New York
The Jewish Weekend

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Mayor Bill de Blasio samples ice cream (not Ben & Jerry's) at Steve's Craft Ice Cream in Brooklyn on March 20, 2014. (Rob Bennett for the Office of Mayor Bill de Blasio)

Must read

● NEWS

Mayor de Blasio Raps Ben & Jerry's, Saying He'll Lay Off Cherry Garcia

The boycott Israel movement "will undermine peace in the Mideast," says Hizzoner.

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

Mayor Bill de Blasio joined critics of Ben & Jerry's, saying Tuesday that he "will not be eating any more Cherry Garcia for a while," referring to a popular flavor of the ice cream brand.

De Blasio's remarks came a day after the Ben & Jerry's parent company, Unilever, announced that it would not sell its ice cream in "occupied Palestinian territory."

That decision set off a storm of criticism in Israel, including angry statements

from its prime minister and foreign minister. Although the decision targets only sales in the West Bank, opponents of the boycott movement, or BDS, say any economic pressure on Israel is harmful to its interests.

De Blasio was responding at a morning news briefing to a question from a reporter who reminded him that he is on record as an opponent of BDS.

"That's sad to me," the Democratic mayor said of the company's decision. "BDS is a movement that will undermine peace in the Mideast. It's as simple as that. You cannot have peace if you undermine the economic reality and create divisions. I just believe that's absolutely the wrong approach and Ben and Jerry shouldn't be doing that."

De Blasio also noted that Israel has a new government, with "a potential for a different path forward" — presumably one less hardline than the former government led by Benjamin Netanyahu.

On Monday, the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York also was critical of Ben & Jerry's, urging Unilever"to reject this decision, to disavow the [boycott Israel] movement and to invest in programs that bring Israelis and Palestinians together to build an atmosphere of peace and cooperation. Peace will only be achieved through dialogue, not boycotts."

A number of New York-area retail outlets, including the Jewish-owned supermarket chain Morton Williams, said they would limit or halt sales of the ice cream.

● **NEWS**

How US Laws Against Israel Boycotts Could Hit Ben & Jerry's

By Ron Kampeas

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Ben & Jerry's decision this week to pull out of an agreement that allowed its Israeli franchisee to sell its product in what the company terms "Occupied Palestinian Territory" has angered some Jewish-owned businesses.

But the move also could have legal repercussions in the United States.

As a result of a campaign since the mid-2010s led by center-right and Christian pro-Israel groups, 33 states have passed laws or issued executive orders targeting the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against Israel, according to a database maintained by Lara Friedman on behalf of the Foundation for Middle East Peace and Americans for Peace Now, groups that oppose the anti-boycott legislation. (In addition, at least one state, Connecticut, has an anti-boycott law that predates the movement popularly known as BDS.)

The laws vary in their details, but they all mandate ending state business with any company that observes a boycott of Israel. Some consequences for the company range from disinvestment from state employee pension funds to losing out on contracts at universities and other state-run organizations.

It's unclear whether Ben & Jerry's pullout from what it considers to be "occupied" territory will fall under the jurisdiction of these laws, but some experts say there is a good chance it could.

Following a series of First Amendment challenges to the laws, many states now set a minimum amount of $100,000 in trade before anti-BDS measures can be triggered against a contractor. That would mean that smaller Ben & Jerry's contracts would remain unaffected, even in states with anti-BDS laws. But Friedman told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency that future contracts could be jeopardized.

"If Ben & Jerry's bids annually for a contract to provide ice cream for the University of Texas, and the University of Texas has an anti-BDS clause that you have to sign when you're putting in a bid, that could be a problem," she said.

On Tuesday, Israel's ambassador to the United States, Gilad Erdan, wrote to the governors of each of the states requesting that they take action according to their anti-BDS laws. The letters, he said on Twitter, were coordinated with Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid.

"I ask that you consider speaking out against the company's decision, and taking any other relevant steps, including in relation to your state laws and the com-

mercial dealings between Ben & Jerry's and your state," Erdan wrote.

Ben & Jerry's did not explicitly mention BDS in its statement, which pledges "We will stay in Israel through a different arrangement."

There may be a wrinkle: Unilever, the British multinational conglomerate, bought Ben & Jerry's in 2000 from its Jewish founders, Jerry Greenfield and Ben Cohen, under a unique arrangement that allows an external board to determine how the company embraces social and political causes. And the board now says that the final statement issued to the public, specifically the pledge to remain in Israel, "does not reflect the position of the independent board, nor was it approved by the independent board."

The board's chairwoman, Anuradha Mittal, was furious with Unilever's response, telling NBC that Unilever was "trying to destroy the soul of the company. We want this company to be led by values and not be dictated by the parent company."

Mittal, an outspoken critic of Israel on social media, is the founder of the Oakland Institute, a progressive think tank that advocates on issues including trade and land rights.

Even though the current Ben & Jerry's pledge says it will keep selling in the rest of Israel that it does not consider "occupied," that may not protect the company from legal repercussions.

Among the 33 states with anti-BDS laws, 21 have measures that target boycotts that include areas controlled by Israel — meaning the West Bank. The language usually reads as it did in the Illinois law passed in 2015: "'Boycott Israel' means engaging in actions that are politically motivated and are intended to penalize, inflict economic harm on, or otherwise limit commercial relations with the State of Israel or companies based in the State of Israel or in territories controlled by the State of Israel."

Ben & Jerry's could not credibly claim that it does not understand that boycotting settlements would effectively lead to a boycott of all of Israel, argues Eugene Kontorovich, the director of the Center for the Middle East and International Law at George Mason University's Antonin Scalia Law School.

Kontorovich, who is widely seen as an "intellectual architect" of the anti-BDS legislative push, noted that Israel's laws effectively ban boycotts of the West Bank and that the term "Occupied Palestinian Territory" likely includes eastern Jerusalem, which Israel regards as its sovereign territory. (The company's statement did not specify from which territories it was seeking to extract its ice cream.)

"Ben & Jerry's is doing this in full awareness that this will basically end their business with Israel," Kontorovich said.

"Under Israeli law, a business can't discriminate amongst Israeli citizens, regardless of where they live, and certainly in Israeli sovereign territory," he added. "The licensee, in this case, understands this full well, and has explained to Ben & Jerry's that [the licensee] really has no choice but to end its association with Ben & Jerry's."

Another avenue of legal damage that Ben & Jerry's critics can enforce involves pensions. Twelve states mandate disinvesting retirement funds for state employees from companies that observe BDS. One is Illinois, where Richard Goldberg, a senior adviser to former Gov. Bruce Rauner, drafted one of the first anti-BDS laws in the nation in 2015.

These laws represent a real threat to Unilever, Goldberg said, because the anti-BDS state pension law is applicable to parent and affiliate companies of the offending party. (Its individual workers, employed by private companies, would not be affected by the state's law.)

"Unilever, being the parent company in this case, is responsible and is liable and is subject to the state anti-BDS laws as they are written," Goldberg said.

Goldberg, now a senior adviser to the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, said the disinvestment language — modeled on earlier laws mandating disinvestment of state employee funds from Iran and Sudan — could result in Unilever being removed from state employee index funds.

That's "a massive amount of money just across 12 states invested in international equities," he said.

Goldberg said he was taken aback by how little wiggle room Ben & Jerry's left itself. Conventionally, he said, companies divesting from Israel do not explain why they are taking such action, which gives them more legal cover against anti-BDS laws.

"This is dead to rights because you have a very formal, explicit announcement from Ben & Jerry's announcing, very clearly, that they are taking a step to inflict harm on an Israeli company," he said. "There really never has been a clearer case, and so high-profile, for a statement that would violate the BDS laws."

The last time a major company pulled out of business with Israeli settlements was in 2018, when Airbnb announced it would stop listing lodgings from settlements. Lawsuits alleging discriminatory practices were filed in the U.S., and Airbnb stood down within months, settling with the litigants.

That may not be possible in the Ben & Jerry's case: The ice cream ban on sales in the West Bank affects both Israelis and Palestinians in the territory, while Airbnb's plans focused only on settlements. One of the lawyers in the Airbnb case, David Abrams, told JTA that he had no comment at this time on the Ben & Jerry's case.

● NEWS

A Rabbi Still Blows a Shofar Every Night to Salute Health Care Workers

"People needed symbols of hope," said Janise Poticha. And then her sister got sick.

By Shira Hanau

When New Yorkers took to their balconies to celebrate health care workers during the first wave of the pandemic, Rabbi Janise Poticha joined them, blowing a shofar on her Upper West Side terrace every evening at 7 o'clock.

"I think all thinking compassionate people needed symbols of hope, needed to know that humankind and America had a future, that we would once again be spiritually, intellectually and financially viable again," she said this week. "So for me, that symbol was the shofar."

Five months into the daily ritual, it began to take on a new meaning: Her sister contracted COVID in August 2020. After a week and a half at home, her sister had to be hospitalized and later intubated.

"She spent a great amount of time closer to death than life," Poticha said.

Unable to visit her in the hospital, Poticha continued to join those cheering, banging pots and playing instruments for the frontline workers. For Poticha, a rabbi at Temple Sinai of Massapequa on Long Island, the sound of her ram's horn reminded her of the binding of Isaac. In the biblical story, Abraham slaughters a ram in place of Isaac, allowing his son to live.

"During that time, not being able to be near her or her immediate family, the blowing of the shofar to me became another symbol of life as it was a symbol of life for Isaac," Poticha said.

Her sister would spend several months in the hospital before moving to a rehab facility and eventually going home. Even after that, Poticha continued to sound the shofar at 7 each evening, even after others abandoned the practice.

Not all of her neighbors approved, but Poticha said she couldn't allow the rite to peter out without some kind of formal ending.

And then there were other milestones to consider.

The week after she got her first dose of the vaccine in the spring, she blew the shofar with a new sense of hope. "Wow, you know, maybe there will be a light if everyone does this," she remembers thinking about the vaccine.

When New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced last month that New York would begin reopening, Poticha thought, "Well, maybe this is the time that we stop doing this," she said. "I asked some of the people that were in the cheer and they were like, no we're going to [keep doing it], this is still important."

She added: "That was about three weeks ago. And the numbers [of cases] are coming back up." The latest seven-day average of total cases in the city is 582, up from

200 a month ago.

So Poticha is still sounding the shofar and praying for the day when it makes sense to stop.

"I can't predict an answer to your question," Poticha said when asked when she might end the practice. "The numbers are continuing to go up, frontline workers continue to be very stressed with what is happening, and there are too many people not vaccinated."

● NEWS

Rabbi Yoel Kahn, Hasidic Scholar Who Preserved Lubavitcher Rebbe's Words, Dies at 91

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

Rabbi Yoel HaKohen Kahn, whose job was to memorize and transcribe the extemporaneous talks by the Lubavitcher rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, died on July 15. He was 91.

As the rebbe's chief "chozer," or oral scribe, Kahn was adept at the arts of memorization, repetition and transcription, according to Chabad.org. Schneerson would deliver lengthy, complex Torah homilies to his followers, and Kahn and a team of scribes would memorize them and submit them later to Schneerson for editing.

Kahn also was a scholar of Lubavitch and other Hasidic thought and a teacher at the Central Lubavitch Yeshiva. He was the lead editor of Sefer Ha'Arachim, an encyclopedia of Hasidic concepts.

Born in Moscow, Kahn immigrated to Mandatory Palestine with his family in 1935 and to New York City in 1950 to continue his studies at Lubavitch headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn.

● EDITOR'S DESK

Julia Haart May Be Unorthodox, but Which Kind of Unorthodox?

Hasidic? Yeshivish? Modern? A field guide to a diverse denomination.

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

I admit I haven't seen an episode of "My Unorthodox Life," the Netflix reality series about fashion mogul Julia Haart. So I won't weigh in on the debate over how it depicts the Orthodox community from which Haart fled, and whether it promotes unfair stereotypes about observant Jews.

I was struck by the close readings of the show by people familiar with the Orthodox community – and especially the fine distinctions being noted among "haredi" Orthodoxy (what the secular media tend to call "ultra-Orthodoxy"), Modern Orthodoxy and "yeshivish" (we'll get to that).

The show's official site refers to Haart as "a former member of an ultra-Orthodox Jewish community." For those in the know, that implies the strictly insular Hasidic and haredi worlds where secular culture is kept at bay, adult men devote themselves to full-time Torah study and women are expected to marry young, have many children and work close to home. Yiddish is often the first language and, as a big political battle in New York has revealed, children are largely if not exclusively taught religious subjects in school. (Haredi Jews are usually indifferent to or antagonistic to Zionism, which is a different story altogether.)

My colleague Shira Hanau points out that before leaving Orthodoxy, Haart and her first husband were part of an Orthodox community better described as "yeshivish" – somewhat "less insular" than the Hasidic or haredi communities depicted in previous Netflix shows like

"Unorthodox" and the documentary "One of Us." "Yeshivish" people speak English as a first language and some attend college and graduate school. Haart's husband attended the Wharton School.

That is not to suggest that Haart is being deceptive about the limitations she felt as a woman expected to marry young and devote herself first and foremost to her children and husband. Or that she isn't entitled to criticize a community she and others see as blinkered or misogynistic.

So to whom do these distinctions matter? Some Modern Orthodox Jews – combining observance and engagement with secular culture — have written critically about the show, saying it tars all Orthodox Jews as insular and backward. And curious nudniks like me have a professional and sociological stake in reminding people that even subsets of a group as tiny as the Jews are very diverse.

There's a huge Modern Orthodox community where I live, and even there it would take an ornithologist to keep track of the markers distinguishing my neighbors. There are the worldly families who send their kids to the elite Ramaz School in New York or the Frisch School in New Jersey, and from there on to the best secular colleges. Others prefer a more "yeshivish" track, at schools where boys and girls are separated in the classroom and Yeshiva University and Stern College are the schools of choice. Women, who are as likely as their husbands to have careers outside the home, take a variety of approaches to rules about dressing modestly and, for married women, covering their hair.

The differences can be seen in the same family: a dad who wears the knitted kippah associated with Modern Orthodox (or "Religious Zionist") Jews, and a son in the black velvet yarmulke he wears at the "right-wing" yeshiva he attends in Israel.

(There's a distinct vocabulary to describe those who fall far from the tree. Religious kids who stray are OTD, or "off the derekh," or path. Kids who become more strictly religious than their parents are said to be "flipping out.")

These distinctions might not matter to you if you are not an Orthodox Jew, and you might even find them silly or worse. Sigmund Freud coined the term "the narcissism of the small difference" to explain how "minor differences in people who are otherwise alike ... form the basis of feelings of hostility between them."

But don't kid yourself – it's the rare person who isn't part of a community that doesn't impose its own values, expectations and dress codes. Even freethinkers look for approval from other freethinkers and make choices accordingly – how they dress, how they celebrate, the schools they attend and the work they do. Orthodoxy may represent an extreme of communal conformity, although I'm pretty sure liberal Jews on the Upper West Side have an unspoken social code nearly as strict. Here's a test: Who do you think would feel more put out – Orthodox parents whose children leave the fold, or secular parents whose children become Orthodox?

"It's the rare person who isn't part of a community that doesn't impose its own values, expectations and dress codes."

The Jewish media often get criticized for exacerbating tensions between Jews by focusing on their differences. Years ago a Chabad rabbi asked me why we even make distinctions between Jewish denominations; aren't we all "just Jews"? But the Jewish world doesn't function that way, and we shouldn't pretend that it does. (Don't get me started on how Chabad is distinct both from other Hasidic Jews and Modern Orthodox Jews.)

And besides – I find these distinctions endlessly interesting. I love how a people can share the same origin story and interpret it in so many different ways. The small differences – what novelist and journalist Tom Wolfe referred to as the "status details" – are, to me, anyway, as interesting and revealing as the big ones.

Paying attention to these distinctions is also a sign of respect, no less than honoring diversity in any other community or setting. It is not Julia Haart's responsibility to protect a community she feels is dysfunctional. But it's on all of us to remember that there is no one way to be Orthodox, any more than there is one way to be Jewish.

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

OPINION

The Ben & Jerry's Boycott Is Not an Attack on Israel. It Is Protesting a Specific Policy.

By Jo-Ann Mort

When I talk with Palestinian friends, I argue against BDS. The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, I explain, has done little economic damage to Israel. It has only strengthened the right wing here while rendering Palestinians under occupation — along with the occupation itself — conveniently invisible to most Israelis.

For similar reasons, I also argue against "anti-normalization" efforts that reject any form of dialogue, collaboration or partnership with Israelis.

So why do I support Ben & Jerry's announcement to stop marketing and selling in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem? Because that decision, as announced by the corporate parent company Unilever, is not a victory for BDS. At the heart of the BDS movement, especially in the United States and United Kingdom, is an attack on the legitimacy of the State of Israel to exist as a homeland for the Jewish people.

That's not what Ben & Jerry's decision is — it's a boycott to protest a particular policy.

It appears that the Ben & Jerry's board of directors, which maintains independent governance rights under Unilever, decided indeed to divest totally from Israel. But its decision was overridden by Unilever, which announced that the global company will change its licensing agreement in order to sell inside Israel but not in the West Bank or East Jerusalem, where its prime market has been Israeli Jewish settlers.

My friends in the peace camp inside Israel have advocated for decades to create a distinction between the economy of the settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and Israel proper. It's a difficult distinction to make because of the intentional blurring, especially in recent years, by the former Netanyahu governments and a strong settlers' lobby. Borders on official maps have been erased. Road signs make no distinction between the suburbs of Tel Aviv and Ariel in the West Bank. Israeli law stipulates that Israeli civilians must be treated equally no matter where they live.

Yet there are exceptions made and they are significant. Even the Netanyahu government made an exception when it agreed in 2014 to accept Horizon 2020 money from the European Union for scientific research for Israel's universities and institutes that would exclude any West Bank-based institution. The current Israeli government did the same when it recently accepted cultural funds from the EU that can't be used over the Green Line.

There's another precedent here, albeit with another food group. From its inception, the McDonald's franchise has been held in Israel by Omri Padan, an Israeli who was an original member of Peace Now. (I serve on the board of its sister organization, Americans for Peace Now.) For ideological reasons, Padan will not open a McDonald's in any of the settlements outside of Israel's internationally recognized border. Yet there are kosher McDonald's all over Israel and outside of army bases catering to the very same audience decrying the Ben & Jerry's decision.

Let's not conflate boycotts against policy with a BDS movement that wants to eradicate the State of Israel. This only gives impetus to the activists to keep going in their anti-Israel campaign.

The reality is that hard-core BDS efforts have gotten more publicity than they have achieved impact.

The EU, Israel's largest trading partner, hasn't stopped trading. Despite COVID, the Israeli economy is set to bounce back nicely.

"Growth is expected to rebound in 2021, with the Bank of Israel forecasting a 6.3% rise if the rapid pace of Israel's COVID-19 vaccination campaign is maintained," Reuters reports.

The diplomatic boycott has been similarly fruitless: Witness not only the Abraham Accords, but recent public diplomacy between Israel and Jordan, as well as Israel and Morocco.

Those who claim that a protest against the occupation is a frontal attack on Israel itself are making a mistake. There has been and continues to be only one issue that should be leading the debate: whether we move toward two states by beginning to differentiate borders and freeze the settlements, or we continually drift dangerously to one state. That's a much more complicated issue than where or whether to eat Chunky Monkey.

I hope that Unilever can hold to its position to keep Ben & Jerry's ice cream inside Israel while exiting the territories. It would be an important statement, even if just symbolic, to say yes to Israel and no to the occupation.

Jo-Ann Mort *has written frequently about Israel and Palestinian issues for a range of publications, including The American Prospect, Dissent, and The New York Review of Books Daily. She is also a consultant working with non-profits in the progressive community in Israel, the Palestinian Authority areas and the U.S.*

● OPINION

My Ex-Orthodox Life Isn't Glamorous, but My Story Should Be Told

"My Unorthodox Life" promotes harmful stereotypes of those who leave their religious families.

By Dainy Bernstein

Numerous reviews of the Netflix reality series "My Unorthodox Life" have been written by Orthodox Jews, who complain that it presents a negative and one-sided view of Orthodoxy.

I write from the perspective of an ex-Orthodox Jew, and while my reasons may differ from those of Orthodox people, I agree that this show is a travesty.

But while many object to its depiction of Orthodoxy, my complaint is with its treatment of the ex-Orthodox. Presumably a story of ex-Orthodox empowerment, it has exactly the opposite effect.

Let's start with truth-telling. In depicting Julia Haart's life as a fashion mogul, the show provides details about the Orthodox community she left but without appropriate context, and sometimes with outright lies. Conflating her non-Hasidic community in Monsey, New York, with Hasidic communities is typical of these distortions.

For half a decade now, I've been involved in efforts to counter negative stereotypes about ex-Orthodox people and promote openness, understanding and acceptance between those who leave and their families and communities.

Those who leave the Orthodox community are often subject to accusations — often from gatekeepers of the life they left behind — that they lie or exaggerate about their upbringing in order to garner the sympathies of secular audiences. This is untrue for most ex-Orthodox people, who simply want a chance to tell their truths.

Telling authentic ex-Orthodox stories is part of that effort, but Haart's story is not authentic. It is a carefully curated and staged reality show that sets back efforts to gain Orthodox understanding of ex-Orthodox experiences.

I grew up in Borough Park, Brooklyn, in a community stricter than the non-Hasidic community Haart left, but not as strict as the Hasidic Williamsburg community in two other Netflix offerings, "Unorthodox" and "One of Us." I was an oddity because I was pursuing a doctorate in English, unlike most of my peers who taught in Jewish girls' schools or got degrees from Touro College – with separate hours for men and women – in preparation for jobs that would allow them to raise a family.

I left at age 25 after I had completed college and begun graduate school. The years after I moved out of my parents' house were fraught with emotional pain as I attempted to navigate a world completely unfamiliar to me while maintaining a relationship with my family — a far cry from Haart's catapult to wealth and success. Most ex-Orthodox people struggle to find their feet in an unfamiliar world and might fail if not for a network of support, both financial and emotional.

In one episode of "My Unorthodox Life," an Orthodox girl named Sara reaches out to Haart for help and advice on leaving the community. The sequence encapsulates how the show feeds negative Orthodox perceptions of ex-Orthodox people. Rather than advising Sara on jobs or referring her to organizations like Footsteps designed to acclimate the formerly Orthodox to the secular world, Haart gives her a makeover — and a vibrator. The episode plays into the stereotype that the ex-Orthodox are waiting to get their hands on vulnerable Orthodox people and ensnare them in a life of sex and depravity.

Many ex-Orthodox people, myself included, get messages from Orthodox individuals reaching out for help in navigating their break from religion or community. No one in my experience advises a 19-year-old to become a "sex bomb" or move out of her parents' home with no support system in place.

Via text and in person, I listen to individuals' stories, anguish, dreams and plans. I provide links to college scholarships, ideas about careers they never knew existed, and advice about finances and apartment hunting. I listen to them rant about their families and gently advise them to think twice before saying all that to their parents because they might want to maintain a relationship and not burn bridges. I tell them about how I tried to make it work with my family and where I think we all went wrong, resulting in my choice to end contact with my parents and some siblings. I tell them about the pain of knowing that other siblings cut *me* off.

"We need movies and TV shows about the authentic emotional journey of leaving Orthodoxy."

Stories about ex-Orthodox people deserve to be told. Starting with Deborah Feldman's explosive 2012 memoir "Unorthodox" (upon which the Netflix series was loosely based), mainstream audiences have been eager for stories about escape from what they perceive as a repressive religious community. Since then, with the market open to ex-Orthodox stories, memoirs like Shulem Deen's 2015 "All Who Go Do Not Return" and Tova Mirvis's 2017 "The Book of Separation" have added emotional nuance to the story of leaving rather than focusing exclusively on shocking details of a closed world.

Movies and TV shows generally reach a wider audience than books, but they also rely more on shock value. We need movies and TV shows about the authentic emotional journey of leaving Orthodoxy. Only when these stories are told can there begin to be healing for ex-Orthodox individuals and for their families and communities.

Haart's series sets back efforts to repair rifts between those who left and their families. We need a show that depicts the raw emotion that comes with choosing a path our parents and communities don't approve of, with entering a world we've been told is unfeeling and will eat us alive, with reaching for our dreams and failing multiple times before we succeed. A reality TV show, in other words, that's grounded in reality.

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SABBATH WEEK
PARSHAT VA'ETCHANAN

When the Broken Path Still Leads Home

The month before the High Holy Days is a time of rejuvenation, redirection and rebirth.

By Rabbi Shmuel Reichman

In Parshat Va'etchanan, we read about the Arei Miklat, the cities of refuge for those who unintentionally kill (Devarim 4:41-49). This portion usually falls out immediately following Tisha B'av, and, consequently, shortly before the Hebrew month of Elul.

At face value, the cities of refuge, Tisha B'Av and Elul do not seem to share a thematic connection. The city of refuge is a safe haven for one who unwittingly murders. Tisha B'av is a day of sadness and destruction, as Klal Yisrael mourns the loss of the Temple and the tragedies that have occurred throughout Jewish history. And Elul is the month of teshuva (repentance) leading up to the

High Holy Days.

What links these three topics?

On Tisha Ba'av, we go through a process of mourning, similar to the process of mourning a loved one. This might seem an excessive response to the loss of a building — the Beis Ha'Mikdash, the Holy Temple. However, the destruction of the Temple itself was merely the physical expression of a much deeper tragedy. The Beis Ha'Mikdash was the makom (locus) of connection between Hashem and this physical world. It was destroyed as a result of the disconnect that we, Klal Yisrael, created between us and Hashem, between us and our fellow humans, and between us and ourselves. We lost sight of the spiritual root of this world, shattering the connection between us and Hashem.

As the Nefesh Ha'Chaim (1:4) explains, once this bond was broken, the Temple, its physical vessel, was reduced to an empty shell and could easily be destroyed.

Death is the disconnect between a spiritual life-force and its physical vessel. The death of a person is the process of one's soul separating from their body. When the Temple was destroyed, the *world* died, resulting in a cosmic spiritual chasm and a shattered reality. We yearn for the day when Hashem will once again be fully and clearly manifest in this world, revealing the spiritual essence of this physical reality.

And just as a person who murders is punished, the Jewish people who "killed" the world were sent into exile. According to some opinions, this was in fact an act of mercy on the part of Hashem, as the Jewish people should have been executed for severing the world's soul from its body. Instead, we were merely exiled, maintaining the ability to correct our mistake and return home.

Similarly, a midrash (Eichah Rabbah 4:14) states that instead of destroying the Jewish people, Hashem took his wrath out on the wood and stones of the Temple, giving us the chance to rebuild anew.

Which brings us to Elul, and why it directly follows Tisha B'Av. Tisha B'Av is the time of breakdown, exile and death; Elul is the time of rejuvenation, redirection and rebirth. As we transition from Tisha B'Av towards Elul, we pause, stop the negative momentum, and begin building anew.

Elul, in the deepest sense, represents our journey back home to our proper place, back to our unbreakable bond with Hashem. The goal of Rosh Hashanah is to fully and wholeheartedly anoint and embrace Hashem as our King. This can only happen after a month spent bridging the gap that we created between us. We yearn to return the world to its proper, higher state, to return the Jewish people back to our elevated status, and for each and every one of us to return to our higher, true selves.

The process of return is a joyous one, but it is also a challenging one. We often feel as though we are fighting an uphill battle, and we struggle to maintain momentum and continue gaining ground. Every year as we approach Elul, there is an underlying sense of dread as we prepare ourselves for another year of "resolutions," making the same list of goals, only to be forgotten two weeks later. For many, this is the unspoken dread of Elul: the feeling of despair and loneliness as we strive to rebuild ourselves and repair our broken connection with Hashem.

And that is why Hashem created the city of refuge. It is a place for those without a place. When one loses their physical makom, they feel lost, abandoned, hopeless. At exactly this moment, they are given a sense of hope. They may have lost their place, but there is still a place for them to go until they can return home. The city of refuge represents hope for the hopeless, a home for the homeless, stability for the unstable.

This is the purpose of Elul. It is Hashem's way of saying, "There will always be a place for you." In response, we must embrace that place, and begin rebuilding from there towards our true destination.

This is the first step of teshuva, recognizing that we are not where we need to be, but that through constant effort and the help of Hashem, we can get there; we can return to our true makom, we can ascend to a true Rosh Hashanah. May we all be inspired to pause, find our footing, and use this Elul to purposefully journey back to our true makom, Hashem.

Rabbi Shmuel Reichman *is the founder and CEO of Self-Mastery Academy, an online self-development course based on the principles of high-performance psychology and Torah. He received his rabbinic ordination from the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary at Yeshiva University and is currently pursuing a PhD at the University of Chicago.*

● MUSINGS

Reason and Passion

By David Wolpe

The Spanish existentialist philosopher Miguel De Unamuno once explained the difference between conventional philosophy and existentialism by reworking the classical syllogism. Students in logic are taught that Socrates is a man; all men are mortal; therefore Socrates is mortal. But the existentialist says: I am a man; all men are mortal. Therefore, I will die.

The first is a conclusion of logic. The second is of ultimate concern to me.

Of course how we reason is not separate from how we feel. Yet the abstract analysis of problems does not always address the single, haunted cry of the individual in all her anguish, need and passion. The Torah teaches that the human being was created singly; each of us sees the world through our own eyes. We can use logic and technology to do remarkable things, to go to space and fashion machines that transform the world. But we would do well to remember Unamuno's caution and the Torah's teaching — the wizardry of the mind will not save us if we forsake the urgencies of the heart.

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.*

CANDLELIGHTING, READINGS:

Avi 14, 5781 | Friday, July 23, 2021
- **Light candles at:** 8:02 p.m.

Av 15, 5781 | Saturday, July 24, 2021
- **Torah reading:** Va'etchanan
  Deuteronomy 3:23–7:11
- **Haftarah:** Isaiah 40:1–26
- **Shabbat ends:** 9:06 p.m.

● SPORTS

How Israel Became a Judo Powerhouse

By Cnaan Liphshiz

TEL AVIV — When he immigrated to Israel from his native Ukraine in the early 1990s, judo master Igor Romanitsky was already resigned to quitting the sport professionally and pursuing a medical career.

"Israel wasn't known for its judo scene back then, and I had a medical degree," Romanitsky, now 57, told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. "I assumed my days as a judoka were over."

But Romanitsky, a father of two from Modiin, was in for a surprise.

In 1992, judokas Yael Arad and Oren Smadja won silver and bronze medals, respectively, at the women's and men's competitions in the Barcelona Olympics, becoming the first Israeli athletes to bring home an Olympic medal for that country. Their achievements, and an infusion of judo masters from the Soviet Union like Romanitsky, spurred a national love affair with the sport, which has led to additional accomplishments and turned Israel into a power in the field in both men's and women's competitions.

Smadja, in a famous quote following his victory, encapsulated the story of judo in Israel when he summarized his rise from obscurity: "I aimed to come in small and come out big," he said.

In 2004, Arik Zeevi won the bronze at the Athens Olympics — the pinnacle of a five-year spree in which he won three golds and a silver at the European Judo Championships. The following year, Israel took the team gold in that tournament. And in 2012, Zeevi recaptured the gold at age 35.

(Judo's divisions don't necessarily correspond to geography. Israel is one of several non-European nations competing in the European tournament, along with Mongolia, Azerbaijan and Brazil.)

Four years later, at the 2016 Rio Olympics, Israel won two bronzes in judo, bringing the country's total of Olympic medals to nine — five in judo. In 2018, the European Championships were held in Tel Aviv.

"I saw firsthand how judo became big. Suddenly all the kids wanted judo classes," said Romanitsky, who now runs Sakura, a prestigious judo school in the central Israeli city of Modiin. Several of its graduates have earned black belts, a rank signifying expertise.

Instead of starting a medical practice, Romanitsky recognized the opportunity to continue practicing judo, his primary passion, by coaching.

Most judokas aren't affiliated with the Israel Judo Association, the main nonprofit organization regulating the sport. But 500 judokas from across the country showed up to a charity event in 2015 organized by Romanitsky and his Sakura judo school, suggesting the number of serious participants in the sport is in the thousands, he said.

The 2018 European Championships in Tel Aviv had 4,000 spectators, a prodigious number that championship tournaments in Japan sometimes don't reach.

Israel's national team is a regular guest at the prime minister's residence, where they have been invited for photo ops after major successes.

"I usually tell foreign leaders that Israel is a world power in high-tech," former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said at such a meeting in 2019. "Now I add that we're a judo super power, and that's not self-evident."

Much of the fascination of many judo fans in Israel stems from their national pride and love of success rather than a genuine appreciation of the sport, people familiar with the field say. Silent, fast and involving only two opponents in a state of utter concentration, judo inspires neither the ecstatic togetherness of soccer nor the thrill of boxing, where blood and knockouts are common. Fights are over within minutes, sometimes seconds, typically when one opponent flips the other on their back.

"The 2018 European Championship in Tel Aviv was sold out not thanks to the love of judo but because it offered the opportunity to shed a tear with 'Hatikvah' on the winner's podium," wrote Paz Chasdai, a sports columnist for the Walla website, referencing the Israeli national anthem.

Fans of alternative sports — meaning, in Israel, everything that's not soccer and basketball — "are hitchhikers in Israel. They don't love the sports; they're looking for a winning ticket," he wrote in 2019.

Romanitsky's story signifies how crucial aliyah, or immigration, has been to Israel's judo success. Many of the people who pioneered judo in Israel were immigrants from Europe and Africa.

"In the 1990s, this strong infrastructure got an infusion of talent from the former Soviet Union, where judo was a major sport, and the effects have been phenomenal," Romanitsky said.

In Russia, the popularity of judo is evinced by none other than President Vladimir Putin, a black belt who competed when he was younger. His mentor and judo coach, Anatoly Rakhlin, was Jewish, and Putin attended Rakhlin's funeral in 2013.

Judo talent that arrived in Israel from the former Soviet Union included trainers like Pavel Musin, who trained Alice Schlesinger, an Israeli winner of six gold medals in European championships since 2013, and Alex Ashkenazi, who coached Zeevi and headed the Israeli national team for many years until 2000.

At the 2019 meeting with Israel's national team, Netanyahu said that Israel's judo victories "help us reach foreign audiences, including in Arab countries." But Israel's outsized presence in the judo world has also created some awkward situations involving Arab and Iranian athletes whose countries boycott the Jewish state as a matter of principle or are in a political dispute with it.

At the 2012 Olympics in London, Ahmad Awad, a judoka from Egypt, was widely thought to have feigned an injury to avoid a fight with Israel's Tal Flicker. In 2015, a Palestinian judoka declined a match with another Israeli, and an Egyptian one, Ramadan Darwish, declined to shake Zeevi's hand after losing to the Israeli. The same Egyptian also refused to shake hands in 2012.

But judo has facilitated some moments of geopolitical cooperation, too. In 2018, the Judo Grand Slam tournament in Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates, became the first major sporting event in an Arab country where

Israeli athletes performed under their flag and the Israeli anthem was played. Israel took five medals there. Two years later, the two countries signed a historic normalization agreement.

In February this year, an Iranian judoka, Saeid Mollaei, who had been forbidden to compete against Israelis as per Iran's policy of nonrecognition of Israel, visited Israel in defiance of authorities in Tehran. He said he felt safe and happy to visit and thanked his "many Israeli friends."

Mollaei sought and received political asylum in Germany in 2019 after authorities in Iran ordered him not to show up — and technically lose — a fight against Sagi Muki, an Israeli judoka. Mollaei did as he was ordered but then fled for Germany, saying he feared a return following conflict with his superiors over the Tokyo fight.

He holds Mongolian citizenship and competes for that country while living in Germany. In recent months, Mollaei has helped train the Israeli judo Olympic delegation to the 2021 Tokyo Olympics. The formidable 12-person team includes Muki, a former world champion in the under-81 kilogram category; Ori Sasson, the bronze medal winner at the 2016 Olympics; and Timna Nelson Levi, who won bronze at the 2016 European Championships in her weight class of under 57 kilograms.

Though Israel is an international judo powerhouse, the sport may never become as popular there as soccer or basketball. Still, a growing number of Israelis are learning about the nuances of the martial art, a highly technical sport where the untrained eye can easily miss much of the action.

"Judo's great accomplishment in Israel is to make Israelis, who are used to watching only soccer, really observe the fights," Chasdai wrote. "Israeli viewers by now know not to rejoice when they see the opponent slammed (wait for the replay!) and can already size up the fighters, aware of the effort and strength the matches require. In short, it has forced us to briefly abandon the soccer superheroes of the Super League — and watch actual sports."

UPCOMING EVENTS

July 26 – July 30 | 2:00 p.m. Free

A Yiddish Renaissance

National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene presents "A Yiddish Renaissance," a virtual celebration of the revival in Yiddish in art, culture and learning. Featuring a global cast of over 140 performers, including casts of NYTF productions such as "Fiddler Afn Dakh" (Fiddler on the Roof in Yiddish). Registration required.

Register at https://nytf.org/renaissance

July 29 | 6:00 a.m. $18+

Israel Baseball Watch Party

Watch Israel Baseball's first game at the Tokyo Olympics at an in-person bagel breakfast at the Ronald S. Lauder JNF House, 42 E. 69th St. Hosted by the American Zionist Movement in partnership with the Consulate General of Israel – New York, Jewish National Fund, and Maccabi USA.

Buy tickets at https://bit.ly/3i3taxH

July 27 | 2:00 p.m. Free

Legacies: Judy Heumann

Disability rights activist Judy Heumann joins Bill Abrams, president of Trickle Up and former president of New York Times Television, for a virtual discussion about her family background in the Holocaust, her new memoir, and her remarkable career fighting to forge a society in which we all belong.

Register at https://bit.ly/3rqVqxb

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