

The New York Jewish Week/end

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Observant Jewish residents of The Colony, a high-rise in Fort Lee, N.J., are suing the board for barring employees from pushing elevator buttons for those forbidden to do so on the Jewish Sabbath. (Screenshot from Google Maps)

Must read

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● NEWS

New Jersey Condo to Resume Shabbat Elevator Service After Settling With Residents Who Sued

By Philissa Cramer

The elevators at a Fort Lee, New Jersey, condo building will again stop on every floor during Shabbat after the condo board settled with Orthodox Jewish residents who sued over the service's cancelation.

Dozens of residents charged in a June lawsuit that The Colony was discriminating against religious residents by turning off the elevators' Shabbat setting and also barring building staff from pushing the elevator buttons for them. Orthodox Jews do not press electrical switches on Shabbat.

Some Orthodox residents in the 32-story building were effectively trapped in their apartments between sundown Friday and sundown Saturday, the law-

suit alleged.

The conflict pitted some Jewish residents in the building against other Jewish and non-Jewish residents, turning The Colony into a battleground over religious accommodations in shared public spaces, the New York Jewish Week reported in July. At the time, one of the lead plaintiffs, Paul Kurlansky, said the solution was simple.

“All The Colony has to do is turn on a switch,” Kurlansky said, “and we’re done.”

That will happen now, according to the terms of the settlement, which were spelled out in a letter to condo shareholders, NorthJersey.com reported Wednesday. The elevators will stop on every floor for 9 1/2 high-traffic hours on Saturdays and major Jewish holidays; while the lawsuit had sought damages, no payments are required as part of the settlement, according to the newspaper.

“All parties are pleased that this matter was expeditiously and respectfully resolved in good will and believe that this resolution is in the best interest of the Colony,” the letter issued to Colony shareholders on Monday said, according to the newspaper report.

● NEWS

1 Arrested After Vandalism, Including Stolen Torahs, Discovered at Long Island Synagogue

By Philissa Cramer

Police in Long Beach, New York, have arrested one man in connection with vandalism that took place this weekend at a local synagogue that had just become part of Chabad of the Beaches.

Rabbi Eli Goodman shared photographs of the damage that showed one door of the Torah ark torn off and prayer shawls strewn on the ground. Two Torah scrolls

and their silver adornments were taken, although some of the metal decorations were later recovered, Goodman told Hamodia, an Orthodox news service. He said the vandalism had taken place sometime on Saturday after the synagogue hosted a bar mitzvah during Shabbat services.

Police announced on Sunday that they had arrested and sent for psychological evaluation a 23-year-old man whom they described as homeless, the Long Island Herald reported.

Chabad of the Beaches, which runs Chabad centers in three towns on Long Island, launched a crowdfunding campaign with a goal of \$250,000 that it said would support security upgrades. The vandalism took place the same day the group began holding services in that building, according to the campaign, which has raised nearly \$10,000 as of Monday afternoon.

“We thought we’d have a quiet, soft opening without so much fanfare, but unfortunately we have this whole tragedy,” Goodman told Hamodia. He said he would be adding “more security, better locks, upgrading our security system right now.”

● NEWS

50 Essential New York Restaurants and Attractions, as Chosen by the New York Jewish Week’s ‘36 Under 36’

By Jacob Gurvis

For comfort food, Kylie Unell, a philosophy student and comedy-show producer, heads to Izzy’s BBQ Smokehouse. The Crown Heights restaurant “is not distinctly Jewish, but it is kosher BBQ that rivals the Kansas City BBQ I grew up eating,” she says.

Meanwhile, Rachel Figurasmith, the executive director of Repair the World NYC, heads to Lee Lee's Baked Goods in Harlem, a decades-old rugelach joint operated by Alvin Lee Smalls, an octogenarian Black man originally from South Carolina whose first encounter with the buttery Jewish pastry came while working as a chef in a hospital kitchen.

Kelly Whitehead, a rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College, makes frequent visits to the Brooklyn Museum, especially, she said, to see "The Dinner Party," a room-sized art installation by the feminist Jewish artist Judy Chicago.

And while Rabbi Ben Goldberg lives near the synagogue in Westchester County where he works, he heads to B&H Dairy in the East Village whenever he can. "For me, this place is heaven on earth," said Goldberg.

Those are just some of the places that this year's New York Jewish Week "36 Under 36" suggested when we asked them about their favorite places to eat Jewish food in the city and to take out-of-town guests.

View the map at <https://bit.ly/3gxD9tK> to explore the full set of suggestions. Be sure to click on each pin on the map to see comments from the 36er who recommended it.

● EDITOR'S DESK

Is Reporting on Hate Good for the Haters?

How to cover antisemitism without giving "oxygen" to the antisemites.

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

A big part of my job is reporting antisemitism – from the filth spilling out of the sewers of white supremacy, to the never-ending debate over when anti-Israel activity ends and Jew-hatred begins, to the isolated graffiti scrawled on a synagogue door.

It's a job that comes with some responsibility, but frankly one that can be abused. Does reporting on antisemitism only amplify it? Like the "if it bleeds it leads" journalism of

local TV newscasts, does our reporting end up suggesting the world is more hostile to Jews than it actually is?

I fret especially over the "one-offs" – the kind of isolated incidents that might be upsetting to the local victims but don't necessarily point to a wider wave of antisemitism. By treating, say, a swastika scrawled on a highway overpass as newsworthy, do news outlets end up empowering a 16-year-old with a Sharpie? Might an article about the incident inspire a copycat?

Authors Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner take on these dilemmas in a new book, "You Are Here: A Field Guide for Navigating Polarized Speech, Conspiracy Theories, and Our Polluted Media Landscape" (MIT Press). The book draws in part on Phillips' 2018 study, "The Oxygen of Amplification." Using case studies, she contended then that journalists accidentally propagated extremist ideology out of a well-intentioned impulse to expose manipulators and trolls. The 2018 paper is a catalogue of Trump-era hate-mongering: the rise of the alt-right here and the far-right in Europe; the ascendancy of social media trolls and social media sites, like 4Chan and parts of Reddit and Twitter, where they lurk.

Reporting on these trends, even critically, also gives the subjects a wider audience. The journalists Phillips spoke to tell themselves that it is better to turn over the rock and expose what's underneath. But they also worry that by, say, amplifying a fringe politician's musings about Jewish space lasers, they inject a new antisemitic idea into the public bloodstream.

"The basic understanding that one's reporting could end up benefiting extremists, or otherwise contribute to the spread of misinformation, was deeply concerning for almost every person I spoke to," she writes.

Phillips cites an example from 2016, when Time magazine reporter Joel Stein shared his email exchange with avowed neo-Nazi Andrew Auernheimer, which ended when Auernheimer declared that Jews deserved to be murdered.

"Even if a particular article takes an overall condemnatory tone toward its subject, as does Stein's, the manipulators' messages are still amplified to a national or global audience, and the manipulators themselves still get exactly what they want"— that is, wider attention and greater recruitment power.

“The Oxygen of Amplification” focuses mainly on online hate. But its advice applies to covering hate in all its manifestations. Focus on the victims, not the perpetrators. To avoid inspiring copycats, Phillips writes, “keep the story specific to the communities affected, focus on the impact of an attack, minimize sensationalist language and headlines, and reduce antihero framings of the perpetrator.” Focus on the victims, not the perpetrators.

“We should put antisemitism in perspective, recognizing its dangers even as we acknowledge the relative security and safety most Jews enjoy today.”

As for the “isolated” incident, Phillips is less helpful. Sometimes an event that seems isolated does fit a wider pattern which isn’t at first apparent. When identifiably Orthodox Jews were reporting attacks in late 2019, it wasn’t clear whether these were random muggings or part of a larger trend of harassment. The community’s sense of vulnerability only became apparent when the attacks increased, and the media, along with law enforcement and the watchdog groups, began connecting the dots. Should media downplay such attacks before a clear pattern emerges? What’s the tipping point?

Nonetheless, “The Oxygen of Amplification” is a helpful guidebook for a treacherous landscape. Journalists should be out there exposing and challenging the trolls. We should be careful about providing microphones to those who are already the loudest voices in the room. We should put antisemitism in perspective, recognizing its dangers even as we acknowledge the relative security and safety most Jews enjoy today.

Those are a lot of “shoulds,” and they can even cancel one another out, like a game of rock, paper, scissors. The best we can do as journalists is to weigh our decisions carefully. In a section on “tips for establishing newsworthiness,” Phillips provides advice from April Glaser, technology writer at Slate. “When weighing the question of newsworthiness, she considers whether the reporting will have a positive social benefit, if it will open up a new conversation, and/or if it will add weight and exemplars to an existing conversation,” writes Phillips. “If the answer to these questions is yes, the story is likely worth reporting.”

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

● OPINION

In Our Season of Reckoning, What to Remember When Abuse Stories Break in Jewish Communities

By Sheila Katz and Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg

We are, once again, in a season of reckoning with sexual abuse in the Jewish community and in the country.

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo resigned after a state attorney general investigation found that he sexually harassed at least 11 women, aided by networks of complicity.

In the Jewish community, the Reform movement, which represents the largest and most diverse Jewish movement in North America, has initiated three separate investigations — one each for its rabbinical seminary, rabbinical association and synagogue network — to look at both allegations of abuse and possible points of failure in its policies and systems.

The Conservative movement has announced new accountability and reporting policies for its youth group program and investigation into allegations regarding past sexual abuse by one of its former staff.

And just this week, a survivor anonymously shared a painful story about their treatment after being raped at Yeshiva University.

As all this unfolds, there likely will be many revelations about individuals who committed abuse, people in power who may have dismissed complaints and perhaps much more. This is likely to be a painful, difficult time for many. But it also has the potential to be a critical opportunity on the road to healing, to repair, to make things different for next time.

In the Jewish world, we are in the weeks leading up to

our High Holy Days, the season of cheshbon nefesh and teshuvah, of accounting of the soul and repentance, of acknowledging what has gone wrong and trying to do the work of making it right. Every season is the season to do the work of addressing sexual abuse and misconduct correctly, with integrity and care, but it is especially resonant in this season.

We both have been involved in this work from a myriad of perspectives. We have worked in assault prevention and trauma counseling. As advocates, we have helped advise multimillion-dollar projects aimed at transforming the Jewish community and helped denominations address systemic change. One of us is writing a book on institutional repentance. One of us came forward publicly naming a major philanthropist as an abuser.

We have seen what can happen from many sides, and we are all too familiar with the common mistakes that are made, time and again, whenever sexual assault or harassment are in the news.

As such, here are some basic principles we recommend following, whether as an affected member of the community or a curious outsider watching from afar.

LISTEN AND FEEL. First and foremost, whether you are speaking to or about survivors, do not assume you know what they should think, feel or do — and yes, believe them.

There is no one right way to respond to victimization, either in action or in feeling. And there are myriad places that a person might be in their potentially lifelong process of healing and recovery — including anger, hurt and disinterest or unwillingness to talk about their or others' experiences of sexual abuse. Certainly all survivors have their own journey in making sense of their experiences, and it is wrong to push them to forgive or reconcile with those who have hurt them in any way. Unless you are asked explicitly for advice about a specific situation, don't give advice to survivors about how to think or feel or make sense of their own experiences.

Let people define who they are for themselves, including how they want to be identified, if at all. Some people prefer the term "survivor" over "victim," whether they are currently in the unwelcome situation or not. It should be up to the person impacted to define their own

relationship to the abuse they experienced.

If a trusted member of the clergy or another key figure in your community is named as a sexual abuser, or if an institution that you trusted has been complicit in great harm, it is absolutely natural to feel a sense of betrayal, anger, confusion, hurt or a range of other emotions. Feel them. Make space for them.

KEEP YOUR EYE ON WHAT HAPPENS NEXT. The true test of an institution that participates in harm is whether and how well it takes responsibility. If you're a stakeholder, can you be part of the project of holding your synagogue, camp or other organization to accountability by making sure that it follows best practices? Some of these may include, but are not limited to, conducting a thorough and impartial investigation; allowing survivors access to the investigation report; making funding for victims' therapy or other mental health needs available; and making a statement that you believe the survivor, are grateful for them coming forward and will be following up on their claim. Push your organization toward tangible actions and concrete measures of accountability. Remember that others are watching and if the institution remains silent, even if there is a legal situation, that silence is easily taken as support for the perpetrator.

As we learn and process, we must hold institutions accountable and keep the accountability bar high. This is how we put the value of "believing survivors" into action and make it possible for them to turn, or return, to their community for solace and support.

Some claim that holding those who cause harm accountable is tantamount to exiling them forever, without any chance of returning to connection or community. On the contrary, there is a path back, but for the sake of those harmed — and to prevent future harm — we must make sure that we are rigorous in pursuing accountability. The work of repentance in the Jewish tradition includes steps of public ownership of harm, beginning to do the work — deep work, hard work — to change, amends, apology and, ultimately, making different choices in the future. In this formulation, only those harmed can make decisions about forgiveness.

THINK ABOUT WHAT AND HOW YOU SHARE. Journalists have an essential role to play in sharing these necessary stories exposing abuse, and they are increasingly

learning how to do so without retraumatizing survivors. Still, as individuals and communities learn to better respond to abuse, remember that many media outlets are catching up on best practices on reporting about sexual abuse. The onus is on all of us to be thoughtful about how we take in or share the news.

Look at the language used in news stories you are considering amplifying. The choice to say that someone is an “alleged” abuser sows seeds of suspicion in the person who came forward; stating that a report of misconduct or abuse was made is similarly factual from the perspective of journalistic accounts, but the reader perceives it as less questionable. Where have the journalists focused their spotlight — do they invest their energies on humanizing perpetrators or on centering the stories and experiences of victims and survivors? Too often, we see so many through headlines and photo choices, through anecdotes and story hooks.

Similarly, sexual harassment, sexual misconduct and sexual assault are not the same things and should not be used interchangeably. The correct term should always be used — and is not always. Sexual misconduct is a broad catchall term for unwelcome behavior of a sexual nature that is committed without consent or by force, intimidation, coercion or manipulation — it may be illegal, it may not be. Sexual assault involves sexually touching another person without consent, or the use of coercion or force, and sexual harassment includes a range of actions from verbal transgressions to physical advances and is illegal in most contexts.

As you engage in the conversation, you might feel compelled to share articles on social media. Many of these articles will include images of the perpetrator, which can be triggering for the victims. Consider sharing the article, but not the picture — it’s possible to click away the photo before posting. Select a picture that says “Believe survivors” or something of the sort to go with your post. This can be a way to show your support, center victims and help reduce trauma for those most affected.

CONSIDER THE SURVIVORS AND VICTIMS WHOSE STORIES AREN’T YET KNOWN. Although anyone can be a victim, regardless of gender, sexual abuse disproportionately impacts women, LGBTQ folks, people with disabilities and people from low-income backgrounds. We must acknowledge that this is not random. Perpetrators

tend to prey on people who are less likely to be believed. Black women report experiencing workplace sexual harassment at three times the rate of white women. Moreover, half of all Black transgender women are survivors of sexual violence and two-thirds of Black transgender people said they would be uncomfortable asking the police for help.

As we prepare for other potential revelations of abuse within the Jewish community and in other spaces, we must continue to focus on the needs of survivors and victims, whether they choose to come forward publicly or not. Each of us must take action — from our unique vantages, roles, positions and experiences — to insist on accountability, to work for systemic change towards equity, transparency, safety and justice, and to ensure a future without harassment, assault or abuse.

Repair is possible, but it must be survivor-centric at every turn.

Sheila Katz is the CEO of the National Council of Jewish Women, the 125-year-old progressive feminist nonprofit.

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● SABBATH WEEK / PARSHAT KI TAVO

Looking Back To Look Forward

*We dare not divorce ourselves from
the total picture of our history.*

By Rabbi Lawrence S. Zierler

There is an inscription that was prominently displayed near the entrance to the original Museum of the Diaspora-Beit HaTefusot, attributed to a Hasidic master of old, that reads, “Remember the past, live in the present and have hope for the future.”

It is a fitting prelude to the opening verses of Parshat

Ki Tavo (Deut. 26: 1-12) that deal with the obligation of the ordinary citizen of the Land of Israel, to bring the bikkurim offering, a gift basket of first fruits.

This celebration of a bountiful harvest does not occur in a vacuum. It is accompanied by a special reading of these opening verses that harken back to our earlier times of vulnerability and near annihilation.

This gives rise to a curious juxtaposition of moods: rejoice in a bumper crop gathered from the land but tinged with an honest reckoning of our past, invoking our ignominies and frailties.

These verses form the core of the “maggid” experience that is central to the Passover Haggadah experience. We refer to this literary and affective phenomenon as “matkhil be-genuth u’mesayeim b’shevach.” In telling our celebratory story linked to the Exodus from Egypt, we must first reference the travails and of our past and formative years.

It is precisely by appreciating from whence we have come that we can enjoy the current bountiful harvest. Our victories are not born in a vacuum and surely saw their share of setbacks and challenges on the road to success and security.

This is a unique feature of our religious mindset and earthly ethos. We are married to our past insofar as we reference it to better appreciate our current successes.

Jewish tradition in keeping with the above mentioned statement is “three tensional.”

Not to be conflated with the Orwellian Groupthink and its sordid doctrine that “whoever controls the past controls the present and whoever controls the present controls the past,” our values system pairs the past to the present, and through this retrospective exercise helps us forge our future. By referencing our previous pain we can and should better appreciate our current achievements. While this might be counterintuitive to those who avoid the rearview mirror to focus solely on what is ahead, Jewish tradition requires us to look back at where we have come from in order to celebrate the fruits of our labors.

In the words of Akavyah ben Mihallaleil from Pirkei Avot, “dah mi-ayin ba’atah ul’an atah holeich...” “Know your origins and where you are headed now, and before whom

you will ultimately be required to give an accounting for your earthly enterprise.”

We dare not divorce ourselves from the total picture of our history. Failure is an event not a person. It does not define us as much as it can refine us. Rav Avraham Yitzchak Ha-Kohen Kook, chief rabbi of pre-state Palestine, often spoke of the necessary “yeridah l’shem aliyah” — the descent and defeat necessary for the ultimate ascent from adversity and its attending victories and advances in life.

This lesson from the Torah portion’s opener is an essential part of the healthy Jewish mindset.

We are “steeled by adversity” in the words of the historian Salo Baron. We might look askance at and ignore the symbolism of the dollar bills taped to a business’ office wall near the cash register which reminds the proprietor of his/her first sales in a nascent enterprise; but they are a fitting reminder of the early, often hungry years. I knew of a family that had permanently parked a rusty old pickup truck in front of their palatial home, reminding them of their humble beginnings and early struggles. It was a monument and testament to their perseverance.

At this time in the Jewish calendar, as we approach the New Year we are engaged in a process of purposeful healing. For seven Shabbats, the sheva d’nichamta, in the aftermath of Tisha B’Av and its mournful legacy, we read Haftarot with prophetic portions from Isaiah, in order to heal and grow.

When Napoleon passed by a synagogue on the ninth of Av and heard the dirges being said inside and was told that the Jews inside were mourning the destruction of their holy Temple some two thousand years earlier, his response was, “Any people who are still able to mourn this kind of loss, so many years later will surely merit to see it rebuilt.”

The word “shanah” commonly translates as “year.” But it also means to learn and review as well as to change.

Parshat Ki Tavo begins with this perspective on organic growth and recovery. When the farmer holds aloft his bikkurim basket he is being “makir tov,” expressing his gratitude and understanding of all that it took to arrive at this joyful moment. He has a nuanced sense of success. He also understands his active role in society. Link this

then to the later portion of the same Torah reading that carries lengthy words of rebuke. In no uncertain terms we are told of the role we play either in the downfall and decline of society or in its growth in health and goodness. There is no absolute parallel between these details of a scorched earth society and the ravages of our current persistent pandemic, but still we cannot avoid recognition of the human hand in history and active life.

Ki Tavo then reminds us in broad relief of the mindset needed to succeed amid the challenges of life and its vicissitudes. We are very much the architects of our destiny — but only if and when we understand how the past influences and teaches us so much about the present.

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● MUSINGS

God and Gershwin

By David Wolpe

On Shabbat morning in synagogue I realized that a Gershwin lyric had a biblical root:

In time the Rockies may crumble
Gibraltar may tumble
They're only made of clay
But our love is here to stay.

Because we read in the Haftarah from Isaiah 54:10: “For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but

CANDLELIGHTING, READINGS:

Elul 19, 5781 | Friday, August 27, 2021

• **Light candles at:** 7:18 p.m.

Elul 20, 5781 | Saturday, August 28, 2021

• **Torah reading:** Ki Tavo, Deuteronomy 26:1–29:8

• **Haftarah:** Isaiah 60:1–22

• **Shabbat ends:** 8:16 p.m.

my steadfast love shall not depart from you.”

That got me to thinking anew how many are unaware of the constant theme in Judaism of God’s love. My first book, over 30 years ago, was called “The Healer of Shattered Hearts” and explored this theme, and related themes of God as close to us and guiding us. “I will love them freely” says the prophet Hosea in God’s name (14:5) and the Rabbis comment that this means “even when they do not love Me back.”

The God of Israel is a god of power and creation, to be sure. But also, a god of love. From Genesis to Gershwin, God’s love is here to stay.

*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.*

● ARTS AND CULTURE

Not Even Aliens Can Shake Up a Clan of New York Jews in ‘the Magnificent Meyersons’

By Andrew Lapin

How did aliens find their way into a nice Jewish dramedy?

It’s hard to say for sure how extraterrestrials factor into “The Magnificent Meyersons,” a new independent film written and directed by Evan Oppenheimer. Even for those who watch the movie, the answer isn’t really clear.

But here’s what happens: The film’s prolonged first act is structured as a series of loosely connected conversations among neurotic Manhattanites, nearly all of whom are Jewish. They largely debate philosophical matters like the existence of God and what kind of weather event best describes them. We don’t quite know how these

people fit together beyond the occasional onscreen text revealing that several are related.

Exactly 30 minutes in — too soon into the movie to qualify as a spoiler, but too late to be a proper inciting event — everyone's phone buzzes at once. The characters stop what they're doing to read the message, which seems to be some kind of emergency alert. Yep, aliens. Or, at least, the government suspects that a mysterious radio frequency has extraterrestrial origins.

Our multitude of characters handles this extraordinary event with what might best be described as mild bemusement. There's a rabbinical student (Daniel Eric Gold), already suffering a crisis of faith, who briefly considers whether the existence of aliens might shake his uncertain belief system. There's a book publisher (Jackie Burns) who has already confessed something deeply personal to her husband; she now decides she may, or may not, make a career change.

We never actually see any aliens. Only the potential of their existence concerns anyone, and even this nugget of information is more or less forgotten by the movie's end. Faced with the grand mysteries of the cosmos, self-absorbed yuppies, we learn, may well continue to play their part.

Indeed, it turns out that when it comes to dramatic potential, otherworldly beings have nothing on Richard Kind. The beloved "Spin City" and "A Serious Man" character actor, who plays the long-absent family patriarch, turns up even later in the film than the aliens. And it's his presence, playing against type as a taciturn and deeply depressed loner, that finally crystallizes what "Meyersons" is trying to say about life, the universe and everything.

Until then, the four grown Meyerson children and their mother, a pediatric oncologist named Terri (Kate Mulgrew of "Orange is the New Black"), are trying to figure out this whole existence thing on their own. They talk a lot; they have a flair for the theatrical. Most scenes find one of them loudly voicing their thoughts alongside some secondary person who listens patiently. Everyone is walking around outside, "mostly within a couple blocks of 14th Street," as the end credits helpfully note. There are a great many transitional exteriors of the Manhattan skyline.

There are so many characters, and in a scant 88 min-

utes so little time to get to know any of them, or how their father's absence affected each of them. That said, with so many monologues, "Meyersons" is a formidable actors' showcase, and the performers are compelling even when the filmmaking itself fails them. For example, the wonderful deaf Jewish actress Shoshannah Stern ("Grey's Anatomy," "Supernatural") is magnetic as a steely realtor, even when Oppenheimer frequently cuts her signing out of the frame.

Occasionally there's a punch of brutal insight that seems like it's fallen straight out of Woody Allen or Noah Baumbach.

"You don't believe in God. That's OK, you're a New York Jew, you're not supposed to," a congregant tells the may-be-lapsed rabbi.

Elsewhere, Terri's own mother (screen legend Barbara Barrie) bemoans that she's too old to see how the aliens will wind up changing society.

"It's as if I get to watch the first half of the show and I don't get to see how it ends," she says.

Maybe that's what's going on here?

"Meyersons" gives us glimpses of this family story, not the full picture. But who are we to demand the complete arc of these people's lives? We're not aliens or God; we're only human.

"The Magnificent Meyersons" opens virtually and for rooftop in-person screenings at the Marlene Meyerson JCC Manhattan on Aug. 20 and in Los Angeles on Aug. 27.

The Jewish Week welcomes letters to the editor responding to our stories. **Letters should be emailed with the writer's name and address. Please keep letters to 300 words or less.** The Jewish Week reserves the right to edit letters for length and clarity. Send letters to editor@jewishweek.org.

● **KVELLER**

My Holocaust Survivor Dad Had This Quirky Secret to Longevity

By Grace Bennett

As I commemorated the second anniversary of my Poppy's passing in April, and with the coronavirus and its emerging variants still ravaging a planet, I keep thinking about how prescient my dad, Jacob Breitstein, was about the spread of disease — and, even more so, about ways to prevent disease.

Poppy was so passionate about the pursuit of health that on his gravestone the phrase “Founder of MIRF” is inscribed. Allow me to explain: My dad, who passed away at age 97 (or 96, it was never quite clear) had, over the course of his lifetime, developed a trove of “health secrets” which he dubbed “MIRF” — as in, “Multiple Infestations Removed Forever.”

His biggest idea was, essentially, that “increased blood speed eliminates microscopic beginnings of fat, cancer cells, weak and harmful germs” — and the way to keep one's blood circulating was to do a series of simple stretching and squeezing exercises. The “stillness” of a person's blood, he was convinced, was what made people vulnerable to everything from colds to cancer. With his grandkids' help, he even self-published a thin book of his ideas, called “MIRF: Empowering the Brain: Sensational Breakthrough.”

But on what authority? My dad never finished high school. He is not a doctor or an expert in medicine. But he did survive numerous Nazi labor camps, Auschwitz-Birkenau and the notorious death march. It might not be a complete stretch to think that maybe he had some insight into how to survive... well, anything.

He expressed regret once that he only wished he had discovered MIRF when he was a teenager at Auschwitz, or even as an adolescent before the Nazis invaded Po-

land, where he was born and raised. He said that the Nazis might have appreciated his cures and maybe would have stopped persecuting Jews (and everyone else) if they just felt better.

Poppy said MIRF could cure evil, and that MIRF would “definitely” have helped his fellow prisoners, who were suffering beyond all comprehension. Because, of course, according to him, MIRF cured anything. (Personally, I remain skeptical. Then again, if there are better theories for cures for what ails Nazis, I don't have any. Do you?)

My dad would tell everyone he knew, along with people he just met, his MIRF “secrets.” Usually, they'd be his captive audience, though sometimes I witnessed a sense of discomfort that told me they might just like to move on with their day, but didn't quite know how to get out from under the circumference of this trim, 5'1" man on MIRF-inspired fire. Oh well!

Over the years, he would add new MIRF exercises to his repertoire. One was called the “Stomach Bump” — he suggested friends and family bump stomachs with one another to gently aid with digestion. He would offer to bump stomachs with strangers, and I'd watch — sometimes cringing, sometimes aghast — as they obliged... maybe because he was uncanny about finding the prettiest women, young and old alike, to do the stomach bump with.

His preaching happened anywhere — on the street, at community centers, senior dances (where nimbly he'd take to the floor with multiple partners to demonstrate the power of MIRF) or at galas or arts events he attended with me. When my mom died of pancreatic cancer 15 years ago at age 69, my dad, 13 years her senior, insisted it was due to her MIRFING non-compliance.

Though my mom begged him to “leave everyone alone with your mishegas,” we all knew he preached MIRF out of love. It was the promise of good health and longevity for everyone that interested him — and he was convinced that any sane person ought to agree, including my poor mother.

The desire to impart his health secrets consumed him. By contrast, though he did bear testimony in the Shoah Project, my dad had little to no interest in or dredging up memories of the dark days of the Holocaust, in which he lost two brothers, two sisters and his mother, my grand-

mother, after whom I am named. Only he and my grandfather survived, and they witnessed countless horrors and had to rebuild broken lives. But with MIRF, I think he was trying to invent a new and better way to live; the elixir for preventing problems and the path to enjoying a rollicking, disease-free old age.

Over time, Poppy's preaching about MIRF gained him a small but loyal following in Forest Hills, Queens, where dozens of neighbors, and especially his fellow chess players, regularly met at a small, local park. They giddily greeted each other with fists clenched — this simple squeeze, according to my dad, speeds up the blood, pushes out harmful bugs and prevents new ones from taking hold.

On his winter escapes to Florida, he managed to convince many hotel and senior-residence managers to allow him to present a lecture about MIRF — and to lay out his books for sale, too. He succeeded in selling a few each time, which made him especially happy. Over time, he grew sophisticated about preaching his MIRFing gospel; one young disciple created and equipped him with a slide show he could take anywhere. For each new convert, I wondered: Did they really believe in MIRF? Or were they just trying to humor my dad? Or, the question that trumped all others: Could MIRF possibly, actually work?!

Logic, of course, tells us it doesn't. But given the remarkable energy my dad enjoyed for most of his life — he eschewed the elevator in order to sprint up and down nine flights of stairs to his apartment, up until he was 90 — the question loomed. Especially as he gained attention.

About a decade or so ago, a neighbor in his building, a reporter for a local weekly, wrote a story about my dad: his story of survival, his stair climbing and, of course, his MIRFing. When he showed me the story in the paper, I admit that I nearly fell off my chair — a just comeuppance for his naysayer daughter. If you could bottle the glee he felt, you could prevent a genocide! I was genuinely happy for him. The attention empowered him, and he dialed his MIRF teachings up a notch.

These days, my dad's self-published book is out of print. But I can't rule out another go around with a publisher, perhaps someday spliced together with the story of his persecution and survival. Maybe it's related... the idea that one evil people can snuff out an innocent people, but that lo and behold, one of their victims later turned their treach-

ery on its head by devising "the secrets for longevity."

If my father was still here today, I'm certain he would add Covid to the list of ills MIRFing could help alleviate. A survivor above all else, I'm also certain he would have been first in line for the vaccine. But, as he was wont to do, he'd also come up with a brand-new MIRF strategy for this virus. He was always fine tuning his exercises, and now — for free! — to honor my dad's memory, I'd like to reveal that the Stomach Bump was not his premiere MIRF exercise.

That distinction belonged to "the MIRF Greeting," something he promoted in lieu of the handshake or hug. I can't think of a better time or reason to introduce it to the world. Here's how he instructs doing it in his book: "Squeeze your hands by your side using the power of your internal and external organs. Power exhale (a belch is OK) for five seconds. Stay calm for ten seconds. Let the blood circulate forcefully through your body."

My father wanted this to become a universal greeting around the world in order to prevent illness and disease from spreading. When he learned that I was traveling with Hillary Clinton in 2012 to Africa (as a member of her press corps), he begged me to share his MIRF secrets with her. I did not. I was too embarrassed, and she was a wee bit busy. But, looking back, maybe I should have.

UPCOMING EVENT

August 31 | 11:30 a.m.

David Grossman: The Legacy of War and the Courage to Love

Israeli novelist David Grossman discusses his latest novel, "More Than I Love My Life" — a tender tale of three generations of women bound together by love, blood and secrets — with Sandee Brawarsky, literary editor of The Jewish Week. This is Grossman's first appearance in the United States in connection with his new novel.

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

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