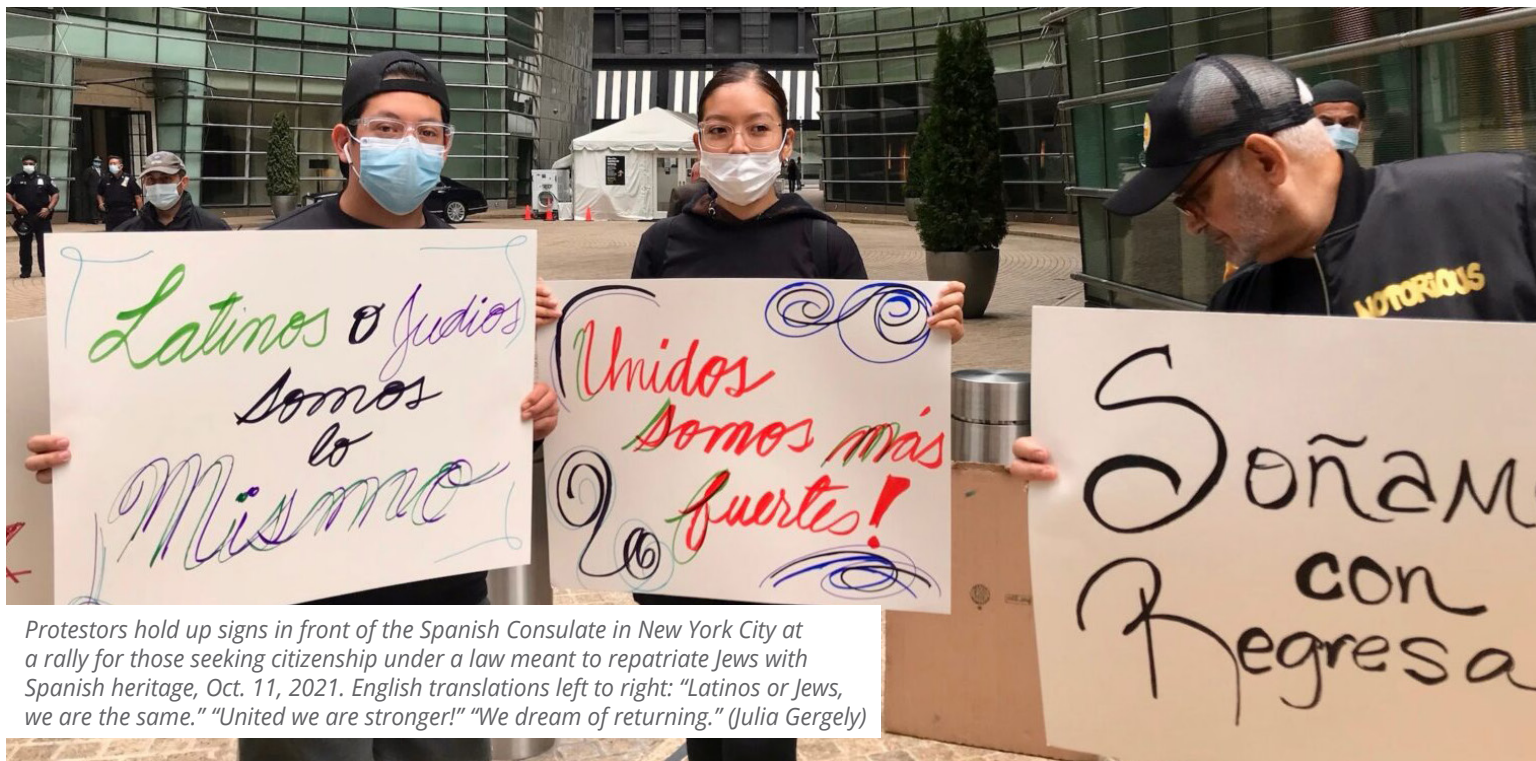


# The <sup>New York</sup> Jewish Week/end

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Protestors hold up signs in front of the Spanish Consulate in New York City at a rally for those seeking citizenship under a law meant to repatriate Jews with Spanish heritage, Oct. 11, 2021. English translations left to right: "Latinos or Jews, we are the same." "United we are stronger!" "We dream of returning." (Julia Gergely)

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## ● NEWS

# New Yorkers With Sephardic Roots Say Spain Is Breaking Its Promise of Citizenship

By Julia Gergely

After Spain announced it would offer of citizenship to families of Jews it expelled more than 500 years ago, Mark Tafoya, a personal chef living in New York City, filled out an application.

Originally from Albuquerque, New Mexico, Tafoya calls himself a "proud Sephardic Jew rediscovering my roots." So from Inwood, in northern Manhattan, he tracked down all the required documents, created a genealogy chart and hired an attorney. He detailed his family's heritage from their departure to Spain and arrival in New Mexico some 500 years ago. He even bought a small stock in Santander Bank to prove a monetary link — what the application requirement defines as a "special connection" — to Spain. The Jewish Federation of New Mexico certified his application.

Tafoya had seemingly done everything right. But for the last 25 months, he has been waiting for an answer from Spain that hasn't come. He hasn't gotten any indication that he'll ever get an answer.

"The waiting is the hardest part," he said. "If I knew I was rejected, I could start the appeals process." Appeals can take four to five months.

Until this year, only one applicant for the Spanish citizenship program had been rejected. But in 2021, over 3,000 applications have already been denied, according to the American Sephardi Federation, and more than 20,000 have found themselves in an extended period of waiting — not just for citizenship, but for an explanation of what appear to be endless delays.

Tafoya was one of about 30 people who gathered in front of the Consulate General of Spain in New York on Monday to protest the denials and delays. Calling their protest "Yo Soy Parte" ("I am a part"), members of both Latino and Jewish communities to call out what they see as the injustice and hypocrisy of these rejections.

The protest was the result of a collaboration between American Sephardi Federation, a Jewish group, and The Philos Project, a New York-based nonprofit that helps Christian leaders, mostly evangelicals, "understand and engage with important Near East issues," according to its website.

The event emerged after Jason Guberman, executive director at the American Sephardi Federation, spoke to Hispanic leaders around New York about the issue at the invitation of Jesse Rojo, the head of Philos Latino who often collaborates with Guberman's group.

Teresa Leger Fernandez, a Democratic congresswoman from New Mexico, flew in for the event and spoke to the crowd in an expression of solidarity.

"I stand with you as somebody who has a deep connection to Spain, its history, and the Sephardim," Fernandez said. "Like many in Northern New Mexico, my ancestors include the Spanish, the indigenous, the Apache, the Pueblo, and yes, the displaced Sephardim."

A congressional letter that she initiated addressed to Spanish President Pedro Sánchez Pérez-Castejón and would introduce on Oct. 12 was read aloud at the protest.

"We urge you to rescind these changes and ensure that every eligible Sephardic Jewish descendant can receive citizenship to their ancestral home under the law as the Cortes Generales intended," said the letter, signed by nine members of Congress, including New York Democrats Alan Lowenthal and Ritchie Torres.

Spain's Law of Return passed unanimously in the Cortes Generales, the Spanish legislature, in 2015. It allowed for any descendent of Sephardic heritage to apply for citizenship. Similar versions of the law existed throughout the 20th century, but the 2015 version said applicants need not be practicing Jews, and that they could apply for dual citizenship.

That opened the door for over 132,000 people who applied for citizenship under the program, claiming ancestry through family trees that included Sephardic Jews with roots in Spain and non-Jewish descendants of "crypto-Jews" whose ancestors were expelled or fled Iberia during the Inquisition. More than half of those people began their application in the last month before the Oct. 1, 2019 deadline.

But the 59,000 people who had submitted their materials well before before the October 2019 closing date should have gotten an answer by now. Of them, approximately 34,000 have been granted citizenship, and another 22,000 still await a response.

For the Sephardic descendants, it seemed as though Spain was genuine in its attempts to make reparations. "It was an amazing gesture," said Guberman, who has worked with many applicants to get their documents in order.

Which is why it feels like such a betrayal when applications are suddenly and inexplicably rejected, protestors said.

"It's an insult on top of an insult," said Tafoya, referring to Spain inviting its Sephardic descendants back in after acknowledging the horrific acts of the Inquisition, only to reject them once again.

"The broken promise of the noble gesture of reparation wounds more than if Spain had never made the offer of return in the first place," the congressional letter concludes.

It is unclear why there has been a sudden slew of rejec-

tions. The congressional letter cites complaints by applicants who were approved by Spanish judges, only to be rejected by the Ministry of Justice — a move that is illegal, according to the New York Times. Many applicants have been asked to provide more in-depth genealogy charts, and some face bureaucrats' insistence that the "special connection" donation to the Spanish economy must have been made before the law was announced in 2015. Others have seen certificates of Sephardic origin from Jewish institutions outside of Spain rejected.

The window to apply closed on Oct. 1, 2019, which makes it even more frustrating that the rules for approval changed after that deadline and applications were already in, a spokesperson from the Jewish Federation of New Mexico told The Jewish Week.

The New Mexico federation, located where a number of people claim Spanish Jewish ancestry, is one of only a few institutions in the United States that grants certificates of Spanish-Jewish origin to non-Jews. Many of those applicants have been denied.

The New Mexico federation helped certify 20,000 people from more than 50 countries across the globe, it said. A majority of the applicants came from Venezuela, Colombia, and Mexico.

The wave of rejections is especially heartbreaking for Venezuelans who applied, Tafoya said. The law seemed to offer a safe, legal opportunity for them to leave their beleaguered country and become European Union citizens. Many had emptied their savings to afford the application process, which costs at least \$7,000 to complete.

Jason Guberman, executive director at the American Sephardi Federation; Rep. Teresa Leger Fernandez, D-New Mexico; and Jesse Rojo, director of Philos Latino (with his son) at a rally in New York City pressuring Spain to approve citizenship applications for those with Jewish roots in the country, Oct. 11, 2021. (Julia Gergely) Some of the protestors speculated that the halt in approvals is due to sentiments of antisemitism in the new Spanish government, which is led by a left-wing party that came to power in November 2019. Others wondered if the ruling party, which was not responsible for the Law of Return, is wary of introducing new voters into the country who might support the previous, more conservative party that had accepted them.

The Consulate General of Spain in New York does not provide information on the status of pending applications, it told JTA by email.

"I believed the Spanish government when they said that they were sorry for the sins of the past," said Jason Gomez, a third-generation New Yorker who learned about Spain's citizenship program while it was under discussion. He subsequently interviewed his older Puerto Rican relatives about the strange customs of his childhood — eating only beef, not pork; placing rocks on graves and only marrying into certain families, all reminiscent of Jewish traditions.

Gomez discovered that his family is descended from a community known as Xuetas, Mallorcan Jews who were forcibly converted to Christianity, but continued to practice their faith in secret.

"In 2015 the Spanish government said that they recognized the generations of suffering in this terrible history and wanted to make amends," he said in his speech. "But only six years later they have turned away from us."

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## ● NEWS

# Creator of Chabad's Famous Menorah Sexually Abused Girl, Lawsuit Claims

By Asaf Shalev

A new lawsuit claims that the man who crafted what might be the most famous menorah in the world sexually abused a young girl dozens of times in the 1990s and that a rabbinical court failed to hold him accountable.

The survivor of this alleged abuse, now a 36-year-old woman living in Israel, is trying to get possession of her abuser's brass menorah, which is normally displayed during Hanukkah at the headquarters of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement in Brooklyn.

Her lawyer says that if she succeeds, she'd consider

melting it down in a symbolic act against taboos that have kept cases like hers from being known.

The craftsman behind the 6-foot-tall menorah was Hirschel Pekkar. After he died in July, an obituary on a Chabad community news site described him as “a renowned Crown Heights silversmith who created the famous Menorah which stands each Chanukah in 770 Eastern Parkway,” referring to the address of the Hasidic movement’s headquarters.

Pekkar was commissioned to forge a special Hanukkah lamp in 1982, after Chabad’s leader, the late Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, said in a speech that the arms of the menorah were originally diagonal rather than curved, citing the medieval Jewish scholar Maimonides. The lawsuit says that the impact of Pekkar’s menorah—thousands of similar pieces have been fashioned over the decades—makes it “one of the most important pieces of Jewish artwork of the 20th century.”

“We’re pursuing the menorah, because it’s so symbolic and because we want to play an active role in shaping that symbolism,” Susan Crumiller, the attorney who is representing the woman, told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. “We hope it’s a transformative moment. We are doing this out of love for the community.”

Crumiller had initially planned to sue Pekkar under New York’s Child Victims Act, which created a two-year window to revive old abuse cases previously barred by the statute of limitations. But, then, on Aug. 5, just days ahead of the deadline, Pekkar died. Crumiller shifted her target and named Pekkar’s estate in a lawsuit filed Oct. 5. She told JTA that the death extended the legal window to sue, meaning that the Aug. 14 deadline no longer applied.

No formal estate has been established for Pekkar by his heirs, and the responsibility for the estate is being addressed in a separate court case, according to Crumiller.

It’s also unclear who formally owns the menorah, though it has been treated as the communal property of the Chabad movement since it was commissioned. For now, Crumiller has asserted a lien on the menorah on behalf of her client, meaning that she has filed a public notice that her client is claiming it.

Asked about the allegations, Rabbi Motti Seligson, a

Chabad spokesperson, said that “our hearts go out to this woman” but that Chabad would not weigh in on the case.

“We are saddened and sickened by the allegations she has made and cannot begin to imagine the trauma she has experienced,” Seligson said in a statement. “However, since these allegations are against a private individual and we are not party to the lawsuit, it’s really not appropriate for us to comment any further.”

Regarding the ownership of the menorah, Seligson added that it was commissioned by rabbinical students and was never owned by Pekkar.

The plaintiff claims in her lawsuit that she met Pekkar in 1991, nine years after he built the menorah for Chabad, when he began employing her father as a jewelry maker in his workshop. She was 5 years old at the time and would regularly join her father at the jewelry-making studio, which was next door to Pekkar’s apartment.

According to the lawsuit, the studio had no bathroom and so one day when the plaintiff was visiting, Pekkar volunteered to take her to use the bathroom in his apartment. Just outside the bathroom, Pekkar allegedly reached under her clothes to touch her vagina.

Afterward, the lawsuit claims, Pekkar acted in a friendly manner but told her not to share what had happened with others. This scenario repeated itself at least a dozen times, according to the plaintiff, who is referred to as “Jane Doe” in the lawsuit.

“Through these occasions, Pekkar groomed Jane, and made her believe the abuse was innocent and consensual,” the lawsuit says.

Eventually, the plaintiff’s father and stepmother discovered the alleged abuse and, according to the suit, sought to confront Pekkar. They tried to entrap him by setting up a hidden video but Pekkar spotted it and the plan was foiled, the suit says.

After that failure, the father approached the rabbinical court of Crown Heights, a panel of rabbis charged with adjudicating conflicts within the Orthodox neighborhood, according to the lawsuit. The plaintiff claims that the court heard the allegations and Pekkar’s response and issued a ruling.

The Aug. 27, 1991, ruling, which JTA reviewed, says that Pekkar admitted to one unspecified offense but not another.

“The defendant admitted that he did things that are not to be done,” the ruling says in Hebrew. “On the other hand, he did not admit to all (the heart of it) of the deception that he was accused of.”

The rabbinical court said Pekkar had been ordered to undergo treatment with an “expert counselor” but had not submitted evidence showing that he had done so.

The plaintiff’s father wasn’t satisfied with the court’s ruling but, feeling helpless, he moved on, the plaintiff claims.

“After the failed rabbinical court proceedings, [the plaintiff’s father] resigned his position with Pekkar and distanced his family from him,” according to the lawsuit. “Feeling they had no recourse, the family did not discuss the abuse, and simply pretended like nothing ever happened.”

A similar allegation would likely be handled differently today. That’s because in 2011, two members of the Crown Heights rabbinical court ruled that acts of child abuse should be reported to the police and that doing so is permitted despite the traditional prohibition against turning over members of the community to secular authorities.

The plaintiff still identifies with the Chabad movement and remains a follower of Schneerson today, the Daily Beast reported.

“For a whole decade [Schneerson] was lighting [the menorah] and loving it, and he was loving something that wasn’t holy,” she was quoted as saying. “He touched a lie. And if he knew, maybe he wouldn’t touch it.”

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## ● NEWS

# An Upper West Side Family Is Reunited with an Heirloom Bible Hidden during the Holocaust

*A book secreted in a German house is returned to its murdered owners’ heirs.*

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

Some families spend years, if not lifetimes, tracking down family heirlooms and treasures hidden from or seized by the Nazis during the Holocaust.

And some, like Jacob Leiter and his grandmother Susi Kasper Leiter, get a message from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum saying a piece of their family past has been rediscovered.

In June, a courier dispatched by a German museum arrived at Susi’s Upper West Side apartment with a package. Surrounded by their immediate family and rabbi, she and Jacob withdrew an 1874 family Bible featuring illustrations by the famed French artist Gustave Doré. The delivery marked the latest turn in the remarkable journey for the Bible and a bittersweet coda to a tragic chapter in the Leiter family’s story.

Hidden by Eduard and Ernestine Leiter, Jacob’s great-great-grandparents, before they were deported to Treblinka, the “Heilige Schrift der Israeliten,” as it is known in German, had passed through multiple hands before arriving, improbably, in New York.

“Twenty-eight members of my own family tragically did not survive the Holocaust,” said Susi, 94. “So when we were notified about the finding and survival of this Bible, I realized that miracles can happen. It is a new connection for my children and grandchildren, to the Leiter family whose name they bear.”

It was a connection that might never have been made if not for a series of accidents. According to the USHMM, Eduard and Ernestine Leiter hid the Bible and other valuables behind a double wall in a house in the German town of Bopfingen-Oberdorf, where they were forced to live by the Nazis along with seven other Jewish families. They were deported to Theresienstadt and eventually murdered at Treblinka in what the museum presumes was October 1942.

“They must have thought to hide their precious few possessions hoping they would return for them, but they never came back,” said Jo-Ellyn Decker, research and reference librarian for the museum’s Holocaust Survivor and Victims Resource Center.

The house in Oberdorf changed hands after the war, and it wasn’t until 1990 that one of the owner’s sons found the hidden cache. In 2017, the man sold the Bible on eBay to Gerhard Roese, an artist from Darmstadt who collected works by Doré.

According to Jacob Leiter, “Roese immediately realized that this Bible was a piece of history and that it was hidden in ‘consequence of force.’” Roese decided to turn its reemergence into an art project, photographing local residents flipping through the Bible as a comment on a post-Nazi Germany. That’s when a student being photographed discovered inside the book a postcard made out to Eduard Leiter from the book’s publisher.

After a few years of unsuccessful attempts to find any living relatives, said Jacob, Roese donated the Bible to the Ehemalige Synagogue and Museum in Oberdorf. They eventually reached out to the USHMM to see if there was any way to track down anyone in the U.S. who might be related.

In February, Jacob was contacted via LinkedIn by a researcher at the museum. She asked if he were related to Charles and Max Leiter, who turned out to be his great-grandfather and grandfather.

The 22-pound Bible was delivered to the family on June 9.

“It was an amazing moment in my family’s history,” Jacob, who lives in Roslyn, New York, told The Jewish Week. “My initial impression upon seeing the Bible was one of awe at the grandiose size of the Bible. After that, I had feelings of gratitude and fulfillment. There was a

lot of back and forth that took place over the course of about five to six months, and I was ecstatic to see it all come to fruition.”

Leiter also cherished sharing the experience with his grandmother, who survived the Holocaust as a child refugee to the United States. Susi told her story for the USHMM’s collection of survivor testimonies, and has identified herself in archival video footage as one of the refugee children aboard the SS Mouzinho, a ship that left Portugal for the United States in 1941. Susi’s late husband Max Leiter, who died in 2008, was the grandson of Eduard and Ernestine Leiter, whose son Charles (Sali) survived the war. Susi and Max had two children and three grandchildren, including Jacob.

“I am overwhelmed with emotions and memories, and at the same time so grateful to witness this,” said Susi. “There are no words to describe the goodness, patience and caring of the wonderful people involved in Germany to make sure that the Bible was returned to its rightful owners.”

Jacob said the family intends to hold onto the Doré Bible as a family heirloom, and “somewhere down the line” donate it to the USHMM.

“To have the Bible back in our family’s possession is an amazing feeling. The more that I learned about the journey of this Bible, the more passionate I felt about bringing this home,” said Jacob.

*The NY office of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum holds its “What You Do Matters – 2021 Northeast Virtual Event,” on Oct. 19, featuring a conversation between Atlantic Editor in Chief Jeffrey Goldberg and Museum Director Sara Bloomfield. Register at <https://bit.ly/3DNr3pL>.*

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**● NEWS**

# Survey: Jewish New Yorkers' Employment, Mental Health Suffered During Pandemic

By Julia Gergely

Nearly 1 in 6 adult Jewish New Yorkers experienced financial setbacks during the pandemic, and three quarters of Jewish New Yorkers who said they have a substance abuse problem said it worsened during that period.

That's according to a new study by UJA-Federation, which surveyed 4,400 Jews in and around New York City to guide its philanthropic efforts to meet the most pressing needs of New Yorkers.

The survey found that while Jewish New Yorkers overall experienced less severe economic and psychological effects of the pandemic than other populations, they were hardly unaffected.

The poll found that 22% of adults in Jewish households faced reduced hours or income in the last year, 8% had been laid off and 12% had been furloughed. It also found a 12% unemployment rate for adults in Jewish households compared with 10% in the overall population in New York City and Nassau, Suffolk and Westchester counties.

The study found that 1 in 5 adults in Jewish households reported symptoms of anxiety and depression, and 1 in 5 has experienced more symptoms since the start of the pandemic. One in 10 adults in Jewish households indicate they have a substance abuse problem, and 72% of those who reported an abuse problem said it worsened during the pandemic.

Those numbers are lower than the Centers for Disease Control reported for the population as a whole from August 2020 through February 2021, when the percentage of adults with recent symptoms of an anxiety or a de-

pressive disorder increased from 36.4% to 41.5%. Similarly, almost half of all workers and a majority of low-wage workers in New York City lost employment income in the COVID-19 pandemic, according to Robin Hood, an anti-poverty foundation.

The federation, which raised \$250 million for the fiscal year that ended June 30, distributes funds to health and human services providers, community centers, food pantries and community-based mental health efforts. (The New York Jewish Week receives UJA-Federation funding as well.) Mark Medin, the federation's executive vice president of financial resource development, told eJewishPhilanthropy earlier this month that smaller donors were challenged during the pandemic, but high-level donors stepped up to give more, enabling the organization to increase giving for hunger relief and other pressing needs.

Brooklyn, home to large haredi Orthodox communities, represented the highest levels of Jewish poverty in New York, with 37% of Jewish households classified as poor or near poor, according to the survey. Across the region, 4% of adults in Jewish households are not up-to-date on rent or mortgage payments, and 9% of adults in Jewish households are food-insecure.

The survey authors point out that cash benefits and government transfers prevented a much more sizable increase in poverty than New York City would have seen during the pandemic, and that "as relief efforts subside, these rates are likely to rise."

A similar study of the New York Jewish community hasn't been done since 2011, measuring the effects of the 2008 economic downturn. And according to Eric Goldstein, UJA-Federation's CEO, it is so far unique during the pandemic.

The survey is "the first representative survey in the nation offering statistics about social isolation, mental health, domestic violence, and substance abuse in the Jewish community," Goldstein said in a statement. "There is no vaccine for poverty or hunger, and the effects of the pandemic will be felt in our community for years to come."

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● EDITOR'S DESK

# We May Be Talking About Gary Shteyngart's Botched Circumcision for a Long Time

*A novelist's New Yorker essay will force difficult conversations among rabbis and reluctant parents.*

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

There's a lot to say about Gary Shteyngart's New Yorker essay on the botched circumcision he suffered as a 7-year-old Russian Jewish immigrant in Brooklyn. The novelist doesn't explicitly come out against circumcision, although he does ask if the procedure is "indispensable enough for us to continue cutting one of the most sensitive parts of the male anatomy, where any miscalculation may lead to tragedy."

Leave it to the author of "Absurdistan" and the forthcoming "Our Country Friends" to write a darkly funny account of a medical nightmare. And give it to artist Javier Jaén for finding a new way to illustrate an article about circumcision: The New Yorker story features his image of surgical scissors draped Salvador Dali-style over a ledge to form a sort of stainless-steel phallus.

I've edited more than a few circumcision stories myself, and it is always a challenge to illustrate them. A few years ago I wrote a piece for JTA titled "OK, wise guy, how would YOU illustrate a circumcision?" Few editors outside a medical journal would show the procedure itself.

I brought examples of how other media had handled it: Least provocatively, editors go with non-graphic photos of an actual bris, or even reproductions of Old Masters' paintings of biblical circumcisions.

But many take the abstract route: a pencil sharpener, a half-peeled banana, pictures of the mohel's toolkit,

a closeup of a distressed baby, an ominous photo of a scalpel from the baby's point of view.

Such illustrations usually treat circumcision as comic or horrific; there is little middle ground. This might reflect the decisions of male editors, who cringe or laugh when the topic turns to their nether regions. But it also reflects the polarizing nature of circumcision itself. For the many people who either support or simply tolerate the procedure, circumcision is either innocuous or even sort of goofy (at one point, even Shteyngart can't resist comparing a penis to a "walrus wearing a cape"). For opponents of circumcision, the so-called intactivists, cutting is a crime, and deserves to be treated with the seriousness of cancer or murder.

What Shteyngart's essay does so effectively – or insidiously, depending on your point of view — is live in the middle ground: The suffering he undergoes as the result of his mangled member is no laughing matter, but by the end of the essay he is no intactivist. Ultimately, he is asking some very difficult questions about a procedure that we Jews either take for granted or place at the very center of male Jewish identity. You can cite statistics showing circumcision is overwhelmingly safe, as some did in responding to Shteyngart, but you can't deny his ordeal.

The Jewish writers who defend the practice often write movingly about the meaning and power of brit milah, surfacing its profound symbolism even as they cite medical evidence showing it to be an overwhelmingly safe and even beneficial procedure. Intactivists almost always go too far, exaggerating the negative consequences and occasionally dipping into antisemitism and Islamophobia. Neither side is likely to win converts (although, in fact, Judaism does win converts, at which point the males have a decision to make).

And that is why I predict Shteyngart's story will resonate widely in the debate over circumcision. He is no polemicist. He raises challenging questions that rabbis and mohels will have to consider the next time a reluctant couple pays them a visit. "I only wish to expand the conversation for future parents," Shteyngart wrote on Twitter, where a number of A-list authors congratulated him for his essay.

Coincidentally, JTA published an article this week about a new organization, Bruchim, that is seeking to normal-



ize the decision by Jewish parents not to circumcise their boys. “Families who are making this decision shouldn’t feel marginalized and they shouldn’t feel like they have to be secret about it,” said Lisa Braver Moss, Bruchim’s co-founder and president.

Moss could also be talking about intermarriage or homosexuality – or at least the way people talked about intermarriage and LGBT inclusion in the Jewish community 20 years ago. Today, unlike in a previous era, few Jewish organizations would support “marginalizing” interfaith families or Jews in the LGBT community. In the example of intermarriage, that’s a reaction to demographics and a shift in empathy: 72% of American Jews who married between 2010 and 2020 chose a non-Jewish spouse. Marginalizing the intermarried means alienating a cohort too large to ignore.

The JTA article indicates that the same thing – and same pressures – might be coming to bear on circumcision: The growing number of interfaith families, even the majority raising children as Jewish, suggest that the number of those deciding to leave their boys uncircumcised is “likely to be growing.”

More and more, rabbis and grandparents will have to decide between pushing reluctant couples away or looking past their decision not to circumcise in order to welcome their families into Jewish life.

At the moment, circumcision is so fundamental to male Jewish identity that those Jews forgoing it remain a tiny minority. But as the Jews themselves demonstrate again and again, a tiny minority can assert a powerful presence. Soon we’ll all be drawn into this debate.

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

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## ● OPINION

# Distressed by the Sally Rooney Controversy? Read How a Jewish Fan Once Schooled Charles Dickens on Antisemitism.

By Erika Dreifus

As a writer, literature professor and one of the 82% of U.S. Jews who report that “caring about Israel” is either “essential” or “important” to their Jewish identity, I am pained when I see authors whom I admire launch exaggerated or misinformed attacks on Israel.

But I also take solace in a correspondence, celebrated in a new children’s book, that showed how one Jewish reader engaged an author who she felt trafficked in anti-Jewish tropes. That the correspondence took place in the 19th century, and the author in question is Charles Dickens, does not make its lessons any less timely.

I was distressed when Irish novelist Sally Rooney said Tuesday that she wouldn’t allow her latest novel to be published in Hebrew by an Israeli publisher “that does not publicly distance itself from apartheid and support the UN-stipulated rights of the Palestinian people.”

Saddened but not surprised: Earlier this year, Rooney signed a “Letter Against Apartheid” — a text issued in the wake of the latest round of violence between Israel and Hamas. It called for governments to “cut trade, economic, and cultural relations” with the Jewish state, which it said had committed “ethnic cleansing,” “massacres” and more in its response to the thousands of rockets fired into Israel by Hamas.

With their particular focus on words, writers should do better, especially when they organize, join or promote

such endeavors. If their misrepresentations are without malicious intent, they're in desperate need of further education.

How such "education" might best be carried out is the subject of "Dear Mr. Dickens," a new picture book written by Nancy Churnin and illustrated by Bethany Stancliffe. This true story of correspondence between the celebrated author and a reader named Eliza Davis — a Jewish woman who launched the exchange to protest antisemitic tropes in "Oliver Twist" — imparts a timeless lesson about speaking out against injustice.

(Disclosure: Churnin and I currently belong to the same writers group; I hadn't seen this manuscript before being granted pre-publication electronic access to an advance review copy.)

Davis (1817-1903) refused to be daunted when writing the famous author, whose portrayal of "the Jew" Fagin in "Oliver Twist" landed "like a hammer on [her] heart," as Churnin describes it. Davis lacked Dickens's stature. But "she had the same three things that [he] had: a pen, paper, and something to say." Quoting the correspondence, Churnin conveys Davis's message: Fagin "encouraged 'a vile prejudice'" against her people. According to Churnin, Davis had considered Dickens especially heroic — and the Fagin character especially discordant — because Dickens "used the power of his pen to help others."

In response, Dickens declared that Fagin was based on real-life Jewish criminals. In a mix of what we'd today call gaslighting and mansplaining, he went further: "Any Jewish people who thought him unfair or unkind — and that included Eliza! — were not 'sensible' or 'just' or 'good tempered,'" Churnin relates. Davis tried again; evidently, Dickens didn't write back.

But the Jewish character in his next novel — the estimable Mr. Riah in "My Mutual Friend" — was no Fagin.

After that novel appeared, Davis thanked Dickens for "a great compliment paid to myself and to my people." This time, Dickens responded much more warmly. He went further, notably in a magazine essay in which he referred to Jews as "an earnest, methodical, aspiring people" and in changes to a subsequent printing of "Oliver Twist," when he instructed the printer to remove many instances in which he referred to "the Jew" and to use Fagin's name instead.

There's still another aspect of Eliza Davis's story that resonates: Instead of calling Dickens out publicly, Davis approached him one-to-one.

True, they weren't strangers. According to an author's note, the Davises had purchased Dickens's former home a few years before this correspondence began. But Eliza Davis didn't know how Dickens would receive her initial message. And when he scathingly dismissed it, she didn't give up.

Rudine Sims-Bishop speaks of books as "windows" and "mirrors" for the children who read them. With rising antisemitism in the United States and elsewhere, "Dear Mr. Dickens" is a sadly timely mirror for Jewish children; importantly, it provides a positive, action-oriented message of tikkun olam, or the Jewish value of repairing the world. For others, the book offers a window into Jewish experience, alongside that universal message about confronting injustice with written words.

Moreover, Eliza Davis's reaction to Dickens's words — her sense of betrayal by an admired author whose compassion somehow didn't extend to Jews — mirrors my own increasingly frequent experience. Like so many Jews, I am imbued with a sense of klal Yisrael, "Jewish peoplehood," linking us with Jews everywhere — including in Israel, the world's only Jewish state, where nearly half of the world's Jews now live.

This doesn't mean that I support all Israeli policies. But criticism of Israel needs to be leavened by facts and context, and a recognition that the situation is far more complex than declarations of an "apartheid" regime and "ethnic cleansing" suggest.

Although I've gone the public route from time to time, private communications with writer-friends and acquaintances — especially in the wake of the May 2021 war between Israel and Hamas — have proven far more fruitful, yielding corrections, deletions and other changes.

For which I, like Davis, have expressed thanks.

I don't expect "great compliments to me and to my people" from authorial idols and colleagues, particularly those of Palestinian descent. All I'm seeking is fairness — and freedom from vile prejudice.

**Erika Dreifus** is the author of "Birthright: Poems" and "Qui-

*et Americans: Stories," which was named an ALA/Sophie Brody Medal Honor Title for outstanding achievement in Jewish Literature. A fellow in the Sami Rohr Jewish Literary Institute and an adjunct associate professor at Baruch College of The City University of New York, she is currently seeking a home for her first picture-book manuscript.*

## ● SABBATH WEEK / PARSHAT NOACH

# Abraham's Odyssey Is a Story Worth Telling — and Embellishing

*The rabbis fill in the gaps on the hero's journey from idolatry to monotheism.*

By Rabbi Gerald C. Skolnik

The world of literature is generously endowed with so-called "journey" epics, from classics like Homer's "Odyssey" and Cervantes' "Don Quixote" to more modest modern entries like Elizabeth Gilbert's "Eat, Pray, Love." Though they are of differing literary quality, they all share certain implicit understandings: that the character who is on the journey will in some significant way be transformed by it, shaped by its challenges and most often emerge stronger or the better/wiser for it.

As he makes his entry onto the biblical stage in this week's Torah portion, Abraham quickly becomes the central figure in Judaism's most iconic and enduring (though hardly its only) journey epic — the story of his life. No sooner do we meet him where he was born and raised than God commands him to leave — *Lech lecha*, or "go forth" — in the very first verse of our reading.

Abraham is bid to heed a divine summons and embark upon what will be the great journey of his life to an unknown land and destiny. Abraham is told that the land that he is promised — Canaan — will be a great treasure, far greater than Ur Kasdim, the land of his birth,

and that it will remain in his family in perpetuity. He is also assured that he will realize unimaginable blessings.

But still, as we might say today, it was a very "big ask." Rashi, the great medieval exegete, suggests from the seemingly superfluous use of the word "*lecha*" — "for yourself" in Rashi's translation — that God is actually constrained to gently prod Abraham, urging him to understand that the journey is in his best interests, and for his own good.

We have the benefit of reading this story every year, at this time of year. We know Abraham will be shaped and transformed by his experiences. We know who Abraham becomes by the end of his journey, how he is ultimately transformed. We might fairly ask, though, transformed from what?

The Abraham that we are introduced to in this week's Torah portion — the man who is commanded to embark upon this epic journey — is already in his seventies. The book of Genesis, however, provides no backstory on Abraham. It is a remarkable testament to the power of rabbinic commentary that if one were to ask a random group of Jews what the first story about Abraham is in the Torah, many would recall the story of him shattering the idols in his father Terah's idol shop. That story, however, is nowhere to be found in our Torah portion. It is only in the legends and traditions of the Midrash, a kind of rabbinic prequel, if you will, to our Torah portion, that his early years are fleshed out.

In fact, the Torah doesn't introduce us to Abraham until he is an older man. The Midrash provides a necessary flow to his life, a far clearer sense of "journey from" and "journey to."

***"Abraham moves forward despite whatever difficulties he encounters."***

Along the way of his journey, those same rabbis continue to broaden the contours of Abraham's life. They tell us that he underwent 10 different tests, of which the greatest was surely the command to sacrifice Isaac. Each one, in its own way, buffeted the precocious young monotheist who had dared to challenge his father. Sometimes the test brings out the best in him, as when he argues powerfully with God over the fate of Sodom. Other tests reveal his human frailties, as when he is less than truthful about Sarah being his wife when they were

in Egypt. What emerges, as the journey progresses, is Abraham's dogged resolve to always move forward despite whatever difficulties he encounters, and realize his covenantal destiny.

Given that Midrash is so critical to our understanding of this foundational story and others, one might well ask from where the rabbis who wrote the commentaries derived their insights. Who gave them the authority to embellish the story?

The answer is, unavoidably, complex. A very significant sector of our Jewish community regards all Torah, both written and oral commentary, as revealed truth from Sinai. These stories were not "made up" by remarkably creative people, but simply uncovered by the sustained study of inspired men. Others who favor a more literary, historically based analysis of the Torah will recognize the work of talented close readers and literary critics — in the case of Abraham's stories, scholars who understood the hero's journey, and found clues in the text to make his journey from here to there — from idolatry to monotheism, from tribal leader to founder of a people — consistent with what we know from the context and other epic Torah journeys.

If it is true that the journey of even a great distance begins with a single step, then it might be fair to say that Abraham's epic Lech Lecha began even before God called him to leave Ur Kasdim. It was launched by his own inner first step, born of the conviction that he couldn't abide the culture that was all around him. By shattering those idols and standing up to his father, God's call to leave the land of his birth and all that was familiar to him was the inevitable next step.

**Rabbi Gerald C. Skolnik** is the spiritual leader of the Forest Hills Jewish Center in Queens.

#### CANDLELIGHTING, READINGS:

**Cheshvan 9, 5782 | Friday, October 15, 2021**

- **Light candles at:** 5:57 p.m.

**Cheshvan 10, 5782 | Saturday, October 16, 2021**

- **Torah reading:** Lech Lecha, Genesis 12:2–17:27
- **Haftarah:** Isaiah 40:27–41:16
- **Shabbat ends:** 6:54 p.m.

## ● MUSINGS

# A Tradition of Song

By David Wolpe

In synagogue we do something that people in society rarely do – we sing together. Our greatest heroes composed shirim – the Hebrew word for psalm and also for song. Moses sang, Miriam sang, and King David was the "sweet singer of Israel" (2 Samuel 23:1). When the children of Israel cross the sea, they cry out, "The Lord is my strength and my song" (Exodus 15:2). The spirit of song runs deep in the Jewish people.

There is a small midrash text called Perek Shirah, the chapter of song. It depicts the entire world singing to God, beginning with the heavens and earth, moving to the animals, birds and fish and even to plant life. Everything has its song. So central is song to redemption that the Talmud says the reason Hezekiah did not become the Messiah was that despite the miracles God performed for him, he did not sing to God (Sanhedrin 94a).

Judaism is a tradition of study and ritual, but also of song. "Your laws are songs for me wherever I may dwell," says the Psalmist (119:54). No Sabbath is complete without Shabbat songs; the Torah is chanted, not merely read, and the tradition of chazzanut, the melodies of prayer, is ancient. As Rabbi Yehuda HeChasid put it many centuries ago, "I sing hymns and weave songs because my soul yearns for You."

*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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**● BOOKS**

# How Meir Kahane's Ideas Entered the Jewish Mainstream

By Emily Burack

*Editor's note: Before working for the Jewish Telegraphic Agency's sister site Alma, Emily Burack worked for a year on "Meir Kahane: The Public Life and Political Thought of an American Jewish Radical" as author Shaul Magid's research assistant. She wrote her undergraduate thesis, cited in Magid's book, on the emergence of the Jewish Defense League.*

Meir Kahane is the "Jew whom Jews would like to forget."

Yet, as Shaul Magid writes in "Meir Kahane: The Public Life and Political Thought of an American Jewish Radical" (Princeton University Press), his new cultural biography of the controversial Jewish figure, Kahane keeps coming back to haunt us.

Born in Brooklyn in 1932, Kahane was elected to the Israeli Knesset, or parliament, in 1984 on an extremist platform calling for Arabs to be expelled from Israel, among other ideas. In 1986, under a new "anti-racism law," he was barred from running for re-election. In 1990, he would be assassinated by an Egyptian American in New York City. In today's Knesset, the Kahanist party Otzma Yehudit (literally, Jewish Power) has one seat.

But in 1968, before his time in Israel, he founded the militant Jewish Defense League. Focused on Jewish pride, Kahane called for "every Jew a .22" and popularized the slogan "Never Again." He spoke out against intermarriage, believed a second Holocaust was inevitable and that antisemitism was a pervasive threat on the left and right, accusing less confrontational Jews of lacking Jewish pride.

Although his militant and violent tactics alienated the Jewish mainstream, he was a key figure in publicizing the fight to free Soviet Jewry. Ultimately he pivoted to what Magid describes as "militant post-Zionist apocalypticism."

Magid's book tells the story of Kahane's radicalism —

from his critique of liberalism through his ever-changing Zionism.

"He became demonized because of his tactics, and because of his violence and his racism. But the worldview has really dug some pretty deep roots," Magid said. In "Meir Kahane," he sets out to unpack how that worldview lingers today, and he spoke with JTA about the project.

*This conversation has been lightly condensed and edited for clarity. Find a longer version of this conversation at <https://www.jta.org/2021/10/11/culture/how-meir-kahanes-ideas-entered-the-jewish-mainstream>.*

**JTA: To begin, you write about how Meir Kahane's ideas, and much of what he promoted in America, have entered our mainstream discourse, like that antisemitism is pervasive everywhere, or his, as you write, "assertive expression" of Jewish identity. As someone who studies Kahane, what is it like to see his ideas enter the mainstream?**

SM: You have to make a sharp distinction between his worldview and his tactics. His militancy was very much a product of his time. He was living at a time of the Black Panthers, the Young Lords, the SDS [Students for a Democratic Society], the Weather Underground; the idea of radical militancy and violence was very much a part of what was happening in America at the time. That, of course, has fallen away, in most cases.

If you take that [militancy] away, it's not that Kahane disappears, but what you actually have is a much more well-defined worldview that has really made its way into the subconscious of American Jewry: perennial antisemitism, antisemitism on the left is worse than antisemitism on the right, anti-Zionism is antisemitism. What we call now "Jewish continuity," Kahane just called "Jewish survival." The idea of Jewish pride: How do you actually create an environment where Jews can be proud to be Jews in an unashamed way? Questions of intermarriage — Kahane wrote a book about intermarriage in 1974 when nobody was talking about intermarriage. He saw into the future a bit on some of these questions.

***In your book, you emphasize that Kahane was a quint-essentially American figure. Much of previous scholarship on him focused on his time in Israel, and looked back on his time in America through that lens, but you argue we need to reverse that — understanding him in***

***America is key to understanding him in Israel.***

He fails in Israel because he's bringing American categories and an American way of seeing society to an Israeli society which is very different. It's more complex in all kinds of ways. First of all, in Israel, the Jews are the majority, not the minority, and that itself changes things. [Second,] he couldn't re-conceptualize the complexity of race in Israel from the much more straightforward understanding of Black and white in America. As a result of that, he succeeds initially — he is elected to the Knesset — but ultimately the country rejects him.

***In terms of Kahane's language of Jewish power and Jewish pride, why is that not as successful in Israel?***

Because you have Israeliness. Jews can be proud of being Israeli; they can be proud of being Jews; they can be proud of being religious Jews; and it's the majority culture. So you don't need to cultivate that identity of pride in the same way that you do when Jews are a minority. Israel is facing antisemitism in a very different way than American Jews are. Israel is facing antisemitism as a collective, perhaps, but not necessarily as individuals. Whereas in America, Jews are facing antisemitism as individuals.

It's different to talk about Jewish power in America than talking about Jewish power in Israel, where actually Jews are the power. They have the power, they have the military, they have the police. I mean, the structure of the society is about Jewish power.

***In the chapter on Zionism, you write about how he's saying Israel can't be both a Jewish state and a democracy, which was, correct me if I'm wrong, controversial to say back then. But we hear that all the time now.***

It was controversial back then, but only for people in the center and on the right. People on the Israeli left were saying Israel can't be a democracy and a Jewish state from early on. You had groups like Matzpen that were basically anti-Zionist precisely because of that: They wanted a democratic state, not a Jewish state. Kahane was saying it as a Zionist; he calls Israel schizophrenic in his 1986 book "Uncomfortable Questions for Comfortable Jews." [For Kahane,] it just doesn't work, so you have to choose: You want to have a Jewish state, or you want a democratic state.

This also has to do with Kahane's Americanism. For him,

there was only one kind of democracy: the American style of liberal democracy. That was it. If you live in a democracy, then everybody that lives in that democracy has to be treated equally. So later, when the Jewish and democratic equation started to become more complicated, people came up with other theories, like "ethnic democracies." Kahane's line is like, "No, no, no. There's no Jewish democracy or Arab democracy, there's just democracy or no democracy."

***Do you see this idea taking hold today more prominently?***

Oh, sure. We're basically living on the verge of a post-two state Israel, where the Palestinians are not going to be given a state, where they're not going to be citizens, and they're going to be ruled over by Israel. If this is being done in order to ensure a Jewish state, what Kahane would say is, "okay, so that's not a democracy anymore." And a lot of people are saying that. If the Jews today are being confronted with a Jewish state or a democratic state, more and more are leaning toward a Jewish state.

***What do you think of Kahane's legacy in the American Jewish community today, in terms of what it means to be a Jew in America, a proud Jew in America?***

One of the things that's happening in American Jewry today is all of this discussion about defining antisemitism. American Jews are feeling newly unsure whether America can ultimately protect them. That brings us back to what Kahane was feeling in the 1960s and 1970s: America has been better to the Jews than any other country in Jewish history, but antisemitism will always rise to the surface, and that Jews could never feel comfortable there. He's giving up on American Jewry, saying that, as long as America remains a liberal society, it will ultimately not protect the Jews. Not that the Jews are going to feel physically endangered, but they're also going to feel spiritually endangered because they will be asked to give up their own sense of Jewish identity.

Kahane was speaking before the rise of multiculturalism, and multiculturalism may have changed that. He was living in an America where assimilation into Americanness meant a diminishing of one's particular identity. Multiculturalism creates a different cultural model where difference is celebrated, rather than only tolerated. What Kahane felt was the danger of the American embrace of the Jew in the 1960s and '70s. In the 1990s

and the 2000s, through multiculturalism, I don't think that's necessarily as true anymore. We can talk about the rise of Orthodoxy in the 1980s and 1990s. Why does Orthodoxy come back into fashion? In large part it's really riding the wave of multiculturalism — it has nothing to do with Orthodoxy per se.

***You speak about how he predicted a lot of the issues that the American Jewish community are struggling with today, but he kept making the same mistake over and over again. Where do you view him failing in his tactics?***

Violence, that's number one. Second of all, he always went too far, he always overextended. And [third,] he had this maniacal desire for power, his own personal power, that ultimately undermined it.

***While we're talking about violence, I'd be remiss not to bring up the Baruch Goldstein massacre in Hebron. Goldstein, an American Israeli physician and onetime JDL member, perpetrated the 1994 Cave of the Patriarchs massacre, killing 29 Muslim worshippers and wounding 125, before he was beaten to death by survivors. Do you view the massacre as directly part of Kahane's legacy in Israel?***

Definitely, definitely. In Kiryat Arba, which is the Jewish city buttressing Hebron, there's a place called Kahane Park.

***And Goldstein's buried there, right?***

Exactly. It's certainly part of that.

One of the other things I hope is that [the book] sparks a much more nuanced conversation about Judaism and violence. And not this kind of "Judaism is nonviolent." No, Judaism is not nonviolent. Because no religion is really nonviolent.

***"Never Again" was one of the very first books he wrote, and we've really seen the phrase "never again" become popular today. It's something I think about a lot, how this was the slogan of the JDL, the name of his book, he was talking about a second Holocaust in way that I'm not sure others were. How do you understand Kahane's vision of "Never Again" resonating today?***

"Never Again" sold 100,000 copies in the first year; none of his other books were that successful. It touched a nerve of a certain kind of anxiety, and also a certain kind of assertiveness that children of Holocaust survivors

and first generation American Jews — who had been affected by the counterculture, and had become alienated from the New Left after 1967 — he basically allowed them to become radicalized as Jews.

The problem with Kahane is that people love him and people hate him, but nobody actually reads him. It would be interesting to do a reading of "Never Again" among a group of liberal American Jews, because of the way he makes fun of the American bar mitzvah, the way he makes fun of the opulence of Great Neck and Scarsdale. His critique of classism, his critique of Jews abandoning elderly Jews in Bed Stuy and Crown Heights -- I mean, in a certain way, if you read that book, without the rest of the history of Kahane, I think it still resonates in some way.

***When people read "Meir Kahane," whether they know him or don't know him, what do you hope they take away from the book?***

Certainly within academic circles, we missed something very important in the telling of the story of 20th-century Jewry. [Brandeis University historian] Jonathan Sarna's "American Judaism" has no mention of Kahane. That was not by accident, that was an intentional erasure. That's the first thing: We can't ignore this person. Whether it's like including him in syllabi, teaching him in courses, whatever it is.

For a more general audience, this is a figure who is incredibly important in terms of the cultivation of Jewish identity among Jews in America and in Israel after the Second World War. I hope that people start to read him critically, as part of the story and to say, "oh, how much of this has seeped in?"

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## UPCOMING EVENTS

**October 16 | 7:30 p.m.** Free**Celebrating 100 Years in the Reform Movement**

To celebrate the 100th anniversary of their membership in the Reform Jewish movement, Temple Shaaray Tefila presents a conversation with Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union of Reform Judaism; Dr. Andrew Rehfeld, president of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion; Rabbi Hara Person, chief executive of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and Cantor Claire Franco, president of the American Conference of Cantors. Moderated by Rabbi Joel Mosbacher, senior rabbi of Temple Shaaray Tefila.

Register at <https://shaaraytefilanyc.org>

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**October 17 | 1:00 p.m.** Free**Confronting Antisemitism: Activating Archives, Libraries, Museums, and Cultural Institutions in the Fight Against Antisemitism**

Twenty prominent panelists — including the presidents of Princeton and Harvard Universities and the Librarian of Congress — will take part in a live-streamed initiative on how archives, libraries, museums and cultural institutions can use their strengths to combat antisemitism and create lasting change. Presented virtually by the Center for Jewish History and jMUSE, the day-long symposium will include seven online sessions of talks and panel discussions.

Register at <https://new.cjh.org/antisemitism>

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**October 19 | 2:00 p.m.** Free**The Jewish Renaissance in Weimar Germany**

The Leo Baeck Institute's *Shared History Project*, focusing on the Interwar Period, presents a panel on how German-speaking Jews seized on the era of cultural freedom ushered in by the Weimar Republic to rediscover, revitalize and transform Jewish culture and identity in a modern context. With Michael Brenner (American University/Munich), Rachel Seelig (University of Toronto) and Kerry Wallach (Gettysburg College).

Register at <https://bit.ly/3BL3ddl>

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**October 19 | 6:00 p.m.** Free**Haredism and the Future of Judaism**

Jewish Currents hosts a conversation on the future of haredi Judaism and what it may portend for Jews in the United States in the 21st century. Featuring Nathaniel Deutsch, Ayala Fader, Miriam Moster, Schneuer Zalman Newfield and Frieda Vize.

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