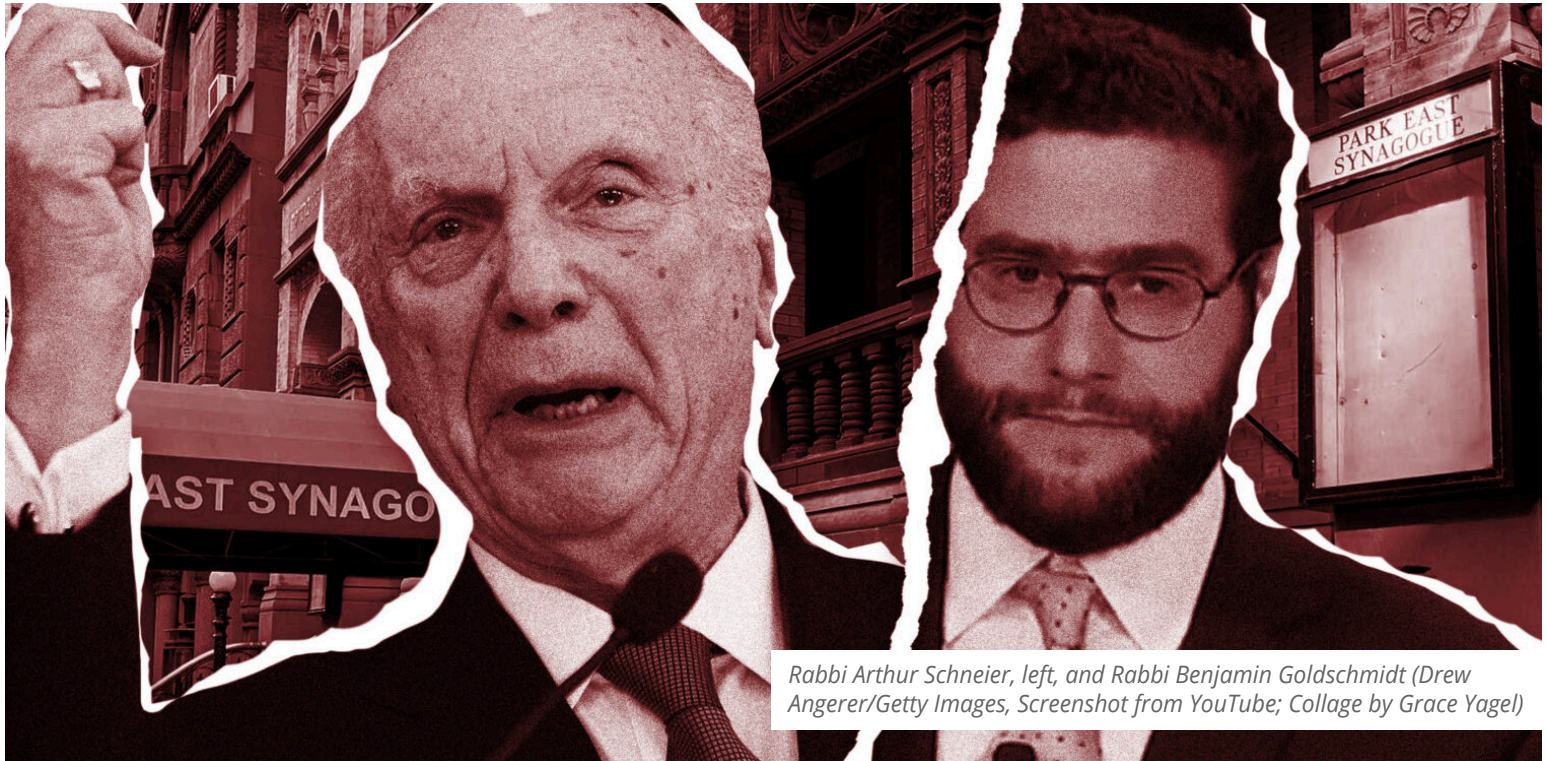


# The New York Jewish Week/end

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Rabbi Arthur Schneier, left, and Rabbi Benjamin Goldschmidt (Drew Angerer/Getty Images, Screenshot from YouTube; Collage by Grace Yagel)

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## ● NEWS

# A World-Famous Rabbi, a Popular Assistant and a Succession Crisis: Inside the Rupture at Park East Synagogue

By Ben Sales

NEW YORK — Near the start of his Rosh Hashanah sermon last month, Rabbi Benjamin Goldschmidt asked congregants a question: "Is there a person in your life that you feel you have done everything you could do to reconcile with, yet nothing works?"

The sermon was about the biblical rivalry between the young David and the older Saul, but Goldschmidt delivered it after years of simmering tensions with his synagogue's senior rabbi, the 91-year-old Arthur Schneier. The two

had split over the terms of Goldschmidt's employment, his work with younger members — and even the safety of the apartment the synagogue provided him.

Five weeks later, that tension would escalate to a rupture: In mid-October, Goldschmidt, 34, was fired from his job as assistant rabbi of the vaunted Park East Synagogue on Manhattan's Upper East Side, after a decade with the congregation. He and his wife, who is pregnant, pulled their children out of the school affiliated with the synagogue.

Goldschmidt's relationship with Park East has been "permanently severed," Park East's board president said in a letter to members.

The abrupt firing has divided the monied Orthodox community; Schneier supporters and Goldschmidt supporters have launched dueling petitions. It has also drawn attention to the unusual leadership structure at Park East, in which Schneier, who is among the oldest pulpit rabbis in the United States, serves full-time while also drawing a salary from the foundation he runs — all without an apparent succession plan in place.

Both Schneier and Goldschmidt declined to speak with the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. Goldschmidt's supporters say he is a talented rabbi who was popular with younger members and has been mistreated with too little explanation. Schneier's allies, meanwhile, say Goldschmidt had sharply misjudged his status in the congregation and had erred by "attempting, effectively, a coup" against Schneier, a Holocaust survivor famous for his human rights activism who has cultivated relationships with some of the world's most powerful people.

"When he surmised he was not going to be the rabbi, or that was not in the cards for him, that he did not have the stature, the education or the qualifications, he attacked the man who gave him the opportunity in the first place," Hank Sheinkopf, the veteran political strategist who has stepped in as Schneier's spokesman, said about Goldschmidt. "You have an irresponsible, unacceptable, childish response to a set of facts."

That response includes potential legal action: Hours after Goldschmidt was fired, his lawyer sent a letter protesting the decision and threatening to take the synagogue to court.

But the more pressing issue for the synagogue may be

how it addresses the fact that its world-famous rabbi, while "a very spry 91," according to one leader, appears not to have cultivated a successor.

"Everyone knows that Rabbi Schneier is getting old and has begun to think about the plan for the future," one involved member told JTA. But what that plan might be is unclear — beyond the fact that the community's 10-year former apprentice will play no role.

Everything about Park East Synagogue broadcasts prestige. Its Byzantine architectural facade, complete with a row of arches and a rose window, has earned it landmark status in New York City and a spot on the National Register of Historic Places. Its calendar is punctuated with events featuring Important People — such as, on consecutive days this coming November, the French Jewish philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy and the consul general of Austria. Those familiar with the synagogue say it sees itself as an institution as well as a congregation — if not more the former.

Cultivating important people, and being in important places, has been a defining theme of Schneier's six-decade-and-counting career. Park East was located across the street from what was then the Soviet Mission in New York and in 1965, three years after becoming Park East's rabbi, Schneier printed a full-page ad in *The New York Times* with the signatures of Sen. Robert Kennedy and other leading officials announcing a protest in front of the mission (and synagogue) on behalf of Soviet Jews.

That effort morphed into the Appeal of Conscience Foundation, led by Schneier, which went on to advocate for Soviet Jews and for peace in other conflict zones. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was particularly active in efforts to bring peace to the Balkans in the 1990s. Schneier has spoken at a long list of international venues, including the U.N., where he was appointed U.S. alternate representative in 1988.

According to last year's tax documents, Schneier received \$200,000 in compensation from the foundation, which is run by his daughter, who received a similar salary. Another column of the document lists \$400,000 in "other compensation from the organization and related organizations."

Schneier's activism has raised the stature of his synagogue, which became the first in the history of the Unit-

ed States to host a pope, Benedict XVI, in 2008. The next year, it hosted Eastern Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew.

Along the way, Schneier also founded a Jewish day school that shares space with the synagogue — and is named after him.

A virtual celebration of Schneier's birthday last year, a few months into the pandemic, attracted tributes from a long list of prominent figures including both living popes, the patriarch, the United Nations secretary general, President Donald Trump, future President Joe Biden, Israel's president, Israel's prime minister, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and more. According to a graphic attached to a video of the party, Park East appears to have raised more than \$1 million at the event, which doubled as a 130th anniversary party for the synagogue.

When Goldschmidt entered Park East as a rabbinic intern a decade ago after studying at well-regarded Haredi Orthodox yeshivas in Israel and Lakewood, New Jersey, he came in with connections of his own. He is the son of Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, who has been the chief rabbi of Moscow for nearly three decades. The elder Goldschmidt, who was born in Switzerland, is also the president of the European Conference of Rabbis, and has also been able to manage relationships with powerful people. He is known for being close with Merkel and, despite that, has mostly been able to maintain his position in Vladimir Putin's Russia.

By 2012, Benjamin Goldschmidt was Park East's assistant rabbi, and focused his work on two overlapping constituencies — young families and Russian-speaking Jews. Until he was fired, he ran the Sunday Shkola, an education program for Russian-Jewish children. For a brief period between April and May of 2021, he also ran the NextGen Minyan, a prayer service for young professionals that shut down over the summer and then was reopened recently without Goldschmidt at its head.

He also built a public profile, publishing essays in the Washington Post and Israeli publications. Before arriving at Park East, he studied at Ponevezh Yeshiva, a prominent haredi yeshiva in Bnei Brak, Israel, and has been a contributor to Kikar HaShabbat, a haredi Israeli news site. In 2014, he married the journalist Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt in a wedding that was featured in The New York Times' "Vows" column.

But in the years after the wedding, the relationship between senior and assistant rabbi frayed. Goldschmidt was never given a contract at Park East, and was never guaranteed vacation time or severance pay. Matters came to a head in early 2020 surrounding the rented apartment that Park East traditionally provides to the assistant rabbi.

By that year, the apartment provided to the Goldschmidts was in disrepair — including months of infestation — and they asked the synagogue for help finding a new place, which was not forthcoming. (Sheinkopf responded that in rental units, the tenants are responsible for handling maintenance issues. "Pick up the phone, call the super," he said. "The synagogue isn't responsible for a rental property, he is.")

They ended up moving out, bouncing between hotel rooms and crashing with friends and family, until friends chipped in to rent them a new unit in the neighborhood. That decision has ended up being a boon to Goldschmidt and his family, as they can remain in their home even after his termination.

Schneier's 90th birthday presentation in June 2020 reflected the strained ties between the rabbis. The 92-minute video produced in honor of Schneier featured tributes from a string of prominent rabbis around the world — including Goldschmidt's father — but Goldschmidt himself was not invited to deliver one. He was thanked for his efforts during the pandemic, including conducting funerals alone during peak COVID, via a message that appeared on screen, well more than an hour in, for six seconds.

People close to Schneier say that Goldschmidt was never in the running to lead the synagogue after Schneier. They say Goldschmidt doesn't have the leadership and fundraising chops necessary to lead the synagogue. A few people noted to JTA, unprompted, that Goldschmidt doesn't have a bachelor's degree, which they view as disqualifying.

He stayed at the synagogue for a decade, they claim, due to a mix of inertia, goodwill and the daunting nature of finding a replacement during the pandemic.

"He has no experience running a large institution, he has no experience raising the needed funds that are required, he does not have an appropriate education, the

man does not have a bachelor's degree," Sheinkopf said.

Schneier's backers, including Sheinkopf, are also adamant that the rabbi's son, Rabbi Marc Schneier, is "absolutely not" being considered for the job. The younger Rabbi Schneier also caters to wealthy Jews — he founded the Hampton Synagogue — and has also parlayed his rabbinate into international activism. He's an advisor to the king of Bahrain and works to promote ties between Jews and Muslims. He's also drawn the attention of the New York Post's Page Six for his string of marriages and divorces, in some cases to his congregants.

Marc Schneier showed up at Park East for services recently, but Schneier's backers say that was only to support his father.

"Marc Schneier is not interested in being the rabbi of Park East Synagogue," Sheinkopf said. "He's quite successful and happy in Westhampton, in a congregation that continues to grow. The rumors to that effect are absolutely inaccurate."

In fact, despite Schneier's advanced age, it seems like there wasn't a succession plan at all until Goldschmidt was fired. That may have been one of the triggers for the chain of events, conducted in large part via email, that led to the firing in the first place.

On Oct. 8, four men, led by Brad Colman and Brian Kaufman, sent an email to the entire synagogue membership calling for a change of course at Park East. The email opened with a paragraph praising Schneier and his career, as well as "his story, his survival, his commitment and the spirit that he brings to daily Jewish life."

What followed was less complimentary. The writers said that they were concerned about the future of the synagogue and that "while Shabbat services used to bring in several hundred worshippers, now they bring in far smaller numbers, with few younger individuals and families (unless there is a special event)."

The email announced the formation of a committee "to revitalize the synagogue and build a sustainable future." The committee proposed to work with Schneier, Goldschmidt and the board of trustees.

Allies of Schneier claim that neither Schneier nor the board of trustees knew about this committee. Two days

after the email went out, members began to complain. One person sent an email to the would-be committee co-chairs, accusing them of having "misappropriated my confidential information." He added, "I reserve my legal rights to protect the confidentiality of my information and will hold you accountable for any damage that results from its theft."

Colman and Kaufman have not responded to a request for comment. But four days after sending the email, they began to do damage control. In an email sent to Schneier and the board, they wrote, "we want Rabbi Schneier to be Senior Rabbi of Park East Synagogue for life. Rabbi Schneier has served this community for six decades and we have no desire or intention of making changes to the Rabbinic leadership of the synagogue." The phrase "for life" was underlined.

But they added, without offering details, that they had "heard for many years of the synagogue's financial challenges," and quoted an email they had received saying that the community was "at risk." In the email, sent to a board composed largely of older men who are allies of Schneier and unelected by the congregation, they wrote that they wanted to "hear from all members (young and old)."

To Schneier and his allies, these emails constituted an act of brazen insubordination — and the board blamed Goldschmidt. In an email to the synagogue membership sent on Friday, Oct. 22, Board President Herman Hochberg described the Schneier camp's view of events.

According to Hochberg, on Oct. 10, Schneier and Hochberg met with Goldschmidt, who had provided the members' email list.

Hochberg claimed that Goldschmidt then "refused to apologize for his rogue actions. In fact, he further enflamed the concerns of Rabbi Schneier and myself by additionally stating that he would continue to use and disseminate the list at his discretion." Hochberg also wrote that the people who wrote the Oct. 8 email "are neither trustees, nor actively involved in the Synagogue or the Rabbi Arthur Schneier Park East Day School."

Five days later, the Park East board met via videoconference and voted unanimously, on Schneier's recommendation, to fire Goldschmidt. A few days after that, Schnei-

er sent a letter to congregants defending his record and attacking the emails from supporters of Goldschmidt.

“Surprisingly, no signatory of the letters ever approached me or any of the Trustees about the initiatives they had in mind,” he wrote regarding the Oct. 8 email. “I suspect it is because they have no real ideas beyond what we ourselves are already doing and that there are other motives afoot that I will not dignify in this letter to you, my beloved congregation.”

But Goldschmidt might fight back. The day Goldschmidt was fired, Daniel Kurtz, a lawyer working in support of Goldschmidt, sent a letter to a member of the Park East board arguing that, according to state law, only the synagogue members themselves have the authority to fire Goldschmidt. Kurtz wrote that if Goldschmidt is prevented from returning to his job, the synagogue “will be met with swift legal action and a wrongful termination lawsuit.” Kurtz declined to comment when reached by JTA.

But even if Goldschmidt provided the list of emails, he may not have broken the law. Synagogues often share contact information with members, and New York State’s Not-for-Profit Corporation Law says that any member of an organization has the “right to examine [a] list or record of members and to make extracts therefrom.”

And his supporters have since mobilized to defend him. Days after he was fired, a petition went online saying signatories were “shocked and disheartened” to learn of his firing. As of Oct. 26, it has more than 400 signatures. A competing petition, titled “Stand with Rabbi Schneier,” has 44.

“If I were bringing young children into the Upper East Side right now, I would have hoped that an individual like Rabbi Goldschmidt would be an assistant rabbi at an institution like Park East,” an engaged Park East member in his 40s told JTA. “What he’s done, his outreach, his individual support, his knowledge of members, his respectfulness and candor — he never complained about anything.”

Supporters of Schneier paint a different picture: One of a rabbi with limited appeal among young families who was unqualified for the job, and nonetheless made an ill-advised grab for it. A common refrain among Schneier’s defenders who spoke to JTA is that Goldschmidt’s supporters weren’t really involved in the congregation,

though a recent congregational newsletter does congratulate one of them on a happy occasion and notes the family’s affiliation.

“What happened here is an unfortunate case of a junior rabbi attempting, effectively, a coup to attain the position that he coveted from Rabbi Schneier,” said a congregant with knowledge of the situation. “Rabbi Goldschmidt was happy having a small loyal cohort of congregants, he would schmooze, but when it came to going out and performing the duties alongside Rabbi Schneier he was really a shrinking violet.”

According to the member of the synagogue leadership, Goldschmidt in fact assumed a larger set of duties during the pandemic, officiating more while Schneier was limited in his activity due to his age. And Goldschmidt’s wife has repeatedly written about his increased responsibilities over the past year and a half. In May 2020, after COVID had raged for weeks through New York City, she wrote that he officiated at a series of funerals, checked up on congregants and taught Zoom classes.

But the member of the synagogue leadership was still blunt when describing Goldschmidt’s reaction to being fired.

“What’s happened here — I’m not saying he’s like Trump, I’m not — but there’s a little Trump here, where he can’t accept being fired because it happened so quickly,” he said. “I think what’s happened here is he needs it to be said that he shouldn’t have been fired, or to fire him was wrong, because he can’t accept it.”

Regardless of what occurred, Goldschmidt appears to retain a base of support. One signatory on the pro-Goldschmidt petition wrote, “the Goldschmidts are exactly what Park East Synagogue requires. It’s both disheartening and shocking to [see] them being treated this way.”

Goldschmidt’s father, Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, hasn’t commented on the affair. But last week, he did share someone else’s tweet about his son being fired.

It said, “Shame on those cowards who so brazenly sacrifice our Jewish communities on the altars they’ve erected to their own fragile egos.”

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**● NEWS**

# Sunrise NYC Rejects Decision by DC Affiliate to Shun ‘Zionist’ Partners

By Julia Gergely

Sunrise NYC, the local chapter of a national youth environmental group, rejected a decision by the Washington, D.C. chapter to shun cooperation with “Zionist” groups.

“Sunrise NYC rejects antisemitism in all its forms, and condemns the choices made by the DC hub,” Sunrise NYC tweeted Friday, aligning itself with a statement made by the national organization. “We stand with our Jewish members and the Jewish community against prejudice, and we will continue to stand arm in arm together during this urgent moment in the climate crisis.”

The statement came after the D.C. chapter called for the removal of three Jewish advocacy groups from a voting rights rally. The request led to charges of antisemitism; the D.C. chapter apologized, although it reiterated its opposition to Zionism.

Jewish groups frequently partner with the Sunrise Movement and its affiliates, as the New York-based Jews for Racial and Economic Justice did on Monday morning when protesters shut stretches of Manhattan’s West Side Highway and FDR Drive to demand action on climate change.

Of the hundreds of protesters, more than 40 people were arrested, including Rabbi Guy Austrian from the Fort Tryon Jewish Center in Upper Manhattan.

JFREJ said it had no second thoughts about working with Sunrise NYC. “This was an NYC action and we were proud to do it with local partners,” said Sophie Ellman-Golan, director of strategic communications at JFREJ.

Most of the collaboration between the two groups has focused on backing and campaigning for progressive candidates in the upcoming city elections, she said. On

Tuesday, JFREJ co-hosted with Sunrise Movement NYC, the Muslim Democratic Club of NY and the Union of Arab Women a Zoom phone bank in support of Democratic City Council candidate Felicia Singh.

Rabbi Austrian did not respond to requests for comment.

The Manhattan highways protest was organized by Sunrise Movement NYC, in collaboration with JFREJ, Extinction Rebellion NYC and Fridays for the Future NYC.

“We chose to shut down these highways in part because both flooded during Hurricane Sandy,” said Veekas Ashoka, the protest’s organizer and an activist with Sunrise Movement NYC. This week marked the ninth anniversary of the superstorm that damaged much of the city.

Launched in 2017, the Sunrise Movement aims to mobilize young people around aggressive campaigns to make combatting climate change a political priority. Organizers of the Manhattan highway protest hoped their actions would reach President Biden ahead of the COP26 Climate Change Conference at the United Nations, which starts Sunday.

Protesters gathered around 7 a.m. Monday, and the action started around 8:15 a.m. Activists linked arms and sat on the highway until 10:00 or 10:30 a.m.

“We need government action: a massive investment in federal funding, and clean jobs,” Ellman-Golan said.

Shutting down Manhattan’s major arteries was also a metaphor in its own way, she said. “Traffic is a particular point of weakness,” Ellman-Golan said. “Everyone’s daily commute is going to change because of the climate.”

**Do you have an event coming up? Submit your events online at [www.jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/contact/submit-an-event](http://www.jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/contact/submit-an-event)**

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**● NEWS**

# As Pandemic Drove Judaism Online, Chabad Bet on More Than \$137 Million in Real Estate

By Asaf Shalev

Facing declining membership, a mainline Protestant congregation in Chicago's Lakeview neighborhood listed its historic church complex for sale in the summer of last year. Church leaders were told it would take at least a year to complete the deal. But within days, an attractive offer came in, and a few months later the building's \$2.85 million sale closed.

The buyers were a pair of Chabad emissaries who had been serving Jews in the North Side neighborhood from their rented apartment since 2015. By converting the church complex, the Hasidic couple, Rabbi Dovid Kotlarsky and his wife Devorah Leah, could now realize their dream of expanding Chabad's footprint and establishing a synagogue and preschool.

According to Chabad.org, key to making the purchase was a \$2 million donation from Chicago tax attorney Jaques Aaron Preis, who heads the Phillip Leonian and Edith Rosenbaum Leonian Charitable Trust. Preis was quoted as praising Chabad's "authenticity" and welcoming attitude.

The real estate transaction in Lakeview — a hub of Jewish life in Chicago, where large Reform, Conservative and Orthodox synagogues have long operated from stately buildings — represents just one of dozens of investments by Chabad in new buildings or in renovating and expanding existing properties.

In some regards, Chabad seems like an anomaly in the Jewish world. Many non-Orthodox Jewish institutions are unsure about what the future holds for their physical spaces after a year and a half of largely digital engage-

ment — and after decades of declining synagogue membership for Judaism's largest American denominations. Chabad, meanwhile, whose strictly Orthodox emissaries seek followers from across the range of Jewish beliefs and practices, appears to be confident about its capacity to attract large numbers of people to its centers.

The movement has embarked on at least \$137 million in real estate projects since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, according to numbers compiled by Chabad.org and reviewed by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency.

In Greenwich, Connecticut, the local Chabad paid \$20 million to take over the site of a Jewish day school that closed last year. In Durham, North Carolina, a \$3 million renovation of a historic inn — supported in part by Sarah Bloom Raskin, the Duke University law professor who is married to U.S. Rep. Jamie Raskin — was dedicated last week. And the Chabad at the University of Illinois is spending more than \$7 million to own and renovate a massive Tudor-style fraternity house.

Because the thousands of Chabad emissaries around the world fundraise independently, Chabad's news and public relations arm had to collect the data by gathering media reports and by carrying out an informal survey, according to Rabbi Motti Seligson, a Chabad spokesperson.

The survey turned up a number of capital projects that have not yet been publicly announced, including some purchases that are underway now. Seligson said the true extent of Chabad's recent real estate expansion is likely much larger than the \$137 million figure indicates.

But he said he wanted to release the information he had in conjunction with the 38th annual International Conference of Chabad-Lubavitch Emissaries, which takes place this week in-person in and around Brooklyn, New York, as well as virtually.

"We were doing an exploration of Chabad's impact and growth to examine the effectiveness of various programs through this difficult time of the pandemic," he said. "These numbers came into sharp focus as we looked at the level of engagement and our institutional and infrastructure growth."

Seligson also pointed out that during the pandemic, Chabad minted 250 new emissary couples who went out to serve existing Chabad centers or establish new ones.

Even before the pandemic growth spurt, Chabad had already engaged some 37% of American Jewish adults in activities, according to recent survey data from the Pew Research Center.

Over the past 20 years, the number of Chabad synagogues in the United States has nearly tripled, reaching 1,036 in 2020, according to a tally by Joel Kotkin, a Chapman University professor who studies demographic trends, and independent researcher Edward Heyman. Over that same period, the overall number of synagogues declined by 29%.

“While their secular counterparts are shrinking, the Hasidim and other more traditionally observant Jewish communities in America are experiencing a surge of growth,” Kotkin and Heyman wrote in a Tablet magazine article analyzing their data.

While many Hasidic groups are growing primarily through procreation, Chabad, focused as it is on outreach, appears to be picking up a significant chunk of the Jews who have disaffiliated from the Reform or Conservative movements or who have never had much of an institutional affiliation to begin with. In its recent survey, Pew estimated that among Chabad participants, 24% are Orthodox, while 26% are Reform, 27% are Conservative, and 16% don’t identify with any particular branch of Judaism.

“In the present the core social needs of the Jewish world are filled by two kinds of organizations: One is Chabad, which is expanding rapidly and offers a full gamut of services,” Kotkin and Heyman wrote. (The other kind of organization is the local Jewish federation and its affiliated Jewish community centers.)

As Chabad proliferates, it is finding among the Jews it serves many willing donors. Sometimes, individual contributors like the Preisses in Chicago play an outsized role, but their gift was accompanied by \$500,000 in small donations, according to Chabad.org.

In comments to Chabad.org, the Preisses explained why they gave to Chabad. “They focus on each mitzvah without criticizing. They’re so welcoming,” said Jacques Preis, who was raised Reform. “It’s not a diluted Judaism,” said Evelyn, his wife.

“Much of the funding for these campaigns is raised lo-

cally from people whose lives are personally enriched by Chabad in their community,” Seligson said. “They represent people from large donors to large numbers of small donors like college students who are committed to supporting Jewish life and programs that inspire them with whatever they can based on their means.”

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## ● NEWS

# Israeli Noshery Sherry Herring Opens in NYC — With ‘No Sherry and No Herring’

By Rachel Ringler

Imagine arriving at the Pastrami Queen but finding no pastrami, or showing up at Holy Schnitzel to find its signature breaded chicken cutlet off the menu.

To quote Tevye, sounds crazy, no? But that is exactly what will happen if you visit Sherry Herring, the Israeli eatery that recently opened on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. It is the first branch of the renowned sandwich bar in the port of Tel Aviv famous for — you guessed it — its herring sandwiches.

But for the moment, to quote Sherry Ansky, the driving force behind Sherry Herring, the New York outpost has “no Sherry and no herring.”

That’s because Ansky is still waiting for her travel documents to enter the United States — and the herring is still aging at a Dutch processor, patiently soaking up the brine and flavors that must meet Ansky’s approval.

Ansky is a food celebrity in Israel, where she has written six cookbooks (one of which was translated into English). For decades she was a food columnist for the daily newspaper Maariv. But in 2011 she hit a writer’s block. It was at that time that her daughter, Michal Ansky, herself a food journalist, opened the farmer’s market in the port of Tel Aviv, which soon became a draw for tourists,



foodies and hipsters. Sherry Ansky decided to create a sandwich shop there that featured herring.

Ansky has had a long-standing love affair with herring, the brined or pickled fish that is a staple of Ashkenazi cuisine. When she was 6 years old, she went to synagogue with her father.

"Somebody made a kiddush and brought me a plate filled with lekach [honey cake], kugel and lots of herring," she told *The Jewish Week*. "I ate one piece, then another, until I finished it all. I believe that there is a moment when you understand the power of candy. For me, it happened with herring."

Ansky's shop, featuring herring and other fish sandwiches, was an immediate success. Shortly after she opened the sandwich bar, she entered the farmers' market to find a line snaking through it and out the door.

"I fainted and ran away," she remembers. "I told the people to go away! I can't do it."

Even those who aren't normally fans of herring may find it hard not to be taken by Ansky's herring sandwich. It is a carefully constructed work consisting of a fresh baguette, sliced in half and slathered with sour cream and French butter, seasoned with hot pepper, seeds and juice from a tomato, onions and scallions, and finished off with brined herring.

Food celebrity Phil Rosenthal visited the Tel Aviv port for his Netflix show "Somebody Feed Phil" and declared Ansky's herring sandwich was "one of the best sandwiches I've ever had in my stupid life."

"The taste is precise," said Ansky. "At the end of the day, I feel like I worked on this sandwich all of my life, until the moment I needed it."

During the pandemic, Ansky sent her son-in-law and business partner, Eyal Amir, to New York to scout out a location for the first of what they hope will be several Sherry Herring shops. They chose the Upper West Side, said Amir, "because it is a Jewish neighborhood where our penetration to the market will be easiest." Their eatery, said Amir, builds on the culture of appetizing stores in New York, including Russ & Daughters on the Lower East Side and Barney Greengrass less than a mile away.

Like the Tel Aviv sandwich bar, the Manhattan shop

offers a choice of smoked fish sandwiches: tuna from a smokehouse in the Hamptons, wild-caught Alaskan sockeye salmon, mackerel from, according to Amir, the "wild waters off of Spain."

So why no herring? Because there is herring and then there is Sherry's herring. During his scouting ventures, Amir brought back samples of all of the herrings he could source in the five boroughs of New York City. None met the approval of Ansky's discerning palate. So she flew off to Holland and worked with a fishery there to select the best herring — creamy with a soft bite — and to create the brine that would give her the flavor she was after.

"We kept on experimenting until we reached the right flavor in July," said Amir. Then they had to submit the recipe and process to the FDA for approval. They started production last month. But the herring, said Amir, "needs 11 weeks in our unique brine to arrive at the flavor, colors and aroma that we want."

So the herring will come, in a first shipment of 15,000 filets, in December. Will that be enough? That, said Amir, "depends on how much New Yorkers like it."

*Sherry Herring is located at 245 W. 72nd St., between West End Avenue and Broadway.*

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## ● EDITOR'S DESK

# Who Was Joyce Newmark? A Rabbi, "Jeopardy!" Winner and Friend.

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

One of the happiest nights I ever spent in synagogue was May 16, 2011, when my fellow congregants and I gathered to watch that night's episode of "Jeopardy!"

One of our members, Rabbi Joyce Newmark, was a contestant, but of course she hadn't been able to tell us the results of a game taped months before. She sat stone-faced as her televised self ripped through category after

category and nailed the Final Jeopardy! question: “What is liberal arts?”

When it sunk in that she had won the game – and \$29,200 – the social hall erupted. Koufax pitches no-hitter! Mark Spitz swims to seven gold medals! Rabbi Newmark wins on “Jeopardy!”

The victory was especially sweet if you knew Joyce: She could come off as forbidding, especially if you couldn’t keep up with her knowledge of Torah, science fiction and current events. She lived alone and suffered from various ailments. But those who got to know her appreciated her sharp mind and keen wit, which she showed off when she chatted with Alex Trebek.

Trebek noted that she was appearing on the show 20 years to the day after her ordination at the Jewish Theological Seminary, and asked her a question about being a female rabbi. Joyce replied, “In an interview I was asked by the search committee, ‘What’s it like to be a female rabbi?’” I said, ‘I don’t know. I’ve never been any other kind.’” Trebek deemed that a “good answer.”

Joyce died on Monday, at age 73, at an assisted living facility in River Vale, New Jersey. I had seen her in services over the High Holidays and she told me she wasn’t well. Actually, she told me she was dying: Joyce was blunt and would hate a euphemism like “she wasn’t well.”

Joyce moved into the assisted living facility in her 60s, a few decades younger than the average resident. It was a compromise to her health and finances: She had last held a pulpit job in 2005, at Congregation Sons of Israel in Leonia, New Jersey, and was on a fixed income. She kept busy editing papers and books for scholarly friends, taking part in a regular rabbis’ study class, and reading the novels (mysteries and thrillers, it always surprised me to learn) that she brought home by the armload from the public library. She came to services every week when she was well, driven by a former synagogue president to whom she was devoted.

My mother-in-law was living at the same facility, and whenever I’d visit I’d see Joyce, usually with a book in her lap. She turned her apartment into a sort of rabbinic cockpit: a desk and computer dominated the living room, surrounded by her sifrei Torah, her holy books. She wrote sharp and often funny commentaries on the weekly Torah portion, many of which I published when I

edited the New Jersey Jewish News. The guest sermons she delivered from our synagogue pulpit were always the highlight of a Shabbat morning service.

I considered Joyce a “kiddush” friend, the kind you run into once a week after services and chat up over kugel and tuna fish. I always enjoyed our conversations, so long as we steered clear of politics (we didn’t agree on much). She’d reminisce about her career before she became a rabbi (she spent more than 15 years in management consulting and banking). She’d share a little Torah, often quoting herself — which I, a habitual self-quoter, found endearing. And, in the last few years, she’d report on how my mother-in-law was doing, especially when she suspected Mom was having a bad week.

Joyce reveled in her attention as a “Jeopardy!” winner and the flurry of media attention that followed. She would spin tales of the process, from auditions to taping to the community of former players who met and chatted online. She was part of an elite club, and knew it, and nobody could begrudge her.

When Alex Trebek died last year, I spoke to Joyce about what he meant to her. “He was the kind of person who competes on ‘Jeopardy!’” she told me. “He loved odd facts and read books and appreciated ‘knowledge lishma’ [for its own sake]. He just loved learning.”

I am pretty sure she was also describing herself.

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

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**● OPINION**

# My Fellow Progressives Are Always Asking Me if Anti-Zionism Is Antisemitic. Here's What I Tell Them.

By Oren Jacobson

I've spent most of the last decade focused on grassroots organizing and capacity building inside the American progressive movement. From helping build the largest leadership development organization on the left, to launching a first-of-its-kind organization to mobilize male allies into the fight to protect and expand reproductive freedom, I've proudly helped elect progressive change makers and pass landmark legislation.

I've done all of that as a Jew who wears a kippah in public, as someone who, statistically speaking, shouldn't exist. My grandfather is one of the 10% of Polish-born Jews to survive World War II. Three million of his Jewish neighbors, and another 3 million across Europe, were packed into boxcars and sent to the slaughter, to gas chambers, to the ovens.

What I am is central to who I am. So when I saw the statement from the Washington, D.C., chapter of the Sunrise Movement explaining its refusal to march in a voting rights rally with Jewish groups because they are "Zionists", I understood immediately that it was deeply problematic. Not only did the decision have the potential impact of spreading anti-Jewish bigotry, but it also weakened our movement more broadly at a time when democracy, which is necessary to ensure civil rights, is under assault in America.

I also understood right away that, for many people, the anti-Jewish nature of the statement wasn't so obvious. When moments like this arise, I get texts and calls from progressive peers across the country who ask: "Is this antisemitic?"

To answer the question, I begin by explaining what it means to be a Jew. Judaism is the religion of the Jewish people. But Jewish identity is so much bigger and more diverse than religion. Some of us are deeply religious. Some of us are totally secular. All of us are Jews. We're a people, not simply a religious community. Contrary to what most think, antisemitism is not anti-Judaism in its modern form (several hundred years). It's anti-Jew. It's not about how Jews pray, but rather about who they are and what they are accused of doing.

Jews get attacked for supposedly controlling the world (governments, banks, media), for being disloyal to our home countries, for killing Jesus, for making up the Holocaust, for being greedy, for undermining the white race and subverting people of color (among other things).

We've been blamed for plagues, famine, economic hardship and war. Whatever major problem a society has, Jews have been blamed for it. None of those things has anything to do with religion.

Criticism of Israel or opposition to it isn't necessarily antisemitic. Harsh criticism of Israeli government policy may make us uncomfortable but isn't antisemitic. But the Sunrise DC statement wasn't about policy. By attacking "Zionist organizations" in a voting rights coalition, and saying that they can't participate in a coalition that includes them, Sunrise DC basically said it won't work alongside Jewish organizations (or Jews) that believe the state of Israel has the right to exist.

For the average Jew, Zionism has become simply the idea that Israel has the right to exist, rather than an embrace of the policies of its government. The Zionist movement got its name in the late 19th century, but it really put a label on a 2,000-year-old yearning to return to the native land Jews were violently forced out of (in an act of colonization). That yearning grew over time as we failed to find sustained peace and security elsewhere, including in Europe, North Africa and the broader Middle East.

That's why when people attack Zionists, we hear "Jews." We hear them saying that the 80-90% of Jews who believe Israel has a right to exist are unacceptable, and that Israel, a country that came into existence with the vote of the international community and today is home to 7 million Jews, must be ended.

Why is that antisemitism? First, it singles out Jews when

most people believe Israel has the right to exist. (In fact, 85% of the general public in America believes the statement “Israel does not have a right to exist” is antisemitic, according to a survey released this week.) Second, it seeks to deny Jewish people the right to self-determination by erasing our peoplehood and connection to the land. Third, it declares that a national movement for Jews is uniquely unacceptable, while at the same time advocating in support of another national movement.

Fourth, it divides Jews into good and bad. Only those who oppose their own national movement can stay. Only Jews who reject Zionism are allowed. Replace “Jew” with any other group and ask if that would be acceptable.

Even if you forswear coalitions with anyone, Jewish or not, who thinks Israel is legitimate, that still denies the Jewish people’s right to self-determination. It says that Jews must be a perpetual minority on this earth subject to the whims and bigotries of the societies they live in. For thousands of years Jews tried that and failed to find permanent refuge — which, fairly or not, is part of the reason most Jews believe in the right to, and need for, national self-determination in some portion of a contested land.

Sunrise DC wasn’t interested in the nature of their shunned Jewish allies’ support for Israel — even though each of the three groups, like most Jews in America, have advocated for a Palestinian state and for an end to policies by the government of Israel that harm the Palestinian people, including, but not limited to, the occupation of the West Bank.

Ultimately, only Jews get to define who and what we are and what antisemitism is. Too often in progressive spaces that right is denied to Jews. Instead, to justify their own positions, some rely on Jews whose voices, while relevant, are far from representative on the question of what constitutes antisemitism. If someone ignored the voices and lived realities of 80-90% of any other minority group, most progressives would quickly recognize that as an act of tokenization to shield biases (or worse).

Some who identify as progressive feel it’s OK to use the word “Zionist” to attack others, claiming that the word is not about Jews. I encourage everyone to go on far right-wing message boards on occasion. Once there, you’ll see how white supremacists typically call Jews Zionists. The prominence of the word, in connection with claims that they control the governments and are trying to replace

white “patriots” with Black and Brown “interlopers,” will stun you.

While there is plenty of room for criticism of Israeli government policy, there should be no room for the exclusionary, reductionist and dehumanizing language of white nationalists in progressive discourse on the topic, or the denial of the right for Jewish self-determination on this earth.

I believe in standing up for those who are attacked for the crime of being who they are as much as I believe in standing up for Jewish life. For me, this work is personal. Not because every issue affects me directly. But because I feel like I owe it to my grandfather. To Jews who were murdered and never had a chance to live. To my peers here who face systemic racism and bigotry. And yes, because I believe “Never Again” isn’t just a slogan to hope for, but rather a mission to fight for.

***Oren Jacobson** is the co-founder of Project Shema, which helps Jewish students, leaders, organizations and allies explore the difficult conversations surrounding Israel and antisemitism. Previously, Oren served as national chapter development director for the New Leaders Council, growing NLC into the largest social justice-focused leadership development organization in America. He holds a master’s degree in International Relations from the University of Chicago, a master’s in Economics and Policy Analysis from DePaul University and an MBA from Regis University.*

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● **SABBATH WEEK**  
**PARSHAT CHAYEI SARAH**

## Four Biblical Models for Coping with Trauma

*Solitude or companionship, action or prayer: there is no one way to respond to challenges.*

By Jason Rogoff

The patriarch Isaac is one of the most passive biblical characters. He speaks infrequently and seems to stand

still while other people feverishly act around him. His presence in Parashat Hayyei Sarah is no exception. After surviving the ordeal of the Akedah, and experiencing the death of his mother, Isaac is nowhere to be found.

Abraham buys the burial plot and only Abraham is mentioned as present at Sarah's burial. Abraham then sends his servant Eliezer to find a wife for Isaac, but again we lack any information as to what Isaac is doing or how he is feeling after successive traumatic life events.

Isaac only returns to the story when Eliezer returns with Rebekah and she first sees Isaac. The Torah describes how "Isaac went out [lasuah] in the field toward evening" (Gen. 24:63). Ironically, one of the few times we hear of Isaac performing an action, the meaning of the Hebrew verb, *lasuah*, is obscure. This allows for multiple interpretations from commentators and scholars, each of which provides us with an important model for how to cope with and respond to tragedy.

The commentator Abraham ibn Ezra interprets the word to mean "go for a walk." Biblical scholar and former Jewish Theological Seminary professor Nahum Sarna explains that this interpretation is based on the Arabic cognate, "saha," meaning "to take a stroll." We can imagine Isaac using this moment at the end of each day to have some time to himself to process the significant life events he had recently experienced. At times, seclusion from others allows us to be in touch with our innermost feelings and reflect on our own needs.

In contrast to this interpretation, Nahmanides prefers a connection to the root for talking, "sahah." He explains that Isaac was out in the field with his friends chatting. That is, Isaac found comfort and support in being surrounded by friends.

Rashbam connects Isaac's action to the word for shrub or plant, "siah." He references the creation story: "when no shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because the LORD God had not sent rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the soil" (Gen. 2:5). Rashbam explains that Isaac was out in the field engaging in the creative act of working the land. The proactive deed of generating life and sustenance perhaps served Isaac well as he worked to return his life to a routine.

Rashi, citing the classical rabbinic midrash, suggests that

Isaac was out in the field praying. The rabbis base their understanding on Psalm 102:1: "A prayer of the lowly man when he is faint and pours forth his plea [siho] before the LORD." The Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 26b connects Isaac's prayer to the establishment of *minha*, the afternoon prayer service. According to this view, Isaac turns to God in the aftermath of his near sacrifice by Abraham and the death of his mother.

Seeking to understand Isaac's actions, the medieval commentators offer us four models for coping with trauma and challenges in our lives: seclusion from others, talking it out, working the land (or whatever action gives you sustenance) or praying. These options take on a modern idiom in Shirat Ha-Asavim ("Song of the Grasses"), a beautiful Israeli folk song composed by Naomi Shemer and based on the writings of R. Nahman of Bratzlav. The lyrics compare the individualized nature of prayer to the uniqueness of a single blade of grass: "Know that each and every blade of grass has its own song." Solitude or companionship, action or prayer: there is no one way to respond to challenges. We all must choose our own path.

Returning to Isaac, the Torah tells us that he indeed ultimately finds the comfort for which he is searching. Rebekah, his new partner, becomes a source of support and love for him: "Isaac then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother's death" (Gen. 24:67).

**Dr. Jason Rogoff** is the Academic Director of Israel Programs and Assistant Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics at The Jewish Theological Seminary. To read more commentaries, visit [JTS Torah Online](#). The publication and distribution of the JTS Commentary are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (z"l) and Harold Hassenfeld (z"l).

#### CANDLELIGHTING, READINGS:

**Cheshvan 23, 5782 | Friday, October 29, 2021**

- **Light candles at:** 5:37 p.m.

**Cheshvan 24, 5782 | Saturday, October 30, 2021**

- **Torah reading:** Chayei Sarah, Genesis 23:1–25:18
- **Haftarah:** Kings I 1:1–31
- **Shabbat ends:** 6:36 p.m.

## ● MUSINGS

# From Tragedy or From Joy?

By David Wolpe

How did Abraham first come to God? The Torah does not say, although the rabbis offer stories to explain.

One imagines that Abraham was like a man who spots a palace in flames. He cries out, "Is no one responsible for this palace?" From an upper window the owner peeks through to declare he is responsible. The palace has an owner.

Similarly, Abraham, seeing the world in flames, cried out "Is no one responsible for this world?" God came to Abraham in response to his cry.

The twist to this midrash is that the word for "in flames" is "doleket." Doleket can also mean full of light. Perhaps Abraham saw the world as a blazing fire, or as a brilliant light — as a cauldron of injustice, or as a palette of beauty. Did he think so terrible a world must have a caretaker — or so magnificent a world must have a creator?

Do we come to God from tragedy or from joy? When we see the injustice and pain of the world or when we see its beauty and majesty? The midrash suggests that we do both.

As did our ancestor Abraham.

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

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## ● ARTS AND CULTURE

# As Broadway Returns, Here Are 7 Jewish Reasons to Head Back to the Theater

By Linda Buchwald

Thanks to safety measures such as vaccination and mask requirements, Broadway shows are playing again after a shutdown that lasted a year and a half, the longest in Broadway history.

The first show to open was the Bruce Springsteen concert "Springsteen on Broadway" in June, followed by Antoinette Chinonye Nwandu's play "Pass Over" in August. Those two limited engagements have closed, but there are now 26 shows running on Broadway, with more set to open or re-open in the coming months.

Many of the shows flipping their lights back on, or for the first time, have Jewish content — from straight plays to musicals, dramas to comedies. Here are seven shows to see with Jewish themes, characters, and/or authors.

### THE LEHMAN TRILOGY

This 2014 epic play by Italian playwright Stefano Massini, adapted into English by Ben Power, spans 163 years as it traces the history of the Lehman Brothers, both the family and the beleaguered financial services firm: from its beginnings as a fabric shop founded by the German-Jewish immigrants in 1844 Alabama (where the Lehmans made their first fortune buying and selling slave-harvested cotton) through its instrumental role in the 2008 financial crash that destroyed the business (along with millions of American livelihoods). The production, directed by Sam Mendes, features an extraordinary rotating office set designed by Es Devlin, stunning IMAX-level projections by Luke Halls and performances from Simon Russell Beale, Adam Godley and Adrian Lester.

Though Massini is Catholic, he has a fascination with Jewish culture and speaks Hebrew — which might explain why there is occasional Hebrew in the play, as well

as a focus on how Jewish immigrant families lose their traditions over time as they assimilate in America. Particular attention in the play is paid to Jewish mourning rituals... appropriate for a play that often seems to be mourning the death of the American dream on the altar of unchecked capitalism.

*Where and when:* Playing through January 2 at the Nederlander Theatre, 208 W. 41st Street

*Bottom line:* See it if you are interested in American history and capitalism, and don't mind sitting through a show that is three hours and 20 minutes long (there are two intermissions).

### CAROLINE, OR CHANGE

This is the first revival of the sung-through musical that opened on Broadway in 2004, the same season as "Avenue Q" and "Wicked." It tells the story of Caroline Thibodeaux, a Black maid for a Jewish family in 1963 Louisiana, as she and her employers respond to the rapidly advancing Civil Rights movement; the show, which opens with a Confederate memorial being torn down, will likely resonate with audiences in entirely new ways in 2021.

The book is by celebrated Jewish playwright Tony Kushner ("Angels in America"), with a score by Jeanine Tesori ("Fun Home") that incorporates klezmer and traditional Jewish melodies, as well as Motown, soul and other sounds of the era. It also might be the only Broadway musical with a Hanukkah song ("The Chanukah Party," which uses an alternate spelling of the holiday). Sharon D. Clarke reprises her Olivier-winning performance in the title role, and the cast includes Jewish actors Caissie Levy ("Frozen"), Chip Zien ("Into the Woods") and Stuart Zagnit ("Newsies").

*Where and when:* Currently in previews at Studio 54, 254 W. 54th Street; officially opens October 27.

*Bottom line:* See it if you like musicals that are more introspective than showy spectacle, or if you are interested in the Civil Rights movement.

### CHICKEN & BISCUITS

In this comedy by Douglas Lyons, sisters Baneatta (Cleo King) and Beverly (Ebony Marshall-Oliver) gather their families to mourn their father and celebrate his life at

his funeral. Directed by Zhailon Levingston, who made history as the youngest Black director ever on Broadway, the production-in-the-round gives the audience the experience of being at a Black church. Michael Urie plays Logan Leibowitz, the Jewish boyfriend of Kenny Mabry (Devere Isaac Rogers), Baneatta's son. Logan is the only white character, acting as a stand-in for the white members of the audience. He asks questions during the service that some audience members might be thinking, but he is not just there as an outsider: His relationship with Kenny is shown to be a positive one and (spoiler alert) he is eventually accepted by the family.

*Where and when:* Playing through January 2 at Circle in the Square Theatre, 235 W 50th Street.

*Bottom line:* See it if you are in the mood for a sitcom-style comedy.

### COME FROM AWAY

After the planes crashed into the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001, the U.S. airspace closed, forcing 38 planes to be diverted to the Gander airport in Newfoundland, Canada. The people of Gander took in the "plane people" until they could get back in the air. This long-running musical, using the true stories of those who were there, shows what happens when people are kind to each other in the darkest of times.

The writers of the show, Canadian couple David Hein and Irene Sankoff, are Jewish and drew on their backgrounds to expand on the very Jewish theme of welcoming the stranger. There's also an explicitly Jewish moment in the show, where people of different religions pray at the same time in different languages, with a rabbi character (based on a real rabbi whose flight was grounded that day) singing "Oseh Shalom." During that scene, one of the locals opens up to the rabbi about his Jewish past.

*Where and when:* Currently playing at the Gerald Schoenfeld Theatre, 236 W. 4th Street.

*Bottom line:* See it if you like upbeat musicals based on true stories about people coming together.

### COMPANY

In Stephen Sondheim's classic musical, first staged in 1970, protagonist Bobby turns 35 by trying to explain

to all his married friends why he isn't married. This gender-bent revival, first staged at London's West End in 2019 and directed by three-time Tony winner Marianne Elliott, flips the script: Bobby is now a woman named Bobbie, played by Katrina Lenk — who, between a breakthrough part as an Israeli cafe owner in "The Band's Visit" and a one-time stint as a gender-swapped Tevye in "Fiddler on the Roof," has cornered the market on Jewish stage roles for non-Jewish women.

Sondheim, one of the greatest and most important composers in the history of American musical theater, is Jewish... and what's more Jewish than a show about neurotic New Yorkers? There is also an interfaith couple in the show, one-half of which is played by Israeli-American actor Etai Benson ("The Band's Visit"). Another selling point for Broadway fans: The show's co-star, stage legend Patti LuPone, also participated in a star-studded concert production of "Company" in 2011.

*Where and when:* Starts previews November 15 with an official opening of December 9 at the Bernard B. Jacobs Theatre, 242 W 45th Street.

*Bottom line:* See it if you are a fan of Stephen Sondheim, Patti LuPone or new interpretations of classic shows.

### GIRL FROM THE NORTH COUNTRY

The characters in this jukebox musical — set in Duluth, Minnesota during the Great Depression — aren't Jewish, but the show is shaped around the music of Bob Dylan, whose Jewish upbringing and consummate everyman folk persona have long fascinated critics and biographers. Wanderers come and go through the boarding-house of Nick and Elizabeth Laine (Jay O. Sanders and Mare Winningham); Irish playwright Conor McPherson wrote the book, and 20 classic Dylan tunes are performed in a reinvented context as Depression-era folk ballads, with beautiful arrangements by Simon Hale.

*Where and when:* Currently playing at the Belasco Theatre, 111 W. 44th Street.

*Bottom line:* See it if you love Bob Dylan and want to hear his songs in a new way.

### A COMMERCIAL JINGLE FOR REGINA COMET

This one is technically Off-Broadway, but any musical that mentions Sukkot deserves a spot on this list. The

music, book and lyrics are by Jewish writer-actor duo Ben Fankhauser and Alex Wyse, who also star. They play a Jewish songwriting team tasked with writing a jingle for a new fragrance for the fictional pop star Regina Comet (Bryonha Marie Parham). The two frequently refer to their start writing Shabbat musicals at Jewish summer camp, and much of the humor in the show is of the Borscht Belt variety.

*Where and when:* Playing through November 21 at DR2 Theatre at Union Square East, 103 E 15th Street.

*Bottom line:* See it if you need a silly, escapist musical comedy.

## ● ARTS AND CULTURE

# A Young, Gay Russian Jew Navigates '80s New York in 'Minyan,' a New Film Set in Brighton Beach

By Andrew Lapin

A gay Russian Jewish teenager comes of age in Brighton Beach in the touching new independent film "Minyan," a subtle and sensitive drama that tells an unexpected story about the Brooklyn neighborhood's large immigrant Jewish community.

Based on a short story by David Bezmozgis, an author who has long grappled with Russian Jewish identity in meticulous and probing ways, Eric Steel's film finds a unique way to highlight its queer themes through the prism of an Orthodox Jewish culture that heavily prizes manhood, and strength in numbers. If 10 men gathering in prayer is a holy act, the film posits, then surely two men gathering in love must have some degree of holiness to it, as well.

Samuel H. Levine, who riveted Broadway audiences in "The Inheritance," turns in a fully lived-in lead perfor-



mance as David, the only son to a family of Soviet Jewish immigrants in 1986. David, whom Levine plays with a quiet, subdued curiosity, feels little affection for his parents: His mother (Brooke Bloom), insistent on sending him to a yeshiva where he is routinely bullied, seems blind to his true needs, while his abusive, philandering father seems to be imparting the wrong ideas about masculinity. To discipline his son for getting into a fight with another yeshiva student who mocks him for being Russian, David's father sucker-punches him in the face.

Instead, David gravitates to his grandfather Josef (Ron Rifkin), whose calm, matter-of-fact rituals bring him comfort. As the film opens, Josef has decided to seek out a new apartment for himself after the death of his wife. Here we see why the film is called "Minyan": Josef is only able to secure a fixed-income apartment in a synagogue building once David agrees to join him, because together they give the congregation the requisite 10 men it needs to pray.

In all these buildings full of Jews dealing with repressed generational trauma (the Holocaust and the Soviet Jewish purges are both frequently invoked), David finally discovers a little piece of himself. His neighbors in the synagogue are two elderly men who live together; they have a storyline that explains their arrangement, which the community accepts, but it's clear they find more comfort in this open secret than they ever could have in the USSR. Soon after meeting them, David begins to explore a local gay bar, and loses his virginity to a brooding bartender (Alex Hurt) who, at the height of the AIDS epidemic, seems shocked by his new lover's youth and ignorance of the disease — and how David, having already avoided one life of misery at the grace of his parents, is unaware he may now be dooming himself to another.

As David quietly, tentatively tries to navigate his environment (partially with the help of James Baldwin's books, which are invoked as holy texts on par with anything in the Talmud), "Minyan" finds meaningful ways to frame his maturity alongside his growth in Jewish thought. Aided by David Krakauer and Kathleen Tagg's klezmer score, the film spotlights the moments when its hero comes into his own: leading a Mourner's Kaddish prayer, advocating for a fellow Jew's living conditions or simply listening to his mother describe her relief that she could give him a new life where he wouldn't be targeted for his Judaism.

Little in Steel's prior filmography — his most notable previous directing credit was the controversial 2006 documentary "The Bridge," which secretly filmed a year's worth of suicides off the Golden Gate Bridge — indicated that he aimed to tackle a story as delicate and human as "Minyan." But Steel himself grew up gay and Jewish in the 1980s, and he's smartly fused Bezmozgis' source material with his own memories to create a film with a personal touch. The movie even feels in league with works by Ira Sachs and Andrew Haigh, the reigning kings of layered, nuanced stories about gay communities, while also being deeply Jewish. "Minyan" is an intimate story of outcasts in many forms.

*"Minyan" opens today at the IFC Center in New York and expands to Los Angeles and on-demand rental Oct. 29.*

## UPCOMING EVENTS

November 2 | 7:00 p.m. Free

### Where Does the Jewish Future Begin?

The Jewish Theological Seminary presents an online program for the Rockland County, New York Jewish community featuring JTS's new chancellor, Dr. Shuly Rubin Schwartz, in dialogue with Rabbi Abby Sosland, JTS alumna and Morah Ruchanit (Spiritual Advisor) at The Leffell School.

Register at <https://bit.ly/2XSVsU3>

November 3 | 1:00 p.m. Free

### Can We Talk About Israel?

New Israel Fund Board President David Myers will be in conversation with NIF CEO Daniel Sokatch about Sokatch's new book, "Can We Talk About Israel?" The book explores why so many people feel so strongly about Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict without actually understanding it very well. Zoom link provided upon registration.

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

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