

# The New York Jewish Week/end

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*The Young Israel of Hollywood has seen a period of unprecedented growth over the past 18 months, its rabbi said, as the area has become one of the fastest growing Orthodox Jewish communities in the country. (Shira Hanau)*

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## ● NEWS

# COVID Has Turned South Florida into a Promised Land for Orthodox New Yorkers

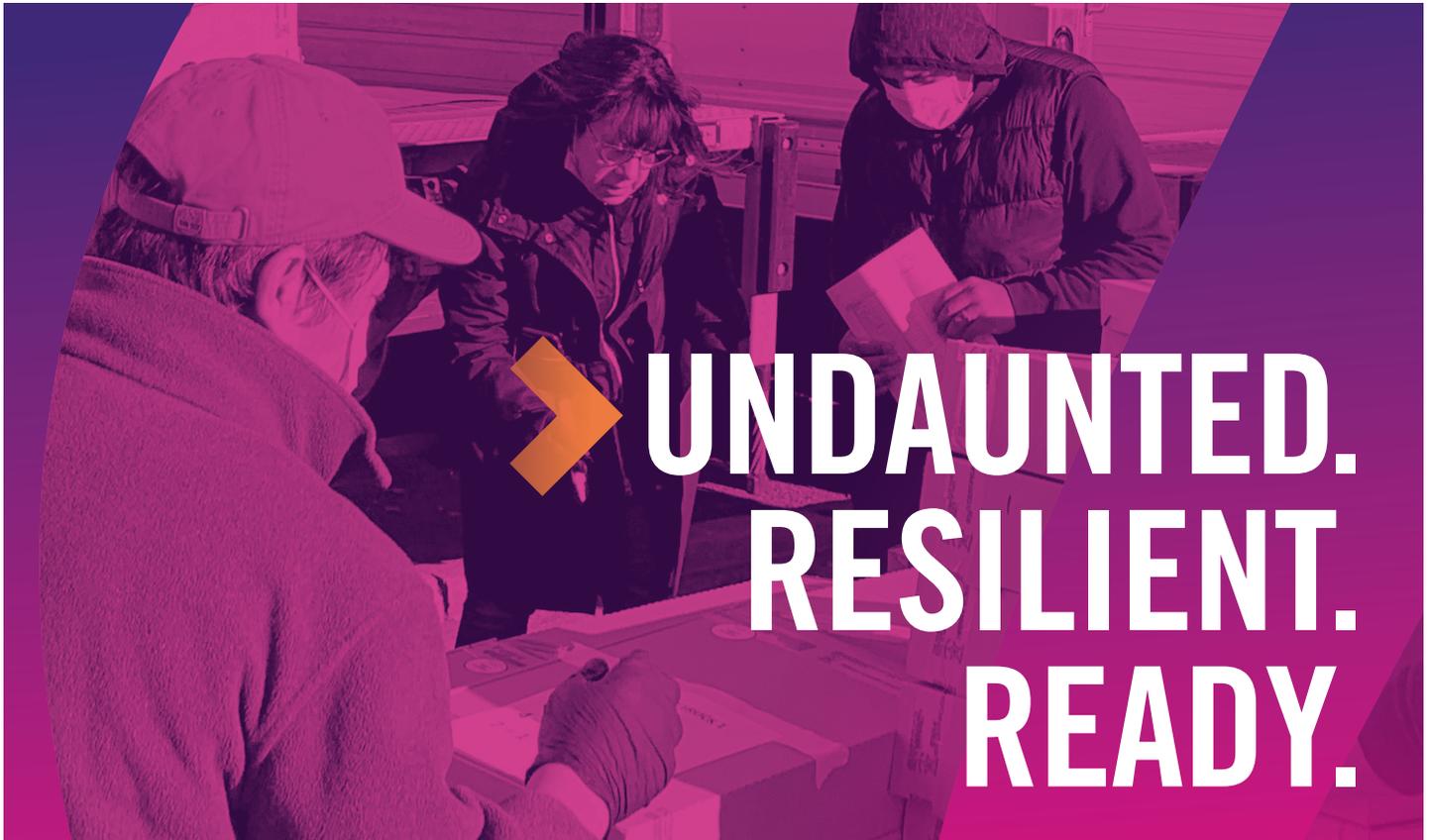
*From Boca to Hollywood, the pandemic boosted a trend of recent years.*

By Shira Hanau

HOLLYWOOD, Fla. — When Orthodox Jewish clients approach local real estate agent Sharon Brandt looking for a home in this South Florida area, she tells them to make sure they have spots for their children in school before they buy.

When Rabbi Yoni Fein, head of school at the Brauser Maimonides Academy in Hollywood, gets inquiries from prospective parents from out of state, he asks them to make sure they can find a house before enrolling their children.

This Catch-22 of a simultaneous housing shortage and waitlists at area schools



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is no coincidence: Hollywood may be one of the fastest growing Orthodox Jewish communities in the country.

"It's very rare that a house comes up," Brandt said of the housing market here. "The real shortage started in January, February, March of 2021. It's just been insane.

Throughout the pandemic, South Florida's Orthodox Jewish communities from Miami all the way north to Boca Raton have experienced a major pandemic-driven population boom. And Hollywood, once home to a small Modern Orthodox community with just one Ashkenazi synagogue and one small Jewish day school, is quickly becoming one of the fastest growing Orthodox communities in the country.

While the community has been growing over the past five years or so, the pandemic has proven to be a major driver of growth for South Florida. New and long-time residents of the area say the newfound flexibility of remote work, combined with frustration over COVID restrictions elsewhere, has driven people toward the more freewheeling Florida. That migration is changing Florida's demographics from a retirement hub for aging Jews to an exciting place to live for young families.

Rabbi Arnie Samlan, chief Jewish education officer at the Jewish Federation of Broward County, called the phenomenon the "Orthodox aliyah to Florida," using the Hebrew term for moving to Israel.

"That joke about Florida being God's waiting room? It's not true anymore," Samlan said.

While jobs have long been a major factor holding people back from moving to Florida — the state lacks a major hub for jobs in industries like finance and marketing that often attract Orthodox Jews in the New York area — the opportunities for remote work during the pandemic have changed that. Some companies have even moved their entire operations to Florida, bringing their employees and their families.

Max Klein moved with his wife and three children from New Milford, New Jersey, to Hollywood at the end of June following his investment firm's relocation from New York to Miami. For Klein, the fact that his job was moving made the decision a natural one. But the perks of living in Florida sweetened the deal.

"It's taxes, it's more free during COVID, year-round good weather, everything just adds up," he said.

Leora Cohen hadn't fully bought into her new Florida lifestyle after moving to Hollywood from Manhattan's Upper East Side in 2019. But when she saw her friends in New York stuck inside with their kids during the pandemic while her own kids played outside throughout the winter, she realized she could never go back.

"I miss my family, but I'm never leaving Florida," Cohen said. She later added: "The joys of summer in New York are our entire life in Florida."

Even at a time when COVID deaths are at a record high in Florida while mask mandates continue to be rejected, the state's relaxed approach to containing COVID has proven a draw for some.

"There are definitely a number of political reasons people move here, the lockdowns and the way in which different states might have handled COVID," said Fein, the principal of Brauser Maimonides Academy. "And they ended up staying. I know a bunch of families who moved here because they didn't know when COVID was going to be over, so they came here."

Rabbi Yosef Weinstock of the Young Israel of Hollywood said the size of his synagogue had more than doubled in the past 15 years, but the past 18 months have been a period of unprecedented growth for the community.

"On the books now we're over 650 families, but that's just the starting point," Weinstock said, noting that the synagogue's membership has grown by more than 60 families since the beginning of the pandemic. He believes there are still 200 families or so who have moved to the area but have yet to join the synagogue.

With housing stock limited in the existing Orthodox neighborhoods, newcomers have been purchasing homes farther out, leading to the creation of satellite synagogues in the new neighborhoods.

In Boca Raton, the local Orthodox synagogue has two new outposts — to the west and the east — to accommodate the communities springing up. The Young Israel of Hollywood has a satellite location in West Hollywood with its own rabbi and recently hired another rabbi at the main location to meet the needs of the growing community.

“There’s a bit of saturation,” Weinstock said of the Emerald Hills neighborhood where the Hollywood Orthodox community had been based since its founding in the 1980s.

One perk of that saturation is the explosion of the kosher dining scene in Hollywood and other parts of South Florida. In Surfside, a small beachside community, several blocks are dominated by upscale kosher restaurants ranging from steakhouses to barbecue to Japanese to Italian. In Hollywood, several large kosher grocery stores offer shelf after shelf of prepared foods and freshly made sushi daily.

Part of the growth in recent years had to do with the popularity of South Florida as a vacation spot among Orthodox Jews, according to Dani Klein, who runs the kosher restaurant site YeahThatsKosher.com. Once large numbers of Orthodox Jews started moving to Florida full time, that created even more demand for top quality kosher restaurants, which in turn draw more people to move there.

“Over the last 10 years or so, we went from having lots of kosher restaurants to lots of good, really top quality restaurants,” Klein said of the kosher food scene in South Florida. “We’ve seen Surfside emerge as the second best corridor of kosher restaurants after probably Crown Heights [in Brooklyn] in the country.”

At Brauser Maimonides Academy, the mass migration to Florida has led to waiting lists in every grade.

Fein had moved to Hollywood from New Jersey to lead the school in 2017. He has seen dozens of friends follow, turning a favored vacation spot for Orthodox Jews in the New York area into a home.

With the growth of communities across South Florida in recent years, Fein said, newcomers no longer have to sacrifice the amenities they expect, like the many kosher restaurants and grocery stores and high quality Jewish day schools they had in New York.

From a student body of about 450 when Fein started four years ago, Brauser Maimonides now has about 650 students from pre-K to eighth grade — with a waitlist in every grade.

While Florida’s approach to COVID containment may prove to be a short-lived draw for Orthodox families,

the economic benefits of the move, particularly when it comes to paying for Jewish day school, are likely to have a longer shelf life.

Fein said Florida’s recently expanded state-funded scholarships for private schools were a “major driver” for families who send their children to Jewish day schools. In May, Gov. Ron DeSantis signed into law a bill that would allow families earning up to \$100,000 to access state-funded school vouchers. (The amount of the scholarships depends on a number of factors, including income and number of children.)

The scholarships, he said, “essentially solve the tuition crisis for a lot of families.”

For families who don’t qualify for the state-funded scholarships, the fact that Florida has no state income tax can spell a very different bottom line for families coming from high-tax states like California, New York and New Jersey.

Allan Jacob, chairman of Teach FL, the Orthodox Union’s school-choice advocacy organization, and a member of DeSantis’ transition team, wrote an opinion piece recently for The Wall Street Journal touting Florida’s benefits for day school parents.

“Beyond school choice, Jewish families who are moving like the idea of living in a state with no income tax and a government with a lighter touch,” Jacob wrote.

Even with the widespread expansion, several longtime residents said the larger community has maintained the feel of a smaller one — something that many craved during the pandemic when so many felt isolated from friends and family.

“There’s a very palpable warmth, not just the temperature, in our community,” Weinstock said. “It’s very family oriented.”

Fein said “you kind of have the best of both worlds.”

“You have a large infrastructure, kosher restaurants, choices of schools and shuls, a lot of friends in the area, but it’s also more affordable to buy a home,” he said. “I couldn’t afford a home in New York and New Jersey. Here I was able to buy my first home.”

Samlan, who moved to Miami eight years ago and recently moved to Hollywood, is renting an apartment

while he waits for the right house to come up. He understands the appeal to his fellow Orthodox Jews coming from out of state.

"If you enjoy coming here for Pesach and Sukkot," he said, "why not work here remotely?"

## ● NEWS

# Clash Over Iron Dome Shows Strength of Democrats on Both Sides of Israel Divide

*Progressives like AOC succeeded in stalling funding for the system, but the mainstream delivered \$1 billion.*

By Ron Kampeas

Progressives led by Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-Bronx/Queens, and "the Squad" forced House Democratic leadership Tuesday to cut \$1 billion for Israel's Iron Dome self-defense system from a short-term government funding bill.

A standalone bill approving the funding passed overwhelmingly Thursday, but the debate over the missile defense system laid bare the tensions that some progressives have unleashed among Democrats.

The progressive Democrats who are deeply critical of Israel vowed to vote against that bill if it included Iron Dome support, simultaneously showing their budding strength but also making clear how far outside the mainstream they are on issues related to Israel. Both moderate Democrats and Republican lawmakers who voted against the overall spending bill overwhelmingly supported the Iron Dome spending. Only nine Democrats and 1 Republican voted against the funding bill Thursday; Ocasio-Cortez voted "present."

While the Democratic mainstream, including the Biden administration, remains unchanged on issues related to Israel, a number of progressives during the Gaza conflict called for diminishing or ending defense assistance for Israel, which runs about \$3.8 billion a year, including hundreds of millions of dollars for Iron Dome.

This week, some progressives said they were angry to have the new money inserted into the funding bill without warning or debate.

Rep. Jamaal Bowman, D-Bronx/Westchester, told Bloomberg that the problem was that the Iron Dome provision had been added in at the last minute, and that there had been no proper discussion.

"It's not about Israel, it's about, once again, leadership, throwing something on our table last minute and expecting us to decide in five minutes what to do with it, that's the bigger problem," Bowman said.

Bowman voted yes on Thursday's stand-alone bill.

At least one member of the "Squad," Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, opposed the \$1 billion spending not just on procedural grounds. In a tweet she cast Iron Dome as part of a system designed to oppress Palestinians. "We must stop enabling Israel's human rights abuses and apartheid government," she said Wednesday in announcing her planned "No" vote.

The Biden administration is on board with the \$1 billion infusion, and President Joe Biden himself assured Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett last month that the money would come through.

Moderate Democrats and Republicans cast the rejection of Iron Dome funding as inappropriately targeting Israel. Rep. Elissa Slotkin, a moderate Jewish Democrat from Michigan, in a Twitter thread asserted that Iron Dome is strictly used for self-defense.

"Whatever your views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, using a system that just saved hundreds, if not thousands, of lives as a political chit is problematic," she said.

Rep. Ritchie Torres of the Bronx — a pro-Israel progressive — agreed. "A missile defense system (i.e. Iron Dome) defends civilians from missiles. Hence the name," he tweeted. "Only in a morally inverted universe would this be considered a 'controversy.'"

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**● NEWS**

# Lee Zeldin Announces That He Is in Remission From Cancer, Says It Will Not Affect NY Governor Run

By Ron Kampeas

WASHINGTON — Lee Zeldin, the prominent Jewish Republican congressman who is running for New York governor, announced that he is in remission from leukemia but will continue his campaign.

“Through early detection, last November, I was diagnosed with early-stage chronic myeloid leukemia (CML),” Zeldin’s congressional office said in a statement Saturday. “I then began treatment with an immediately positive response and no side effects. Over the last 9 months, I have achieved complete remission, am expected to live a normal life, and my doctor says I currently have no evidence of this disease in my system.”

Zeldin made his illness and remission public on Friday night at a country GOP dinner, as Maggie Haberman, the New York Times reporter, first reported in a tweet. Zeldin subsequently told Haberman that leukemia had no effect on his campaign for next year’s gubernatorial election.

His congressional office’s statement, which included an affirmation from Zeldin’s hematologist, said that Zeldin had not abated in his work as a congressman and that he had not missed assignments as a U.S. Army reservist.

Zeldin, who has garnered county GOP endorsements up and down the state, appears to be the frontrunner for the Republican nomination. Winning the governorship, however, would be a long shot in the overwhelmingly Democratic state.

Zeldin, 41, represents New York’s 1st District, covering

Long Island’s eastern stretch. He is one of two Jewish Republicans in Congress and emerged during the Trump presidency as one of the former president’s most robust defenders.

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**● NEWS**

# The Rabbi Working to Get More Women in Leadership Roles in Great Britain’s Orthodox Community

By Jacob Judah

LONDON — Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz was a teenager when she began to feel Judaism calling her back. Her family had left the synagogue behind, and in the mid-1970s she was living in Cornwall, about as far away from Britain’s Jewish centers as one can.

She wrote letters to Jewish institutions and asked them to send her pamphlets. She pored over Jewish entries in the thin pages of an Encyclopedia Britannica. She began deciphering unfamiliar words and learning about Israel. She couldn’t yet visualize all the traditions, and there were things that she knew weren’t in the books – for the moment “everything was theoretical.”

Theory became practice at Cambridge University, where Taylor-Guthartz would attend synagogue and learn Hebrew. She would eventually live in Israel. She went on to teach at the London School of Jewish Studies, or LSJS, which is associated with the United Synagogue — roughly equivalent to the Modern Orthodox movement in the United States.

Taylor-Guthartz, now 62, burst onto the agenda of Britain’s Jewish community after being ordained in June by New York’s Yeshivat Maharat. The egalitarian “Open Orthodox” yeshiva is where other women like her in Britain go for what the seminary calls a “traditional Orthodox semikha [ordination] curriculum” for women. Graduates choose their own titles, and Taylor-Guthartz

chose “rabba.”

Britain’s traditionalist Orthodox establishment reacted quickly, sacking Taylor-Guthartz from her teaching position at LSJS, where she had been for 16 years. Her research fellowship at the school was similarly revoked.

That might have been the end of it, but something unusual happened: A senior research fellow at the school resigned in protest, donors threatened to take their money elsewhere, community figures wrote critical opinion pieces in communal newspapers and many people spoke angrily behind closed doors.

The controversy has kickstarted a conversation about how far British Orthodoxy is willing – or able – to adapt to women who want to see it move in a more egalitarian direction.

A letter signed by 30 Liberal and Reform rabbis accused the United Kingdom’s chief rabbi of maintaining a “glass ceiling of Torah above which half your community may not ascend.” Taylor-Guthartz was even given a hearing on the BBC’s flagship women’s issues radio program “Woman’s Hour.”

The establishment backed down. Her teaching roles were restored — but only after a compromise in which she agreed not to use the rabba title.

“For all the protestation that nothing had changed,” she told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, “something has changed.”

Some suggested that Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, spiritual leader of United Synagogue as well as president of LSJS, was worried how more conservative elements of the Jewish community both at home and abroad would react if he were to permit a female rabbi to teach at a college under his watch.

Like Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks before him, Mirvis is squeezed between the liberals and the increasingly assertive haredi Orthodox community that is growing in numbers and influence.

Others wrote letters supporting Mirvis, saying he was holding the line in support of a position that is widely accepted across a range of Orthodox streams. Yeshivat Maharat’s graduates have found positions within the Orthodox world, but seldom in roles that would conflict with the notion that only men may serve as congrega-

tional rabbis or ordained clergy. In 2015, the Modern Orthodox Rabbinic Council of America ruled that Orthodox institutions may not “allow a title implying rabbinic ordination to be used by a teacher of Limudei Kodesh [Jewish studies] in an Orthodox institution.”

Rachie Binstock, the senior rebbetzin at St. John’s Wood Synagogue in London, defended the Orthodox position during Taylor-Guthartz’s appearance on “Woman’s Hour.”

“The title of rabbi today connotes the leader of a community in a synagogal context,” she explained. “That’s problematic to Orthodoxy, it’s always going to be, because the synagogue is built as the place for male prayer. Women and men have different roles in prayer, different expressions of prayer.”

Binstock’s title indicates that she is the wife of the rabbi at St John’s Wood, where she serves as an educator and program director in her own right.

“We don’t believe that equality is sameness,” she said. “Judaism celebrates difference, and we have many different roles.”

Others noted that Rabbanit Shira Marili Mirvis, the wife of the chief rabbi’s nephew, in April became the first woman to be appointed – albeit not under the formal title rabbi – as the spiritual and halakhic, or Jewish legal, authority of an Orthodox community in Israel.

Taylor-Guthartz says Britain lags “10 to 15 years behind Israel and the United States.”

“We’re a small provincial community in comparison,” she told JTA in a Zoom interview. “We’re very old-fashioned. We’re very conservative. We preserve a conservativeness that I think as characteristic of Britain in the 1950s, but which Britain has grown out of. Britain has moved on, but the Jewish community preserves it.”

She is hoping to change that.

“It may take a long time,” Taylor-Guthartz said. “It may take an age – it may even take more than my lifetime — but you’ve got to keep moving. You’ve got to keep coming. I think we’re at the beginning of that process.

“I am a great believer in facts on the ground, and there are now facts on the ground that there weren’t before,” she added.

Taylor-Guthartz, who during her time in Israel attended an egalitarian Orthodox synagogue that prided itself on a decentralized and democratic model, said she experienced culture shock when she came back to Britain in 1998.

"The London communities just seemed odd to me," she said. "They were all very frightened of things. I wasn't used to this."

Taylor-Guthartz talks about female pioneers who came before her, and friends encouraged her to think about investigating Maharat. She talks about her dissertation on Orthodox women for her doctorate at University College London, which has recently been published.

But there is one story that jumps out to her: Shortly after she had returned to Britain, a Jewish woman came up to her and asked: "Can I pray in my own words, and can I pray outside the synagogue?"

Taylor-Guthartz was floored.

"I thought it was devastatingly sad," she said. "Even before I got ordained, I was already being asked questions by people who didn't feel comfortable going to their rabbi for one reason or another: Either they were asking something that was a bit out of the box, or for whatever reason didn't feel they could ask somebody."

"It's very important that there are women who are resources for other women."

The United Synagogue movement has taken a hard stance against allowing women to take on rabbinic posts, even as Britain's progressive denominations have had female clergy since the 1970s. Because of that, United Synagogue has been accused of lagging behind other mainstream denominations and wider society in opening itself up to women. The organization only allowed women to become trustees in 2014 after opening synagogue chairmanships to them two years earlier.

"It is such a lumbering, prehistoric beast," Taylor-Guthartz said. "I don't know if it can adapt. It has tried, but it is always playing catch-up."

Still, she is optimistic.

"I think the community is way ahead of its leaders here," she said. "They are getting a bit impatient, and it just

seems ridiculous to many people that you can have top judges and top doctors sitting silently in shul where they can't say anything."

Taylor-Guthartz says the communal reaction to her firing from LSJS proves her point.

"What surprised me, and what I think is really significant about what happened, is the amount of solidly centrist United Synagogue people that stood up and said this is not OK, this is ridiculous, this is crazy," she said.

Britain's most recognizable Reform and Liberal Jewish figures, such as Rabbis Julia Neuberger, Laura Janner Klausner and Charley Baginsky, are all women. By contrast, Britain's Orthodox women are "invisible both inside and outside the community," Taylor-Guthartz said.

"A lot of people are very angry and a lot of people have left. There is a silent drain of people because they feel unwanted, unheard, disrespected," she said.

"You've got to have women. You've got to talk to women."

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## ● EDITOR'S DESK

# The Price of Fish: What Lox Can Teach Us about Thrift and Luxury

*And why I can't shake my parents'  
Depression-era values.*

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

When I was a kid, lox was definitely a luxury. My dad, raised during the heart of the Depression, would watch us on Sunday mornings like an auditor as we placed fingernail-sized bits of lox on a bagel spread thinly with cream cheese. If we put on too much lox, he'd say, "There's a whole 'nother meal there!" and force us to put some back.

Once I slept over at a friend's house, bigger and more

luxurious than my own, and watched in amazement and horror as he slapped a slab of lox on an inch-thick smear of cream cheese. He might as well have taken a \$10 bill out of his pocket and burned it.

My wife has similar memories of her parents' thrift, and neither of us has really shaken off their Depression-era values. (A friend who grew up like I did said it wasn't until she was dating her husband did she realize it was possible to order a second soda at a restaurant.) Even when we try to indulge ourselves or our kids, our internal accountants are watching carefully. Breaking the Yom Kippur fast last week, I layered on the lox with the care and efficiency of a transplant surgeon.

I've always wondered how lox came to be the symbol of Jewish luxury. Just how expensive was a quarter-pound of lox in the early 1970s, when my parents doled it out like gold leaf? I actually looked it up. According to a New York Times article from July 1973, prices ranged from "about \$1.15 for a quarter of pound of regular lox (Waldbaum's, Oceanside, L. I.) to \$1.49 at Zabar's." This, mind you, was on the eve of an expected lox shortage, the result of "heavy buying by Japanese and Europeans."

But even taking the shortage into account, \$5.96 a pound doesn't sound like that much to pay for a cured fish. But then I factored in household income. Fifty years ago, the median family income for households with wage-earners in the 45-54 age bracket was \$12,900, which rose to \$16,730 for college grads (like my dad).

By contrast, the median family income for the same age bracket in 2019 was \$92,221, and rose to \$100,164 for college grads. So that must explain it, right? In 1971, a quarter-pound of lox would have cost you .46% of your weekly household income. In 2019, when lox sold at the supermarket for, let's say, \$8.99 a quarter-pound, it would set you back only ... .47% of your weekly paycheck.

In other words, almost exactly the same.

So if household income doesn't account for the luxurification of lox, what does?

Data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture might explain it: It turns out our spending on food — proportional to our income — has "actually declined dramatically since 1960," according to a 2015 article by NPR. The average share of per capita income spent on food fell from

17.5 percent in 1960 to 9.6 percent in 2007.

"Because of the overall rise in income, and the consistent shrinking of food prices adjusted for inflation, we actually have more disposable income than our grandparents did, according to Annette Clauson, an agricultural economist with USDA's Economic Research Service," reports NPR.

Which suggests that lox may not have taken a bigger bite out of my parents' income than it does mine, but it took a much larger bite out of their household food budget. If you were worried about the price of meat (like a lot of people in the early '70s) and just how much three growing boys could eat (which my parents definitely were) you too might go easy on what is essentially a glorified breakfast food.

I also think lox had a cachet beyond its price tag, which taught our parents to treat it as a delicacy. I don't know when lox first became available in vacuum-sealed packs, but growing up my folks got theirs custom-sliced at an appetizing store or at a supermarket deli counter. (I worked at one such counter in high school, and without any training I was told to slice the lox for a customer. The result looked like an autopsy gone bad.) You weren't just grabbing some fish, but having it carefully prepared by an artisan to your specifications, usually on the very same morning you intended to serve it. And this you were going to let your husky son just gobble down?

***"Eating, like life, is a balancing act between moderation and indulgence."***

I don't know that my rich friend's life would have been better if he ate less lox, but let's pretend it would have. He never learned that thrift is good for the planet and good for the soul.

In the version of the "Al Het" confession I recited on Yom Kippur, the community owns up to sinning "in our eating and drinking." The confession doesn't specify in what ways we sinned at the table, but that verse is immediately followed by the sin of "greed and oppressive interest." We sin as eaters — and consumers — when we bite off more than we can chew, or let our appetites overwhelm our ability to savor. As the food writer M.F.K. Fisher put it — in what, actually, sounds like a confession — "We sink too easily into stupid and overfed sensuality, our bodies

thickening even more quickly than our minds.”

My wife is definitely a “less is more” person, and she is usually right: If you end up putting too much lox on a bagel, you find yourself masticating a mouthful of fish, instead of appreciating the subtle interplay among the lox, cream cheese and bagel, with perhaps a caper or slice of red onion for a grace note.

The risk of thrift is when it leads you to calculate the price of everything and appreciate the value of nothing. I admit, I have been guilty of that. But I’d prefer to think of myself as prudent, not cheap. Eating, like life, is a balancing act between moderation and indulgence. I inherited an appreciation for lox, among other finer things in life, and might not have had I been able to eat as much of it as I wanted as a kid.

As for a second soda — what am I, a Rockefeller?

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

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## ● OPINION

# Shmita Is Judaism’s Sabbatical Year. It Can Be a Model for Tackling Climate Change and Inequality.

By Sen. Meghan Kallman and Rabbi Lex Rofeberg

We are in an era of multiple interlocking crises. From record-breaking heat waves to wildfires to water shortages, from rising authoritarianism to a pandemic rampaging across the world, it is clear that, to survive, human beings will need to make urgent, major changes to how we live.

Bold policy proposals already exist to address these problems, both nationally and in different states. Addi-

tionally, we — one of us a politician, the other a rabbi, and both progressives — want to suggest another possibility, gleaned from Jewish tradition: the ancient idea of shmita, the sabbatical year, which can guide our work in this urgent moment when everything we do matters.

Both of us are millennials, and therefore have come of age under the worst inequality since the Gilded Age — exacerbated and symbolized by a student and health-care debt crisis. The disastrous effects of climate crisis, extinctions, displacement and environmental degradation are threatening to turn life into a nightmare for most on the planet. These problems can be traced to a global obsession with unending growth.

Our only chance to avoid that is to drastically re-envision our society and its priorities.

Both of us are also, in particular, Jewish millennials. We have, in different ways and at different points in our lives, felt called to participate in Jewish communities of learning, prayer and communal gathering. Despite our involvement in those spaces however, neither one of us learned of shmita’s existence until adulthood. It is time for our Jewish spaces, around the world, to re-prioritize this sacred ritual, and apply its wisdom in concrete ways to our own times.

The word “shmita” is observed every seven years. The shmita year began several days ago, on Rosh Hashanah. “Sabbatical” tends to refer to respite from work, typically in a university context. But the shmita year is slightly different. It is a collective sabbatical, a radical recalibration of society as a whole, in order to align it with principles of justice and equity for human beings and for the lands we inhabit. Shmita offers a framework for how we might enshrine seemingly individual choices as social values.

The shmita year has two major components. The first is that it serves as a rest for land: Just as humans get to observe a sabbath once every seven days, the land that we inhabit gets a sabbath, too. In biblical times, it meant that the land should lay fallow for a year, and the gleanings left for the needy and even animals. Through shmita, our relationship to land can shift from one of control and domination to one of appreciation and interdependence. Clearly, such lessons are applicable to this moment as well.

Shmita's other major component is that debts are forgiven. This is done to address financial inequities that grow over time, and to enable everyone to have the opportunity to thrive. Debt forgiveness every seven years disrupts wealth-hoarding, and provides relief to those struggling to meet their basic needs. Shmita approaches justice expansively.

These ideas can be, and should be, used in practice — not just in our ancient texts, and not just aspirationally. For instance: we could forgive debts, and change the systems that cause such terrible indebtedness. Two-thirds of contemporary U.S. bankruptcies are over medical issues and medical debt; we must make healthcare free and universal to solve this problem over the long term. Collectively, U.S. college students owe nearly \$1.6 trillion in student loan debt; President Biden could and should forgive up to \$50,000 per borrower in federal student debt through executive action. Over the medium term, we must make public colleges and universities free, to avoid re-creating the same problem — something that our home state of Rhode Island is already on its way to doing. This year, its General Assembly permanently enacted RI Promise, the free tuition program at the Community College of Rhode Island.

The idea of shmita can also guide us in acting to avoid the most catastrophic effects of climate change. Shmita proposes that for a year, humans must avoid treating land simply as a means to our ends; we must not think in terms of limitless expansion, but rather in terms of sustainability and rest. Leaving the land fallow rejects the notion that our planet, and its resources, exist only to serve us.

Our state's Act on Climate bill sets legally binding targets for emissions reductions; now we must act urgently to meet them. Measures like mandating net-zero emissions in energy generation, a critical move that passed only the Senate this session, are crucial first steps. We need to rebuild our food systems, and expand public transit and clean energy production. Neighborhoods are building community gardens while offering training for formerly incarcerated people, rethinking financial systems, and experimenting with basic income. Communities and legislatures are mobilizing around these issues, but we need more action, faster, and at every level.

The choices we make now will determine the survival

of millions within the next few decades. We must seek out every strategy available to us as we take on the challenges that threaten the inhabitants of our country, other countries, and our planet. That includes strategies anchored in ancient wisdom, like the shmita year. We need to act collectively, for everyone's health. Because a society that takes care of itself and its most vulnerable is one that is, quite simply, the only moral option.

**Sen. Meghan Kallman** represents District 15 in the Rhode Island State Senate.

**Rabbi Lex Lofeberg** is the Senior Jewish Educator for Judaism Unbound.

## ● SABBATH WEEK / SIMCHAT TORAH

# America, Like Genesis, Has Two Creation Stories

*As Jews we learn to live between the contradictions that sometimes haunt us.*

By Rabbi Ruth Abusch-Magder

Everyone has at least a few creation stories: how they were born, how they came to the career they chose, how they met their loved one.

Next week Jews around the world will return to our creation story, the one found in the first chapters of the Torah that are read on Simchat Torah (beginning Tuesday evening, Sept. 28) and again on the following Shabbat (Oct. 2). Each time we engage with these stories we uncover more of the mystery and discover a bit more of the truth. The story of Bereishit — Genesis — reminds us that reexamining beginnings can help us find a deeper understanding of why and how we have arrived at this moment, and how we can utilize these insights to continue to uncover and understand American history.

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The story of creation as presented in the Torah is really two versions of the story. The first story is found at the end of the first chapter of the book of Genesis. In this version, God creates a being in the divine image, both male and female. This being or beings (it is a bit unclear) share the same place in the broader hierarchy ruling over all the other living creatures. Male and female are equal, they have distinct names and personas. Neither one precedes the other. While this sets up a binary gender dynamic that creates its own problems, it also embeds male/female equality into the foundation of our culture and story. From this moment forward binary equality is part of Jewish life and tradition.

The second story of creation comes in the second chapter of the book of Genesis. In this version, God first creates a singular, male being. God brings all sorts of creatures into the world to be company for the man, but none of the animals truly completes him. God decides it is not good for the man to be alone. While the man sleeps, God removes a rib from Adam's side and from this manly rib fashions a woman. She is derived from him and there to complement and complete him. Man is first, woman is secondary. From here on men are at the center of Jewish life and tradition and women play a supporting, secondary role.

Scholars have tried to reconcile these two versions of the Jewish creation myth; it is not easily done. The contradictions reverberate throughout Jewish life: There are many ways in which man and woman are equal to each other within Jewish life and there are many ways in which they are not. While it would be easier to have a singular narrative to either celebrate or revile, we are forced to live with the contradictions.

From the start, our tradition has encouraged us to em-

brace complexity. We understand that complexity can coexist with wholeness. Taking the lessons we learn from the biblical telling of creation, we will be better able to navigate the history of the creation of the United States of America.

The United States was founded on a platform of freedom and equality for all. Our brave colonial forefathers broke with the British monarchy and its hierarchical structures and governance. The Constitution enshrines freedoms for all. Many have died fighting for this vision of society. Laws and policies have been shaped to bolster this ideal. With the Constitution as our guide, we have sought this equality in our schools, our elections and our social interactions.

***“That both these foundational narratives could and exist side by side is hard to reconcile, both in theory and in practice.”***

This is the founding narrative that makes Americans proud of their country. For too long, it was the only narrative taught in our schools. It is easy to celebrate this version. It is a promise that draws immigrants to our shores, believing that they too can be part of this dream. It is hopeful. It is inclusive. And in many ways it is real.

We must also hold that this vision was intentionally created with limits. The founders enshrined this vision of equality within a system that sustained white supremacy over people cast as non-white. Unlike the Constitution, this principle was not originally written on paper but enacted by white people on the bodies of generations of enslaved Africans, displaced and murdered indigenous peoples, and their descendants. Many people have suffered and died because of a system of white supremacy that casts them as less than human. Beginning before the nation's founding and continuing to this day, countless laws and policies perpetuated this vision of domination and inequality. We see the impact in our schools, our elections and our social interactions.

That both these foundational narratives could and exist side by side is hard to reconcile, both in theory and in practice. The contradictions in these narratives haunt us daily in the United States. The fundamental mismatch between them is a source of ongoing friction. There are those who would like to ignore the discomfort of the narrative of oppression, or focus solely on the ravages

of our original sin.

But that is not the Jewish way. As Jews, we know how to hold on to these types of complexity. We need to advocate for teaching both American stories in our schools. We will not be able to find our way forward as Americans until we recognize the tensions and imbalances that emerge from these two very different creation stories.

*Rabbi Ruth Abusch-Magder is director of education and rabbi-in-residence of Be'chol Lashon (GlobalJews.org).*

## ● MUSINGS

# A Strange Holiday

By David Wolpe

It is a commonplace to say that something is what it is. Well, Shemini Atzeret is what it isn't.

On the one hand, it is the eighth day of Sukkot, hence the name "Shemini" which means eighth. On the other hand, as saying "Shehechyanu" on Shemini Atzeret indicates, it is a separate holiday. On yet another hand, there are different interpretations of what Atzeret means, from "stop" to "gather" to "store up," as with grain. It is marked by Yizkor, the memorial prayer, and Geshem, the prayer for rain, but neither defines the holiday.

So what is it? It is the close of the extended holiday season, a chance to usher in the winter rains, an additional day to linger in God's presence. In other words, it is many things, but without the single defining feature that so marks other holidays in the Jewish calendar. Seven days of the week, seven days of creation – the eighth is extra, over and above the requirement. Shemini Atzeret expresses our unwillingness to leave the holiday sense of God's presence; a gentle, lingering close to the celebrations and a portal to the new year.

*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

# Whistle, Gotham City's Latest Superhero, Is Jewish. It's a Full-Circle Moment for the Comics Industry.

By Julian Voloj

It turns out that Batman's hometown of Gotham City has a historically Jewish neighborhood, complete with a synagogue. And for this year's High Holidays, at least one masked superhero will be worshipping there.

Her name is Whistle, a.k.a. Willow Zimmerman, and she's a Jewish superhero — DC Comics' first to be explicitly created as Jewish in 44 years. She's an activist-turned-masked-crusader who draws inspiration from Jewish teachings; she develops the ability to talk to dogs; and she's making her debut this month in "Whistle: A New Gotham City Superhero," a graphic novel geared to young adults.

"There's a long and fascinating history of Jewish creators in comics," the book's author and character creator, E. Lockhart, told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. "Superman, Batman and Spider-Man were all invented by Jewish men, and scholars have interpreted them through a

### CANDLELIGHTING, READINGS:

**Tishrei 18, 5781 | Friday, September 24, 2021**

- **Light candles at:** 6:31 p.m.

**Tishrei 19, 5781 | Saturday, September 25, 2021**

- **Torah reading:** Sukkot, Chol Hamoed

Exodus 33:12–34:26

Numbers 29:23–28

Ezekiel 38:18–39:16

- **Shabbat ends:** 7:26 p.m.

variety of lenses that take that into account. But while there have certainly been Jewish superheroes before, Whistle is the first Jewish hero to originate as Jewish from DC Comics since 1977.”

Lockhart was referring to Seraph, a superhero from Israel who helped Superman in “Super Friends #7” before immediately falling out of the public eye.

Yet the roots of superheroes are distinctly Jewish.

Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel, the sons of Jewish immigrants, effectively kicked off the lucrative genre in 1938 with the debut of Superman in “Action Comics #1.” Superman was a new kind of hero, a noble, all-powerful defender of American ideals who harbored a secret identity and origin story that made him distinctly an outsider. If his origins weren’t specifically Jewish, they were certainly informed by the Jewish experience.

Superman became an unexpected bestseller and, consequently, the blueprint for a whole genre, as the market soon flooded with new superheroes. The vast majority of these comic book pioneers — writers, illustrators and publishers — were Jewish, including Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. However, their characters were a generic form of “all American” without any religious or ethnic affiliation. So while Captain America was allowed to punch Hitler on the cover of the hero’s debut, it took decades for superheroes to have a Jewish identity.

There have been exceptions over the decades, most notably Marvel’s “X-Men” villain Magneto, retconned as a Holocaust survivor following his debut, and popular DC antihero Harley Quinn, a Brooklynite who sprinkles in Yiddish phrases and was voiced in her original 1990s animated TV debut by the Jewish comedienne Arleen Sorokin. (Harley’s current film incarnation, played by Margot Robbie, drops the Jewish signifiers.)

But what makes Whistle unique is that her origin story is centered around her Jewish identity. Willow Zimmerman is a social justice activist who volunteers at a local pet shelter and lives with her single mother, an adjunct Jewish studies professor, in Down River, a Gotham City neighborhood modeled after the Lower East Side. That means it comes with a long Jewish history, making Judaism canonical in Gotham more than eight decades after Bob Kane and Bill Finger, two Bronx Jews, created the Dark Knight.

The setting was informed by Lockhart’s own upbringing. Growing up, she often visited the real Lower East Side with her father, the playwright Len Jenkis, who wrote for “The Incredible Hulk” TV show in the 1970s.

“I always had a strong sense of my paternal family’s heritage and the history of New York City as intertwined,” she said. “I had done research on the Jewish history of the LES for another book, so when DC invited me to create a new Gotham City hero, it felt natural to use some of that research and my own love of the neighborhood to create a new part of Gotham that’s a lot like the LES of the 1980s.”

For Whistle herself, Lockhart drew inspiration from a different trailblazer at DC’s rival: Kamala Khan, the Muslim Ms. Marvel introduced in 2013.

“I love Ms. Marvel and was definitely inspired by the way [author] G. Willow Wilson engaged with questions of heroism and the superheroic body through the lens of Kamala’s Muslim identity,” Lockhart said. “I thought about it a lot while I was writing Whistle.”

“Whistle,” which is illustrated magnificently by Manuel Preitano, is Lockhart’s debut as a graphic novelist.

“I write novels about young women who are navigating morally complicated situations,” she said. “Very often the stories are about agency and power and self-knowledge, one way or another. So in that sense, ‘Whistle’ is right on brand for me.”

Those familiar with the Batman universe will recognize many side characters, such as the Riddler and Poison Ivy, in the narrative.

“It was great fun [...] to play in the sandbox of DC Comics’ Gotham City, which has a wonderful rogues gallery of spectacularly deranged supervillains,” Lockhart said.

Another Batman supervillain, Killer Croc, plays a central role in Willow’s transformation into a superhero. Outside her local synagogue, she and her sidekick, a loyal stray Great Dane named Lebowitz (named after Fran, Lockhart confirms), collide with Killer Croc and wake up being able to understand each other.

“When she gets superpowers, she becomes Whistle — and no longer feels helpless,” Lockhart explains. “It’s a fantasy of empowerment, but her position is also mor-

ally complicated. I didn't want to shy away from asking questions about what it means to be a hero, emotionally and ethically."

Like Lockhart herself, Willow is secular. Her visit to Gotham's synagogue is for meditation purposes.

"I knew I would tell the most truthful and nuanced story if I wrote from my own identity and from the community I'm in," Lockhart said on her decision not to make the character strictly observant. "My heroine engages with her Jewishness in much the same way that I do."

Rooted in Lockhart's own past, Willow's Judaism leans on old-neighborhood nostalgia and Yiddishisms like "bub-beleh. It's a more traditionalist approach to a Jewish superhero identity than other recent efforts, such as Marvel's relaunch of "White Tiger" in 2002 as a biracial Jew of color struggling with his Black and Jewish identities.

But Lockhart does touch upon many present-day topics animating Willow's generation, such as gentrification, social justice and environmental issues. With Willow, a hero whose actions are clearly informed by her Jewish identity and the concept of tikkun olam, or repairing the world, Judaism will now be an integral part of Gotham's mythology.

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](mailto:editor@jewishweek.org).

## UPCOMING EVENTS

September 26 | 2:00 p.m. Free

### Truus' Children

Join the Museum of Jewish Heritage and the Netherlands' diplomatic network in the U.S. for a virtual screening and discussion of "Truus' Children," a new film exploring the legacy of Truus Wijsmuller, a central figure in the rescue network known as the Kindertransport. The program will feature a panel discussion with the filmmakers and Ilse Bauer-Langsdorf, one of the children saved by Wijsmuller. Attendees will also receive a private link to stream the film online from September 17 to 28.

Register at <https://bit.ly/3o9X86e>

September 30 | 12:00 p.m. Free

### Nevertheless, They Resisted: The Women Who Defied Nazi Rule During the Holocaust

The Olga Lengyel Institute for Holocaust Studies and Human Rights presents a discussion regarding the role of women in the resistance movement during the Holocaust. With Sheryl Silver Ochayon, program director, Echoes & Reflections, International School for Holocaust Studies, Yad Vashem, and Sheri Rosenblum, director of Development and Outreach, Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation.

Register at <https://bit.ly/3o42v78>

September 30 | 4:00 p.m. Free

### Does the Idea of "God's Chosen People" Divide Jews and Christians?

Professor Joel S. Kaminsky of Smith College will examine how early Christians and ancient rabbinic Jews each adopted the concept of "chosenness" in the Hebrew Bible, and how these approaches to chosenness both united and divided their communities.

Register at <https://bit.ly/3CEOm4n>