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Amy Shreeve developed the Twitter account "This Used to Be a Synagogue" as a rhetoric and history major at the University of Texas-Austin. (Courtesy)

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● NEWS

A 20-year-old College Student in Texas Is Mapping Every Manhattan Address that Used to Be a Synagogue

A Yiddish class inspires a project that recalls the city as it once was.

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

Writer Luc Sante calls them the "ghosts of Manhattan." Those are the souls of the poor and marginal people, now dead, whose presence can be felt like a shade in the history of now affluent neighborhoods, "where they push invisibly behind it to erect their memorials in the collective unconscious."

Sante's poltergeists came to mind after I stumbled on a strange little Twitter account called "This Used to Be a Synagogue" (@OldShulSpots). Once a day or

so the account delivers a photograph of some nondescript street view in Manhattan, with a tweet stating the address and name of the congregation that used to sit on the site.

That nail salon at 90 Clinton St.? That used to be Linath Hazedek Anshei Sadlikoff. The deli at E. 104th St.? Something called Mac'zikei Torath Kodesh.

I felt that if I stared at the photos long enough the color would fade and I'd see spectral images of Jewish ancestors entering these long-gone places after dodging horse-drawn carts or steering boxy automobiles with high fenders and wide running boards.

Even the teeth-cracking names in the old Ashkenazi spellings hinted at something both ancient and familiar, like a cave drawing or the empty mezuzah cases you see in medieval ghettos.

For a time the account didn't explain much about who was behind it. I assumed it was a white-haired amateur historian of the Lower East Side or a Jewish conceptual artist who was making a point about gentrification.

So I sent a direct message and soon heard back from the creator, who identified herself as Amy Shreeve and agreed to chat on the phone. Shreeve explained that she started the account as an academic project in something called commemorative geography, which is the study of memory and location. She said that she had accessed a public database from the Ackman & Ziff Family Genealogy Institute at the Center for Jewish History in Manhattan.

The database listed over 1,000 names and addresses of past and present Manhattan synagogues and Jewish organizations. Shreeve created a big spread sheet and then "geocoded" a Twitter bot using Google APIs and Python (I admit she lost me at this point), scheduling the bot to automatically post Google Streetview photographs of the places where synagogues and Jewish organizations used to be.

She said she was "originally curious about naming patterns and mapping out where people came from" and "really interested in thinking about the geography of Eastern Europe and see how people organized in New York based on where they originally came from."

"So you're a student?" I asked.

"At the University of Texas, in Austin."

"Graduate school, I presume?"

"No, I'm an undergraduate. My major is rhetoric and history."

"Wait," I asked. "How old are you?"

"I just turned 20," Shreeve said. "It was just last week, so I am not used to saying that."

So forget the white hair. And to cut to the chase here, you can also forget the Jewish part. Shreeve describes herself as a descendant of Mormon pioneer immigrants on her father's side and "Irish famine immigrants" on her mother's.

"This is honestly weirdly random even for me personally," she said. "I have no family connections. I'm just a big fan of Jewish history."

And why is that?

"Because I am a huge fan of Yiddish," she said. "I needed to take a language class. When I heard that my school in Austin was teaching a language with less than 2 million speakers, I thought it was a rare and unique opportunity to learn a niche language."

Her professor was Itzik Gottesman, whom it turns out I knew when he was an editor at the Yiddish Forward and is a notable figure in New York Yiddish circles. Shreeve had read an article that Gottesman had written about how synagogues in Brooklyn had become churches, gymnasias and YMCAs. For a separate geography course, she decided to combine mapping with what she learned in Yiddish class.

(Gottesman referred to Shreeve in an email as a "star student.")

On her own website, Shreeve explains the impetus behind the project.

"People following this bot get regular reminders that New York City used to be ... different. Different people lived and gathered there and had a different way of life," she writes. "This bot encourages people to explore their own cities and wonder 'What used to be here? Who gathered here?'"

I find the site addictive. Every address can lead you down a rabbit hole, discovering along the way layers upon layers of New York Jewish history. And it is not just ghosts in empty sockets: Occasionally there are signs of the original synagogues. At 317 E. 8th St. in the East Village downtown, you can still see the tall sanctuary windows and Star of David motif that now provide a funky historical motif for a condo owner's living room. The Anshei Kalusz (people of Kalusz, Ukraine) Lechetz Yosha building was sold to a developer by its Orthodox congregation in 2000 following a battle with a rabbi and medical marijuana activist who had hoped it would become a nondenominational worship space for artists and other creatives. It was the last synagogue in the once gritty Alphabet City neighborhood.

At 58-60 Rivington St., plaques representing the Ten Commandments and two roaring lions of Judah mark what had once been the Warschuer (Warsaw) Congregation, which itself had supplanted a congregation from Jassy, Romania. The original congregation had hired a young architect to design the current building in 1903. That architect, Emery Roth, would go on to build various New York landmarks, including the Ritz Hotel Tower and The Beresford. Some 10,000 people attended the synagogue's dedication.

After the Warschuers inherited the building in what appears to have been a hostile takeover, it became a favorite for local celebrities, including the Gershwins, Sen. Jacob Javits and the comedian George Burns. Or at least that was the shul they *didn't* go to.

The neighborhood changed, and by 1973 the building was derelict. It was bought by the artist and metalworker Hale Garland in 1979 and apparently still functions as an artist's studio.

Happily, some of the addresses aren't ghosts at all. There is still a synagogue at 137 E. 29th St. Congregation Talmud Torah Adereth El says it has held services at the same location (albeit not the same building) since 1863 — the longest continuous service at the same site in the city. New York's oldest congregation, Shearith Israel, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, was established in 1654, but it has only been in the same location since ... 1897.

And 308 E. 55th St., once known as Chevra Bnei Leive and founded in 1906, is now Congregation Or Olam,

which became a Conservative synagogue in 1966.

And yet most of the tweets feature gas stations, apartment buildings, housing developments and churches where Jewish communities flourished, struggled and eventually moved on, replaced by other groups and institutions that represent the city's never-ending process of regeneration.

If there is a connection for Shreeve between old Jewish New York and present-day Austin, it is in the experience of immigrants.

"The demographics of New York are different [than Austin], but you still see how immigrants totally change the landscape," she said. "Comparing the history of the Jewish people and Hispanics and immigrant at large, you see how history does have a tendency to repeat itself."

Shreeve has 1,016 entries in her database and said she expects the project to wind up soon. She hopes to find records for the other boroughs, especially Brooklyn, although a notoriously inept remapping of Brooklyn's streets in the mid-1800s might make that project impossible.

She also hopes to get to New York one day, perhaps when the pandemic is really over.

"Looking at a map is not the same as walking the streets and seeing that what is currently a movie theater or a parking lot once housed minyans or charity organizations," she said. "I want people to reflect on the space, and to think of the immigrant stories and religion stories that came from there."

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● NEWS

Long Island Leaders and Parents Save a Jewish Day School by Buying It

The Mercaz Academy will take over at what had been the Plainview campus of the Hebrew Academy of Nassau County.

By Stewart Ain

When the Hebrew Academy of Nassau County began exploring the sale of its elementary school building in Plainview, parents and local leaders were downcast. They lamented what would be the loss of a Jewish day school campus that has long served Roslyn, Glen Cove, Syosset, Merrick and other Long Island towns.

So they bought it.

A dedicated group of parents and community leaders are buying the building and renaming it the Mercaz Academy. What's more, they plan on retaining the current teachers and staff.

"We worked with a small group of individuals from the administration for about two years to allow us to take over in September 2022," said Gary Katz, the former CEO of the International Securities Exchange and one of the community leaders who has been spearheading the purchase.

HANC, founded in 1953, planned to sell the property in Plainview as part of its plans to expand and consolidate its campus in West Hempstead, the seat of a large and growing Modern Orthodox community about 23 miles west of Plainview. HANC bought a property adjacent to its early childhood campus at 240 Hempstead Ave., expanding the campus to about three acres.

The West Hempstead plans call for a new building housing early childhood through eighth grade, and moving

its Uniondale middle school into the new West Hempstead building.

It "made sense for us to try to limit the amount of property we had, and our strategic planning perspective is to focus on western Nassau County," Aryeh Eisner, HANC's board chairman, told The Jewish Week. "Our school served the Plainview community for many years and in any strategic move we made we wanted to make sure we did it with them and that everyone walked away serving the community's needs.

"I'm pretty proud we were able to enter these negotiations in an upbeat and positive manner leading to the separation," he said.

A contract for the sale has yet to be finalized and the sale price has not been publicly disclosed, although the Mercaz website calls it "a price that would allow us to remain an independent school." The Plainview school has 143 students who come from 18 surrounding communities.

A former parent and who serves on the school board, Katz said the HANC administration will continue to run the school this year to allow "time for a proper transition to ensure it will be smooth."

"There has been a tremendous amount of excitement from both sides for working this out," he said. "There is tremendous appreciation from the parent body that this has been done and that we can now continue to move forward."

Katz said leadership of the new school has been talking with parents, teachers and administrators to solicit their views on what areas of the school need improvement. Those suggestions will then be considered by the new school's board of education and trustees.

Another member of the purchase committee is Jeffrey Lichtman of Plainview, who was a member of HANC's first high school graduating class in 1974. A trustee for 32 years who also served as its chairman, he said the Plainview location was important to families on the eastern half of Nassau County and Suffolk County.

"This school is an essential part of Jewish life in central Long Island," he added. "If this school did not exist ... a person in Huntington or Melville who is looking for a day school education for their child would either have to

move or not send him.”

Were it not for the Plainview school, Katz pointed out, “there would be no Jewish day school east of the Meadowbrook Parkway,” which forms a boundary between the “head” of the fish-shaped Long Island and its eastern “body.” “So you can see why leaders of many Jewish communities said this is very important to the future of our families on Long Island.”

Parents with children in the school said they were happy to see the school continue in its current location.

“I went to public school and I wanted my son to grow up with values he would only get in a yeshiva,” said Melissa Refael of Plainview, whose son entered the school last year at the age of 4. “We are Conservative and I was concerned because it is Orthodox. But the minute I walked through the door I knew this is where my son would go to school. They welcomed us and embraced us – it was such a warm, welcoming environment.”

Ora Fryman of Plainview said her 3-year-old son was in the toddler program. She and her husband, Craig, a physician, heard great things about Mercaz Academy’s planned STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) program.

“We’re so happy to know that he will have a stellar education both in terms of secular and Judaic studies,” she said. “I heard they [will] start computer coding as early as pre-k. One of the big factors in our decision to move to Plainview was this school. We are Orthodox and wanted to send our child to an Orthodox Jewish school.”

Lichtman said he viewed the purchase “as a mission to provide educational services to Jews in central Long Island. We know there are several hundred thousand Jews here and that many of them would be interested in exploring as a family their Jewish heritage in addition to what a synagogue can offer.”

There have been no demographic studies of the Long Island Jewish community in recent years but it is believed the Jewish population in eastern Suffolk County declined. There has been growth, especially in the Orthodox community, in areas of Nassau County, particularly in Oceanside, according to Aryeh Eisner, HANC’s board chairman.

“We have our largest incoming high school freshman class this year – nearly 100 children,” he said. “And we have about 310 in the high school. Our biggest growth communities are in West Hempstead and Oceanside.”

● NEWS

Sharon Kleinbaum, Rabbi of New York City LGBTQ Synagogue, Picked to Rejoin US Religious Freedom Commission

By Philissa Cramer

Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, who has led New York City’s Congregation Beth Simchat Torah since 1992, is one of President Joe Biden’s choices to join the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Kleinbaum has previously served on the commission, which monitors religious freedom abroad, according to the Biden administration’s announcement Friday. Biden also announced the appointment of Khizr Khan, who rose to prominence as a moral voice after his son, a U.S. Army captain, was killed in Iraq.

Kleinbaum is known for her advocacy on behalf of LGBTQ and human rights, including in Israel. Her support for the liberal pro-Israel lobby J Street induced a right-wing political action committee to run an ad last year that called her an “antisemite,” drawing condemnation from the Anti-Defamation League and others.

Praise for Kleinbaum poured in after the announcement, including from New York City politicians and from her wife, American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten.

● NEWS

New Documentary Tackles Debate Over Secular Education in New York City Yeshivas

The film follows the aftermath of a 2015 complaint by graduates of haredi schools who felt ill-equipped for jobs and higher learning.

By Shira Hanau

Are yeshiva students being denied the solid secular education guaranteed them under the law, or should New York City yeshivas have the freedom to set their own religious curricula free from government oversight?

Since a complaint by activists for better secular education in yeshivas in 2015, it's been a perennial issue in the city's politics. In this year's mayoral primary race, powerful Orthodox leaders reserved their endorsements for candidates who saw it their way. The 2015 complaint spurred an investigation that confirmed allegations of substandard secular learning, but it has yet to prompt action.

Now the issue is getting the documentary treatment in a new film, "An Unorthodox Education."

The film traces the conflict between yeshiva leaders, represented by an organization called Pearls, and Yaffed, a group formed by activists for secular education who graduated from yeshivas.

Joe Kolman, the film's director, acknowledged that he didn't launch the project without his own view — that yeshivas should follow the law requiring them to provide a secular education "substantially equivalent" to the one provided by public schools. But Kolman said he wanted to hear from the other side.

"Most graduates of ultra-Orthodox schools ... are happy

with the education they receive and they have no desire to leave," he said. "But those that do want to leave their communities, they feel imprisoned by the education they never received."

We spoke to Kolman about why he decided to tackle this subject. This conversation has been edited and condensed.

JTA: What drew you to the subject of secular education in haredi yeshivas?

Kolman: My grandfather was the chief rabbi of the Yemenite community in Holon, Israel. He arrived from Yemen in British Palestine in 1922 and he made sure that his kids got a good religious education and a secular education. My mother went to a religious girls' yeshiva in Tel Aviv, and she went on to University of London and went to law school in Chicago and got a Ph.D. from Columbia.

I'm a direct beneficiary of my grandfather's belief in secular education. So when I learned a few years ago that there's tens of thousands of people in Brooklyn who are illegally denied a basic education, I was just furious.

My wife and I learned about all this firsthand when we volunteered to let a member of Footsteps [a support group for the formerly Orthodox] stay in our spare bedroom. She was studying to get her bachelor's degree and she told us these horror stories about the enormous hurdles she had overcome. It was just so shocking.

Before you started working on this documentary, what was your impression of the Orthodox world?

I knew it very well because I spent summers in Israel. When I was in my grandfather's house in the summers, the phone got turned off with a switch on Friday afternoon and it wasn't turned on until Sunday morning. And then Friday night it was 50 people in the house because everyone's coming in for Friday night dinner, and then Saturday the house is filled with people, too. I knew what Orthodox life was all about. It wasn't this strange thing to me, and I still think it's an amazing thing.

Was there anything that surprised you as you did the research for this documentary?

Oh my god. The surprises just came one after the other. I mean I could not believe the things that we saw. We are people of the book, but what surprised me were these

young people that were functionally illiterate. You see that the kids don't know how to write their own names in English. They're not taught that the earth moves around the sun, they're taught to hate everybody who isn't Jewish.

We make this point over and over again that education at yeshivas varies widely, we're not talking about all the yeshivas. Some yeshivas actually do a good job of teaching secular subjects, particularly Modern Orthodox and some of the religious schools, but others just don't, and you have to see the accounts of the people themselves.

You see this incontrovertible evidence on film and I think people are inevitably surprised like I was. Their jaws drop. Once you see this for yourself, you can't say that it's simply not true or that we're making all this up.

Did Yaffed have any official connection to the film in terms of shaping it or producing it?

I wanted to call Pearls. And the first thing I said was I'm doing this independent documentary and [its spokesman] says, "Well, you're funded by Yaffed, aren't you?" And I go no, it's an independent documentary and when I say independent, that means it's not affiliated, I'm not a gun for hire, this is not a corporate documentary. And they literally could not understand what that meant.

How do you approach the issue of portraying both sides, especially when representatives of the yeshivas refused to speak with you and didn't really trust that you were independent?

I tried calling professors who had this point of view and they turned me down. I made it very clear, "Look, I have a position, I have a position that there's a problem here in the community." And I made it very clear, I'm not going to lie to them and say this film is something that it's not. But I said, "I do want to hear the other side." And nobody wanted to be interviewed.

I actually did one interview with a professor, but then he didn't feel comfortable after the interview, so we didn't run it. So the only thing we could do was use the public footage that was available online. The first version of the documentary was 20 minutes long and people told us, we're not hearing enough of the other side. And I said, OK, you're right.

That's when we started amping up the other position because you really need to have the two sides to debate. If you're not talking about the other side, you're not really convincing anybody. You need to understand the issues from their perspective.

Do you feel like there are two sides to this?

The way I framed the debate is there's a state law and the state law says a certain thing, and that state law has to be obeyed, and there's clear evidence that it's not being obeyed. People have desires and rights under that law to practice religion the way they want. And then they have to follow state law on other things. And I think that's the way I look at it.

What do you think would be a just resolution to the question of how the government should regulate and mandate secular education in the yeshivas?

I think there needs to be a way for us to determine that the kids in yeshivas are getting a decent education. Now that doesn't mean inspectors coming in and looking into the textbooks in the lockers. It means coming up with some objective way. Now one objective way might be testing, such as the Regents tests.

One of the people at Pearls points out very rightly that public schools are not doing a great job of teaching secular education and yes, that's true. So let's make sure that all yeshivas are at least as good or better than the worst public schools, or the average public schools, and let's find a way to do that. We don't have to tell them how many hours a day they study or what subjects or what textbooks to use, but there has to be some objective way to determine the truth.

The question is whether children who graduate from institutions have the abilities to become independent adults if they choose. And if someone comes from a yeshiva and doesn't have enough English to get a job as anything but a minimum wage job in a factory, then you wonder whether they're getting an appropriate education.

I think that a better secular education would allow people who remain in the community to be more prosperous and to solve some of the problems associated with the [reliance on] government funding in many of these communities. Kiryas Joel [the Satmar Hasidic enclave in upstate New York] has [some of] the highest Section 8

housing funding in the entire country in any community.

In my mind, there's no conflict with having a secular education and practicing your religion. My mother was this really devout woman. Her secular education never interfered with her faith. So I don't understand why people are so afraid of it.

What do you hope people will take away from watching this?

I'd like them to ask themselves what we owe children, what we owe our kids, and what happens when we don't give them the education they need to become independent.

"An Unorthodox Education" (2021, Elm Court Productions) is streaming through Aug. 8 at <https://watch.showandtell.film/watch/anunorthodoxeducation-facebook>.

● NEWS

Tel Aviv's Sherry Herring Sandwich Shop to Open on Manhattan's Upper West Side

By Shira Hanau

If there was any doubt that the Upper West Side of Manhattan was a Jewish neighborhood, a new herring shop opening in the area should seal the deal.

Sherry Herring, a Tel Aviv sandwich shop offering herring sandwiches — served with a shot of vodka — will be opening a stateside outpost in New York City. According to the West Side Rag, the new store will be located at 245 West 72nd Street, replacing a longtime hat store. It is not yet clear when the store will open.

The original Sherry Herring store is located in Shuk HaNamal, an outdoor food market established in 2010 at the Tel Aviv port. The shop, which sells pickled fish and baguette sandwiches, was once featured on an episode of Somebody Feed Phil, a travel show on Netflix. Michal

Ansky, the Israeli foodie who launched Shuk HaNamal, said the shop was named after her mother.

"This is worth stopping for," Phil Rosenthal, the show's host, said of the sandwich.

● EDITOR'S DESK

Jackie Mason Was Too Jewish, Except When He Wasn't

The rabbi-turned-comedian told and embodied an important Jewish story.

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

My late father couldn't stand Jackie Mason. Dad grew up in upstate New York, the youngest member of the only Jewish family in town. Like any normal kid, he was desperate to fit in, and being Jewish was what kept him apart. Mason represented all that my father tried to suppress: the Jewy accent, the Yiddish rhythms, the Borscht Belt shtick.

Mason knew he had this effect on other Jews. "The only persecution that I ever suffered from in my career was from Jews that are embarrassed that I am so Jewish," he said in one routine.

Mason's career soared on the strength of his brand of ethnic humor — and it groaned under the weight of it. He was a brilliant practitioner of his craft, expertly building and delivering a joke and playing an audience for all they were worth. His best material was trenchant, sometimes even wise.

But Mason owed the rise, fall and rise of his career to his audience's perceptions of his Jewishness. In the Borscht Belt, in front of Jewish vacationers, he was in friendly territory. But as he pushed into the mainstream, some urged him to tone it down. "There was a profound rejection problem: the reverse discrimination of Jews against other Jews who talk like me in show business," he said in an insightful interview from 1988. "I think they were

ashamed and embarrassed about my accent, that I was somehow symbolic of the whole fear that Jews would be discriminated against again.”

He was talking about the 1950s and '60s, when American Jews felt both vulnerable and increasingly at home. In the wake of the Holocaust, antisemitism was largely discredited and Jews were welcomed into the mainstream. But certain rules applied: You could be Jewish, but not too Jewish. It's not like ethnic humor wasn't in vogue – it's just that few channeled it as aggressively as Mason. Henny Youngman, Rodney Dangerfield, Alan King, Norm Crosby – the Borscht Belt comics who “crossed over” were Jewish. Jackie Mason was a Jew. And his career tanked.

But something happened in the 1980s. Speakers of Yiddish-inflected English began dying off. Jewish ethnicity was fading, which only led people to long for it. Mason got this too. “We take our heritage with us, wherever we come from,” he said. “But in America, people have tried to assimilate. And now they feel they are missing something about their culture. People need these characteristics to know who they are, and they want to distinguish themselves from other people's ethnic differences. I think there is a certain degree of re-identification with their ethnic identities, and it gives them something, emotionally and spiritually.”

“Ethnic humor is tricky, never more so than now. Humor thrives on generalization and provocation, when both are out of vogue.”

What he gave them was “The World According to Me!,” a one-man show that opened on Broadway in 1986. Its best-known bits are built on distinctions between Jews and gentiles. Gentiles take blue collar jobs, Jews aspire to the professions. Jews are sober, gentiles drink. Gentiles work with their hands, Jews are hopeless with tools. “Go to any gentile home and you'll see the truth of it. A gentile home is a workshop and a Jewish home is a museum.”

Although his fellow Jews were as much a target of these jokes as their gentile foils, audiences ate it up. If Mason wasn't describing them, he was describing their uncles, or parents, or neighbors, often as precisely as a sociologist. (JTA has a roundup of his routines about Jews at <https://www.jta.org/2021/07/25/culture/jackie-mason-was-a-jewish-american-comedy-icon-these-videos-show-why>)

Some of this was cringe-worthy, but – honestly? To the audiences that helped the show run for two years and fed numerous sequels, his observations rang true. As he said, after decades of suppressing what made them different and sensing what was being lost, Jewish audiences wanted to hear what made them distinctive.

Ethnic humor is tricky, never more so than now. Humor thrives on generalization and provocation, when both are out of vogue. It's not just a matter of “punching up” or down. As a society we have learned to celebrate diversity but are wary about embracing distinctions. The terms of the debate over intermarriage, for example, have changed drastically in the past 50 years. Baby Boomers and Gen X weren't about to sit shiva for a child who “married out,” as their parents or grandparents might have threatened. But many did want their children to appreciate what made Jews and Judaism distinct and special and urged them to carry it on. Their children, in turn, find the whole idea of in-marriage more than distasteful, and perhaps a little racist.

Jackie Mason's late-career success straddled these generational divides, and his star faded again when audiences were no longer eager to look back at where they had come from. Mason found what his New York Times obituary diplomatically called “a new sideline as an opinionated political commentator” – in fact, he turned into a crank, embracing the uglier sides of right-wing populism that his friend Donald Trump rode into the White House. (A Trump speech is itself like a Borscht Belt routine, stripped of anything resembling wit.) Mason used the Yiddish S-word to describe David N. Dinkins, the Black mayoral candidate, apologized, then did it again to belittle Barack Obama. His sour politics and blatant racism reflected badly on his old routines, and once amusing bits about women and Puerto Ricans began to curdle.

But for a good stretch the rabbi-turned-comedian told and embodied an important Jewish story, about who we were, who we are, and what we were becoming. Like any great artist, his work deserves to be appreciated, even when it stops being admired.

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

● OPINION

The Holocaust Is Exaggerated in Pop Culture. That Makes It Hard for Educators Like Me to Teach the Truth.

By Luke Berryman

“Hey, I did have one question ...” That was the tentative opening to an email I recently received from a high school teacher. The Ninth Candle, the Holocaust education organization I founded, had led some educational programs for her students, and the teacher and I had been trading emails for a few weeks.

Even teachers at schools with established Holocaust programs can be reluctant to get too close to the big questions about it. I sense a widespread but unspoken fear of being called insensitive or offensive — or worse, antisemitic. She only asked me her “one question” after a relationship had begun to form and she had my repeated reassurance that nothing was off the table.

And the question?

She wanted to know if the Nazis had used human fat, rendered from Jewish prisoners, to make bars of soap. The class materials she’d been given said they had. She doubted the claim but was too afraid to challenge it.

The answer is no, they didn’t. Despite the teacher’s apprehension, it was perfectly reasonable to ask.

This teacher shared more of her class materials with me as our exchange went on. Along with the “soap myth,” which academics are still untangling, there was a mess of small but significant factual errors: chronology, place names, victim numbers. We soon realized that Holocaust education at her school, like at many schools across the country, needed to be overhauled. A recent study revealed that our knowledge of the Holocaust is de-

clining. Most millennials and Gen Z members surveyed don’t know that 6 million Jews were murdered during the genocide, and half of those surveyed can’t name a single concentration camp or ghetto. Meanwhile, antisemitic incidents are surging.

One of the first things we can do to improve the situation is to uproot myths from our curriculums. This will involve discussing all those difficult questions. We also need to keep class materials updated because our knowledge of the Holocaust is still evolving. (The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum is a good source for teachers who want to make sure their lessons are up to date.)

Take the soap myth. Rumors that the Nazis made soap from Jewish prisoners emerged before World War II was over, and evidence to support them was presented at the Nuremberg Trials. In the 1980s, historians discovered that the issue was more complex than first realized, and their investigations continued into the 21st century.

We now know that the Danzig Anatomical Institute’s preparation of corpses made a soapy byproduct used to clean the institute during the final months of the war. The corpses weren’t Jewish, and no bars of soap were ever made. But Allied and Soviet propaganda, and pop culture works like Zofia Nalkowska’s 1946 book “Medallions,” inflated the institute’s disrespect for the dead into something even worse.

There are many other examples of our knowledge of the Holocaust improving over time. But such changes don’t always make it into curriculums and schools.

This is partly due to Holocaust education’s dependence on pop culture, with its liberal use of works that deliberately blur fact and fiction. Schools commonly choose to include books and movies like “Schindler’s List,” “The Boy in the Striped Pajamas” and “The Tattooist of Auschwitz.” But these works aren’t useful teaching tools. They treat the Holocaust as a game of cat-and-mouse, Jews as an interchangeable mass who went to their deaths unthinkingly and survival as a matter of attitude. In addition, there are so many advocacy groups putting free, one-size-fits-all Holocaust lesson plans on the internet now that some schools and teachers barely know where to begin.

For students, pop culture’s repetitive, two-dimensional treatment of the Holocaust makes it difficult to think

about it critically, or to feel empathy for its victims, or to connect it with the present — especially if that's where one's Holocaust education begins and ends. (More than 30 U.S. states still have no mandate that the Holocaust be taught at all.) Folding more cases of resistance into Holocaust curriculums is one way to address this. I've seen students' relationships with the subject change when light is cast on the uprisings in Auschwitz, Sobibor and Treblinka, or on resisters like Alexander Pechersky and Zivia Lubetkin.

Another way is to study the Holocaust alongside Nazi Germany's "forgotten victims," as the historian Richard J. Evans calls them: the Roma and Sinti peoples, gay people, people with mental and physical disabilities, and Slavs, among others. Students often connect with books that reach imaginatively beyond the settings of camps and ghettos. Liza Wiemer's novel "The Assignment" is about two students challenging their school over a classroom activity that requires some of them to argue in favor of the "Final Solution." Wiemer illuminates historical facts about the Holocaust with contemporary ideas about what it means to be an ally to marginalized groups. The story is a timely response to real-life "assignments."

As a Holocaust educator, the most common question children ask me is: "How come the Jews didn't fight back?" This is a product of their exposure to the myth that Jews went to their deaths "like lambs," and it shows the inadequacy of contemporary Holocaust education. It also helps explain why many young people are prone to taking the Holocaust lightly. Such ignorance can breed indifference, and as the historian Ian Kershaw said, it was indifference that paved the road to Auschwitz. Hitler wrote in "Mein Kampf" that the Nazis would never recruit members from "the unthinking herd" of the public. He knew that widespread indifference would help his pursuit of antisemitism more than widespread fanaticism.

We learned many lessons from the war, but the threat of indifference enabling hatred to run riot is as pressing today as it was in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s. The Holocaust is the most radical demonstration of what can happen when the suffering of others goes unchecked. This is why improving the way we teach it must be a priority for schools everywhere. (Chalkbeat)

Chalkbeat is a nonprofit news site covering educational change in public schools.

● SABBATH WEEK / PARSHAT RE'EH

Learning to Trust in an Age of False Prophets

Torah wants us to be open-minded, but not gullible.

By Rabbi Ben Goldberg

Whom do we trust, and why? This perennial question has become even more pressing.

The continuing and continually evolving pandemic has sent many of us in search of trustworthy information to help us manage risk and keep ourselves and our communities healthy. And, rightly or wrongly, various political actors have cast doubt on the trustworthiness of institutions of our democracy, be they elections officials or the police.

And yet, stepping back from the present political moment, we can see that trust remains as essential to the operation of society as ever. A recent book review in the *New Yorker* suggests that trust, as a baseline condition for the operation of a prosperous economy, has even grown. Think about it: People now, as a matter of course, connect with a stranger using the internet and then get into a car driven by that stranger, two things I was warned as a child never to do.

Indeed, as the economist Benjamin Ho writes in his new book "Why Trust Matters," "One could tell the story of human civilization as a story of how we learned to trust one another."

Even though we routinely and implicitly trust strangers in our everyday interactions, we still have to choose who to trust when it comes to the most important matters we face.

Our Torah portion this week, Re'eh, addresses this issue of trust through the laws concerning the false prophet:

If there appears among you a prophet or a dream-di-

viner and he gives you a sign or a portent, saying, “Let us follow and worship another god”— whom you have not experienced — even if the sign or portent that he named to you comes true, do not heed the words of that prophet or that dream-diviner. For the LORD your God is testing you to see whether you really love the LORD your God with all your heart and soul. (Deuteronomy 13:2-4)

Imagine this situation from the perspective of the Israelite audience: A false prophet who advocates for the worship of another god appears and offers evidence of the reliability of that prophesy, either by correctly predicting the future or by some miraculous spectacle. The audience then weighs the evidence for this new god against the track record of the God of Israel they and their ancestors have known, and is supposed to reject the new deity in favor of the familiar one.

Why would God conduct such a test? For Maimonides and other rationally inclined commentators, this cannot be a test in the way that a science experiment is a test to determine whether a hypothesis is correct or not. God already knows everything and therefore has no need for such a test.

Rather, this is a test in the sense of a demonstration, to show to others that belief in God is well-considered and so firmly rooted that it could not be undermined by whatever supposed evidence the false prophet can muster (Guide for the Perplexed III:24). The real beneficiaries of this test, then, are the people Israel and anyone observing their steadfast devotion to God, who will see that this faith is based on reasoned consideration and not on signs and wonders.

As the historian Howard Lupovitch suggests, the laws concerning a false prophet mean that critical thinking provides an indispensable guardrail in the spiritual and philosophical life. Such thinking offers “a crucial line of defense against the unscrupulous charlatan, prophetic or otherwise, who takes advantage of people in times of duress.”

As important as skeptical criticism of a potentially false prophet remains, it is also possible to err too far in the other direction, loyally sticking with what one believes to be true even in the face of counter-evidence. As the economist Ho put it, “it’s potentially quite rational to

place more trust in news and news sources that confirm what you already know.”

“Critical thinking provides an indispensable guardrail in the spiritual and philosophical life.”

Go too far in this direction, and you might reject truthful information as the signs and portents of a false prophet. That is probably what happened, for instance, when the people of ancient Jerusalem refused to listen to the prophet Jeremiah’s correct warnings about the impending destruction of their city. And arguably that is what happens when people today unquestioningly trust sensationalist news sources that only reinforce their existing opinions and biases.

What the Torah calls for is a middle ground, where we remain loyal to certain overarching beliefs and narratives that help structure reality as we understand it, while also critically examining new claims to determine how they might fit with what we already know to be true.

In other words, we are to be open-minded, but not so much that our brains fall out.

Rabbi Ben Goldberg is rabbi of Congregation KTI in Port Chester, NY. He was named to *The Jewish Week’s* “36 Under 36” list of change-makers who are making a difference in the life of Jewish New York.

CANDLELIGHTING, READINGS:

Av 28, 5781 | Friday, August 6, 2021

- **Light candles at:** 7:47 p.m.

Av 29, 5781 | Saturday, August 7, 2021

- **Torah reading:** Re’eh, Deuteronomy 11:26–16:17
- **Haftarah:** Isaiah 54:1–55:5; Samuel I 20:18; Samuel I 20:42
- **Shabbat ends:** 8:49 p.m.

● MUSINGS

Why I Love Mystery Novels

By David Wolpe

From the moment I read my first Agatha Christie and my mother gave me a John D. MacDonald, I've been hooked on mysteries. From Holmes to Bosch, I read classic, golden age mysteries, international mysteries, noir, psychological puzzles, police procedurals, spy novels. I've even contributed an essay or two to compendiums about mystery literature. There are established reasons of course: Such books have a clear plot and strongly defined characters; they suggest there are solutions in the world and there is ultimate justice (at least, most of them do). But lately I've come to believe there is another reason why I, and so many others, love mystery novels.

The best mysteries emphasize the essential unpredictability of life. No one expects the murder(s), even if the detective makes some dark, foreboding remark. And the solution is inevitably surprising, or the mystery is not a success. It is a literature of contingency, of possibility, of dark and light in unlikely and unpredictable combinations. It is a literature of life.

A mystery is a promise of improbable occurrences: In a remote town called Ur, a man named Abraham hears a voice. You'll never guess what happens next.

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

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● ARTS AND CULTURE

These Jewish Women Photographers from the Met's Exhibit Are Absolutely Worth a Look

"The New Woman Behind the Camera" features the work of photographers taken worldwide in the early 20th century, including several Jewish standouts.

By Sarah Rosen

If you had joined me at the Met Museum on a recent Sunday, you would believe what they're saying: New York is back. Though I'd reserved a ticket online (the Met's COVID protocols include timed entry), I still found myself standing in a long line in the thick heat along with approximately five trillion other people before making it inside, where there were another five trillion people but also, thankfully, air conditioning.

The exhibit I'd come to see, "The New Woman Behind the Camera," was worth the wait. A sprawling photography show, it features the work of women photographers taken worldwide between the 1920s and the 1950s. From street photography in Japan to desolate U.S. Depression-era scenes to glamorous fashion shots, the exhibition has ambitious aims: to present the often overlooked work of the so-called "New Woman of the 1920s," whom they describe as "a global phenomenon that embodied an ideal of female empowerment based on real women making revolutionary changes in life and art." Included in the exhibit were many new-to-me Jewish women photographers, including the first female war photojournalist to be killed during combat and several masters of street photography.

Jeanne Mandello, a German Jew living in exile in Uruguay,

trained in Berlin and then opened a photography studio in Frankfurt. She took an experimental self-portrait in Montevideo in the early 1940s in which she gazes at the camera from beneath the leaves of a palm branch, her gloved hand ladylike, and her expression both inviting and enigmatic.

Ilse Bing, an American Jew born in Germany, began her career in 1929 and was one of the earliest photographers to embrace the Leica camera, a lightweight 35mm camera whose transportability transformed photography and inspired a surge in street photography and photojournalism. In 1930, Bing moved to Paris where she got her nickname, "the Queen of the Leica." In this self-portrait, she uses mirrors and a striking composition to capture this quintessential image of the Woman Behind the Camera.

American Jewish photographer Rebecca Lepkoff made socially conscious work that often featured her Lower East Side neighborhood and its multiethnic residents. Her parents were Russian Jews who emigrated from Minsk to New York in 1910, and her photographs capture tenement life in the 1940s.

Helen Levitt, another American Jew, is known for her unromanticized street photography. She worked as a commercial photographer in the Bronx until the Leica camera allowed her to start exploring street photography in the 1930s. Cultural critic and poet David Levi Strauss has called her "a widely recognized modern master." Her solo exhibition at the Met in 1992 was the museum's first solo exhibition of a woman photographer.

Alice Brill grew up in São Paulo after fleeing Nazi Germany. (Her father died in a German concentration camp.) She left Brazil to study photography and returned in 1948. Her photography highlighted marginalized communities, like this photograph of an Afro-Brazilian woman selling goods on city steps in front of a busy street and cityscape.

Gertrude Fehr came from a prominent German Jewish family. She ran a portrait studio in Munich before escaping to Paris in 1933 after Hitler came to power. In Paris, she and her husband opened a photography school where she taught experimental exposure techniques (as seen in this luminescent photograph from 1936).

Liselotte Grschebina was born in Germany in 1908. In 1934, she emigrated to Mandatory Palestine and opened a photography studio in Tel Aviv. She was committed to the photography styles she learned in Weimar Germany: advocating for photography as its own unique artform, especially suited to capturing candid portraits.

Ilse Salberg was a German Jewish photographer who fled to Paris with her partner, the painter Anton Räderscheidt. The exhibition featured an extreme close-up of her partner's underarm hair, which the photograph's composition distorts into something strange and unfamiliar.

Gerda Taro was a German Jewish war photographer and antifascist activist who (like several others on this list) lived in Paris after escaping Nazi Germany. Her partner was the photographer Robert Capa, and much of her photography was credited to him. While documenting the Spanish Civil War in 1937, she was hit by a tank and died, becoming the first woman photographer to die in the field. Her affecting photographs of the frontlines and civilians appeared in several magazines.

Overall, the show's selection is impressive and diverse, with sections on photography studios, avant-garde experimentation, fashion and advertising, social documentary, reportage and more. The exhibition explains this sweeping variety: "During this tumultuous period shaped by two world wars, women stood at the forefront of experimentation with the camera and produced invaluable visual testimony that reflects both their personal experiences and the extraordinary social and political transformations of the era."

I found the curators' understanding of the exhibit's gendered terminology helpful: "Women constitute a heterogeneous group whose individual identities are defined by a host of variables and factors. Thus the designation 'woman photographer' is imperfect (as is the adjective 'female'), yet it remains a useful framework for analysis."

The show was not only heterogeneous, but so wide-ranging in sensibility, location and subject that it ran the risk of feeling barely curated, like a kind of highbrow vintage Instagram feed. Actually, that's exactly what it felt like, and it was awesome. From war scenes to glamorous commercial photoshoots to indecipherable photos of the body, the photos captured work from many walks of life, countries and styles, and coalesced into a scattered

exhibit that felt surprisingly contemporary.

As I left the museum, I found myself thinking about something the Jewish writer Nicole Krauss said in a 2017 interview I'd recently read: "Every writer is born into his or her material, whatever that may be." This struck me as true for these photographers too, whose work was informed, if not defined, by the extraordinary times they were living in. I was inspired by their chutzpah. They captured what they saw and trusted it had value (or even if they didn't trust it had value, they didn't let that stop them). On the crowded steps of the Met, a young woman asked me to take a photo of her posing. I snapped a few options on her cell and then sanitized my hands, thinking about the insanity of the times we're living in, too.

For a worldwide tour of women photographers from China to Spain to Hollywood, I highly recommend heading to the Met before October 3, 2021. And if you can't make it in person, the virtual opening, which takes you through the exhibit in more detail, is available to view online.

"The New Woman Behind the Camera" is on display at the Met Fifth Avenue in New York from July 2-October 3, 2021. (Alma)

Sarah Rosen is a writer and filmmaker in Brooklyn.

UPCOMING EVENTS

August 8 | 3:00 p.m. Free

Sarah Aroeste With Shai Bachar: Ladino Music From Yesterday To Today

International Ladino singer/songwriter Sarah Aroeste, joined on piano by longtime Israeli collaborator Shai Bachar, draws upon her family roots from Macedonia and Greece as she performs traditional and original Ladino songs in this special multimedia program. Attend this concert, presented by the Museum and the Center for Traditional Music and Dance, in person or watch the livestream from home.

Learn more and register at <https://bit.ly/3xsBrzA>

UPCOMING EVENTS

August 8 | 4:00 p.m. \$16

Jewish Heritage Night with the Brooklyn Cyclones

JCRC-NY presents Jewish Heritage Night with the Brooklyn Cyclones vs. the Hudson Valley Renegades. \$16 admissions package includes a limited edition Jewish heritage cap, a Brooklyn Cyclones cap and a \$5 donation back to the JCRC.

Get tickets at <https://bit.ly/3ysHW6N>

August 10 | 4:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.

How 9/11 Changed Us Free

American Friends of Rabin Medical Center presents "How 9/11 Changed Us" as part of its Global Connections leaders forum. Robert Siegel, former senior host of "All Things Considered," moderates a discussion with Larry Silverstein (chairman, Silverstein Properties), Alice Greenwald (president/CEO, National 9/11 Memorial & Museum) and Evan Osnos (staff writer, The New Yorker).

Register at <https://globalconnections.splashthat.com>

August 12 | 8:30 p.m. Free

A Discussion on Antisemitism

Combatants for Peace presents a discussion on antisemitism featuring Peter Beinart, editor at large of Jewish Currents.

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

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