of the townspeople along with him.

With this theme of an outsider’s journey to self-acceptance, “Luca” conjures up memories of so many movies we’ve seen before (think “Shrek,” “Beauty and the Beast” and “Wonder”).

“Luca” fits in perfectly with the zeitgeist. Viewers are reminded that they, too, should work to love themselves, especially their parts that don’t conform to societal expectations.

But there is another genre of banal narratives that bucks the “Luca” trend. It’s the story of a character so freakish, from a place so abominable, that an ending of affirmation or reconciliation is not possible. The only choice for this misfit is to escape her world of origin as the audience cheers her on.

This reviled place is known as Orthodox Judaism, and its captives have no possibility of learning to love and find meaning in what makes them different. According to Hollywood, their only chance to find happiness and

fulfillment depends on escape.

The run of such TV shows and movies in recent years includes global hits such as the documentary “One of Us” and the scripted series “Unorthodox.” The latest is the Netflix reality show “My Unorthodox Life.” It tells the story of Talia Hendler, who walked out on her family right after her oldest daughter married seven years ago. Hendler reinvents herself as secular Julia Haart, fashion designer and CEO of the Elite World Group, the modeling and talent agency chaired by her second husband. Haart eats shellfish, dresses provocatively, urges her somewhat religious son to talk to girls and encourages her daughter to wear pants (even though it’s a topic the daughter and her husband are still discussing).

Julia’s assistant asks her if there are rules about sex in Orthodoxy, and she quips “Rules about sex? There are rules about which shoe to put on first.” *Silly Orthodox Jews and all of their rules.*

We also hear how Orthodox women are second-class citizens and baby-making machines, that secular education is verboten, and that girls can’t play sports or ride bikes. While these ideas may be present in the most dysfunctional homes and the most extreme haredi, or ultra-Orthodox, communities, the show does not offer the nuance to show the range of behavior within Orthodoxy — including Atlanta, Georgia, and Monsey, New York, two communities to which Haart apparently once belonged. The viewer is simply left disgusted.

Instead of this one-sided — and, as I’ll suggest, inflammatory — scenario, I’d like to propose instead that Hollywood consider the “Luca” approach to ex-haredi storytelling. What would that look like?

Perhaps a wayward haredi Jew, fleeing abuse and a lack of secure attachment — a common experience among people leaving haredi Orthodoxy — seeks out coreligionists who have built systems to prevent abuse and hold abusers accountable.

The protagonist would then spend Shabbat in the homes of these families, where he would be graciously welcomed and unconditionally loved. He’d get to witness what a healthy home looks like when it comes to marriage, parent-child interactions and Judaism.

The character would then reengage with Jewish texts,

but this time he'd be encouraged to ask questions, his teachers giving over a Torah of kindness and ethics, affording it the nuance and complexity it deserves. This would allow him to revisit Jewish rituals and observances, approaching them with the goal of finding meaning and joy. The protagonist would then open himself up to the possibility of discovering a loving and compassionate God.

“My Unorthodox Life’ fails to show the range of behavior within Orthodoxy.”

Stories like this would be possible to tell because these are the stories of so many members of our organization. The Makom branch of Jew in the City caters to anyone raised haredi, though most of our members come from the Hasidic world. Our tagline is “From Darkness To Light” because we help our members separate their negative Jewish experiences from Judaism itself. Some members become more Modern Orthodox. Others simply find healthy people in their haredi community and relearn nuanced approaches to Judaism.

Their stories are similar to that of a woman I'll call Sorah, who is no longer Hasidic but now lives a Modern Orthodox life. After healing, Sorah has been able to open herself up to the fact that there are healthy Hasidic Jews out there that she never knew about. She shared a profound insight with me: Many of the Jews she knows who left Hasidism behind healed in many ways, but she noticed that something was still lacking in their recovery. It was in the act of revisiting Jewish rituals and texts, and reconnecting with the community and eventually God, that Sorah came to see that there were beautiful pieces of her heritage.

This led to a sense of self-love that has healed her holistically. Why? Because just as there is no running from being a sea monster or an ogre, Sorah explains that a Jew can never stop being a Jew. So her choice is either to despise where she comes from and what she is made of, or to return to the source of her hurt and figure out a way to reclaim those parts that are meaningful — even maybe discovering a different place within the Jewish community that feels like home.

I don't judge or resent anyone who runs. It is a logical reaction to dysfunction, the main reason most of our members find themselves displaced. At the same time

there is a compelling reason not to. When our members learn to separate dysfunction from Judaism, they are able to attain a self-love that changes them in foundational ways.

The Jewish community and the world deserve to have these stories told, not just because it would cause tremendous healing or other marginalized groups get this treatment. According to the FBI, 63% of all reported religion-based hate crimes in 2019 were directed at Jews, despite Jews only making up less than 2% of the U.S. population. When our community is shown again and again as only being worthy of escape, that hurts us and emboldens our enemies.

It's time that Hollywood take note.

Allison Josephs is the founder and director of Jew in the City. Its Makom branch helps haredi Jews with negative experiences find a positive place in Orthodoxy.

● SABBATH WEEK / PARSHAT DEVARIM

Without Compassion, Ritual and Prayer Are Useless

Justice and care of the vulnerable are preconditions for spiritual practice.

By Eitan Fishbane

With this week's portion, Devarim, we begin the book of Deuteronomy, the opening of a book of memory — recalling 40 years of desert wandering while simultaneously anticipating the entrance of the people into the Land of Israel.

Eleh hadevarim, “these are the words”; the opening refers to the words that recount the life and journey of a people, their entrance into covenant at Sinai. But as the Hasidic teachers frequently remind us, the Torah is eternal, reverberating anew for each individual Jew in every generation. And so, the guiding theme of remembering also takes place in the mind and heart of each person.

We are part of a people and a community, and we are also individual selves, bound up in our personal relationships and in self-examination. This is how we may understand the strong themes of justice and love that are expressed in Deuteronomy — wise discernment and compassionate care for the other, the urgency of love in devotion. These ethical and theological imperatives flow directly from the exclamations of Parshat Devarim — the introspection, self-examination, and turn to memory.

Indeed, Deuteronomy as a whole may be understood as an exhortation to justice and care of the vulnerable as a precondition for proper love of God. If so, we are able to understand the rabbinic choice to make Parshat Devarim also Shabbat Hazon, the Sabbath of vision. The latter name derives from the opening word of the haftarah linked to this occasion, Isaiah 1:1–27. This is a haftarah of harsh admonition and rebuke, an attempt by the prophet to awaken the urgency of repentance, the imperative of social justice in the form of care for the wronged and the vulnerable:

Cease to do evil;
Learn to do good (*limdu heitev*).
Devote yourselves to justice (*dirshu mishpat*);
Aid the wronged.
Uphold the rights of the orphan;
Defend the cause of the widow . . .
Be your sins like crimson,
They can turn snow-white . . . ”

Isa. 1:16–18

This is the essence of piety: not the external formalities of ritual performance alone, but animated by interpersonal acts of justice and compassion. “What need have I of all your sacrifices,” the prophet Isaiah says in the name of God,

Who asked that of you?
Trample my courts no more;
Bringing oblations is futile,
Incense is offensive to Me . . .
Though you pray at length,
I will not listen.
Your hands are stained with crime—
Wash yourselves clean;
Put your evil doings
Away from My sight.

Isa. 1:12–16

Religious ritual and prayer without teshuvah (repentance) for moral transgressions, for evildoing and lack of care for the vulnerable, is useless and unwanted by God. Spiritual practice must be grounded in the moral imperative of compassion and care to achieve depth and authenticity.

Let it be in this spirit that we view the trajectory of time progressing toward the *yamim noraim* (High Holy Days), toward the *aseret yemei teshuvah* (Ten Days of Repentance). This time in which we find ourselves — the three weeks of collective mourning during the second half of the Hebrew month of Tammuz and the first part of Av — this is our reenactment of the brokenness that culminates this Saturday night in Tishah B’Av (the Ninth Day of Av), which commemorates the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem and has also come to symbolize the many catastrophes that have befallen the Jewish people over more than two millennia.

I suggest that we understand the ruined House of God not just in its literal sense as the historical Beit Hamikdash, but as the sacred space of peace, balance and kindness within each of us. Perhaps this is a figurative way to read the classical idea that the Temple was destroyed because of *sinat hinam* — baseless hatred between people — a lack of compassion, kindness and peace.

Read this way, the haftarah of Shabbat Hazon may remind us of the inner brokenness and the pain in others that is caused by our callousness and indifference to suffering. That is the deep wail of Eikhah (Lamentations) that we recite in reenacted despair on Tishah B’Av: a howl over the brokenness and ruin that has come about as a result of our actively destructive behavior and our apathy toward those in a state of vulnerability who need our intervention, our work of justice, compassion and love.

The wail of lament and despair includes an introspective awareness of the ruined interior Temple of our hearts. Only through the breaking open of our hearts can we rediscover the compassion that is needed to work for the betterment of the wronged and the alleviation of suffering.

Interpersonal justice *is itself* a prayer come to life. It prepares our hearts— once hardened, judgmental, and indifferent, arrogant and angry — to be softened into compassion and care, to lift up the broken remnants of

the Temple, transforming them into moral piety. Only then will our hearts be truly opened to sincere prayer, only then will we even have the right to speak our prayers before “the One who spoke and the world came into being.”

Dr. Eitan Fishbane's recent books include “*The Art of Mystical Narrative*” (Oxford, 2018) and “*Embers of Pilgrimage: Poems*” (Panui, forthcoming this fall). To read more commentaries, visit JTS Torah Online at <https://www.jtsa.edu/jts-torah-online>.

The publication and distribution of the JTS Commentary are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (z”l) and Harold Hassenfeld (z”l).

● MUSINGS

Toothpaste and Travel

By David Wolpe

In my house growing up we only used Crest toothpaste. That may seem a negligible datum, but in fact, it shaped my childhood. I learned that no other toothpaste was used by smart, responsible people. When I visited another child’s house and saw Colgate, or one of the unserious toothpastes like Ultrabrite (the very name suggests frivolity) I knew those parents were not as wise as my own.

The day I realized that one could be as kind and as smart as my mother and use Pepsodent, my world changed. And that, my friends, is the point of travel. It is not only to see magnificent sites, although that is glorious. It is to recognize the variety of legitimate and even wonderful ways in which human beings arrange their lives, so

CANDLELIGHTING, READINGS:

Avi 7, 5781 | Friday, July 16, 2021

- **Light candles at:** 8:07 p.m.

Av 8, 5781 | Saturday, July 17, 2021

- **Torah reading:** Devarim, Deuteronomy 1:1–3:22
- **Haftarah:** Isaiah 1:1–27
- **Shabbat ends:** 9:13 p.m.

different from one’s own.

To travel well is to be humbled: To recognize how little one knows of the vast world, and how many assumptions about life one has not thought through until experiencing another way of doing things. We still love and value home, but in a wider frame and with deeper understanding. You cannot properly treasure your own country if you never see it from afar. I still use Crest although now and again I grab a brand from another country, where apparently, they too have teeth.

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.

● TISHA B’AV

Jerusalem Is a Thriving City. Why on Tisha B’Av Do We Mourn Its Destruction?

Letting go of our communal grief is not just a modern idea.

By Adina Lewittes

Fasting and praying for 25 hours — many of them sweltering — isn’t anyone’s idea of summer vacation. But that’s not the only reason Tisha B’Av (the 9th day of the Hebrew month of Av, which begins Saturday night at sundown) is among the least observed days on the Jewish calendar, despite its status of a “major” fast day shared only with Yom Kippur.

On Tisha B’Av we lament the destruction of Jerusalem’s ancient Temples. But in a Jewish world that for nearly 2,000 years has grown accustomed to living without a Temple, many are conflicted over mourning an edifice that the vast majority are not interested in rebuilding.

Let's also not forget that Jerusalem today is a modern, bustling city. While it contends with competing narratives that both animate and agitate its people and politics, it doesn't lie in ruins.

The mourning for ancient Jerusalem isn't confined to this single day of dirges and dehydration. Apart from the extension of mourning practices to "the three weeks" prior to Tisha B'Av — a practice that, according to Professor Daniel Sperber, is based on a flawed reading of rabbinic precedent — there are also three additional "minor" fast days (dawn to nightfall) connected to the hurban (destruction of the Temple). They are the Fast of Gedalia (which falls between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur), the 10th of Tevet (which lands in the winter) and the 17th of Tammuz (three weeks before Tisha B'Av).

That's a lot of fasting and mourning for a time most of us are no longer missing. We may recognize the impulse to ask: *Must* we grieve today for the Jerusalem of yesterday? But few of us have asked whether we are even *permitted* to do so. Yet it's hardly a modern question.

The prophet Zecharia declared back in biblical times:

Thus said the LORD of Hosts: The fast of the fourth month (Tammuz), the fast of the fifth month (Av), the fast of the seventh month (Tishrei), and the fast of the tenth month (Tevet) shall become occasions for joy and gladness, happy festivals for the House of Judah; but you must love honesty and integrity.

While they agreed that the "major" fast day of Tisha B'Av (the fast of the fifth month) remained compulsory, the Sages were more emboldened about the minor ones:

At times of peace – those days are days of joy and happiness. At times of persecution – they are fast days. If there is neither peace nor persecution – it is people's choice whether to fast or not to fast.

Mourning the past seems to hinge on the present. If we find ourselves in trying circumstances, ritual mourning of past tragedies is embraced. If we aren't suffering, the meaning — and necessity — of such rituals are uncertain. But how do we determine the dictates of our time?

Rabbi Haim Ovadia of Torah Veahava unfolds a tapestry of medieval commentary upon this opaque Talmudic directive, trying to illuminate some direction for our gen-

eration. Some authorities claimed to live during neither "peace" (often identified with Jewish sovereignty) nor "persecution" (even though some of those times were known to have been turbulent, just not disastrously hostile to Jews and Judaism). With Jewish life essentially stable, they ruled that people could choose for themselves whether a fast day is appropriate. Others limited the authority to make such choices to the *beit din*, or rabbinical court. Still others, before mandating a fast, required comparing their era's state of affairs to the historical one before.

Embedded within all these rulings was the recognition that times change and observance often changes along with them.

One authority, the Meiri, goes even further, ruling that in times of peace, when we are not subjugated to other nations, fasting is not even a matter of choice, it is forbidden entirely. Anything less would be a violation of the Torah's prophecy that these days would turn joyful.

Several thought-provoking insights emerge from these sources:

- Judaism recognizes that reality isn't always binary (war or peace) but that there's fluidity to life and society, and even to halakhah (Jewish law). That indefinite space invites human conscience — individual or rabbinic — into the calculation of how to respond ritually.
- Uniformity isn't always the goal of communal observance. There's considerable tolerance for individualized expression even within single families and communities.
- Preserving the tradition of the past without accounting for the present might not just violate biblical teachings like Zecharia's that provide for change, but could distract people from their responsibilities to engage with the needs of their day.

How do we understand the times we're living in and their ritual implications? How does the existence of the State of Israel impact our ongoing need, or even permission, to mourn for ancient Jerusalem? Should the resurgence of antisemitism shape our practice today?

While the Torah might suggest otherwise, should Tisha B'Av remain the catch-all day of mourning for the

Temples, while the minor days evolve into days of joy, or gratitude, for today's independent and resilient Jewish people?

Or perhaps there is a middle ground today, as some rabbis have created, that invites people to spend the first half of Tisha B'Av in mournful fasting and reflection, and the second engaged in acts of chesed (lovingkindness) and tikkun olam (social repair), rebuilding not a Temple but a world of love?

"When to engage with memory and when to disengage are questions that percolate beyond Jewish observance."

When to engage with memory and when to disengage are questions that percolate beyond Jewish observance. They inform societal narratives, too. Consider the debate around removing Confederate monuments on one side, or adopting Juneteenth as a national holiday, on the other. Which markers ought to be dismantled and which narratives should be elevated? The answers shape the stories we tell about ourselves as a nation; the stories we bequeath to the next generation.

In our personal lives, too, we wrestle with when to hold fast to the past as a source of comfort or inspiration and when to surrender our emotional replays for the sake of forgiveness and renewal.

Jewish remembrance isn't only about recalling the past; it's about building the future. Sometimes history — and destiny — is honored by ritualizing memories, sometimes by letting them go.

Adina Lewittes is a rabbi and thought-leader who engages with contemporary questions of ethics, spirituality, identity and belonging. When she's not teaching or writing, she's hiking, skiing or mixing craft cocktails. She can be reached at adinalewittes@gmail.com.

Do you have an event coming up? Submit your events online at www.jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/contact/submit-an-event

UPCOMING EVENTS

July 18 | 9:00 a.m. – 9:45 p.m. Free

Tisha B'Av with Hadar

Observe Tisha B'Av online with the Hadar community. Drop in for learning sessions throughout the day with Hadar faculty, including Rabbis Shai Held, Avi Killip, Tali Ader and Avi Strausberg and breakfast with music from Joey Weisenberg. Register at <https://bit.ly/36B1Zl>

July 19 | 2:00 p.m. Free

The History of Jews in the Olympics

With My Jewish Learning, Joe Siegman, author of the new book "Jewish Sports Legends," will discuss the history of Jews in the Olympics, and the accomplishments of Jewish athletes worldwide. Register at <https://bit.ly/3hHDHhL>

July 20 | 7:00 p.m. Free

The Light of Days – Women of the Resistance

Park Avenue Synagogue presents Judy Batalion, author of "The Light of Days: The Untold Story of Women Resistance Fighters in Hitler's Ghettos." Hear the stories and extraordinary accomplishments of brave Jewish women who became WWII resistance fighters. Register at <https://www.tfaforms.com/4908068>

July 22 | 7:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m. \$22

Paul Shapiro's Midnight Minyan

A six-piece group that re-imagines Jewish music through a jazz lens is joined by singer Lila Shapiro, a senior at the High School of Math, Science and Engineering at the City College of New York, for an in-person performance at Chelsea Table + Stage, 152 West 26th Street between 6th and 7th Ave. Get tickets at <https://bit.ly/3ivuKYb>