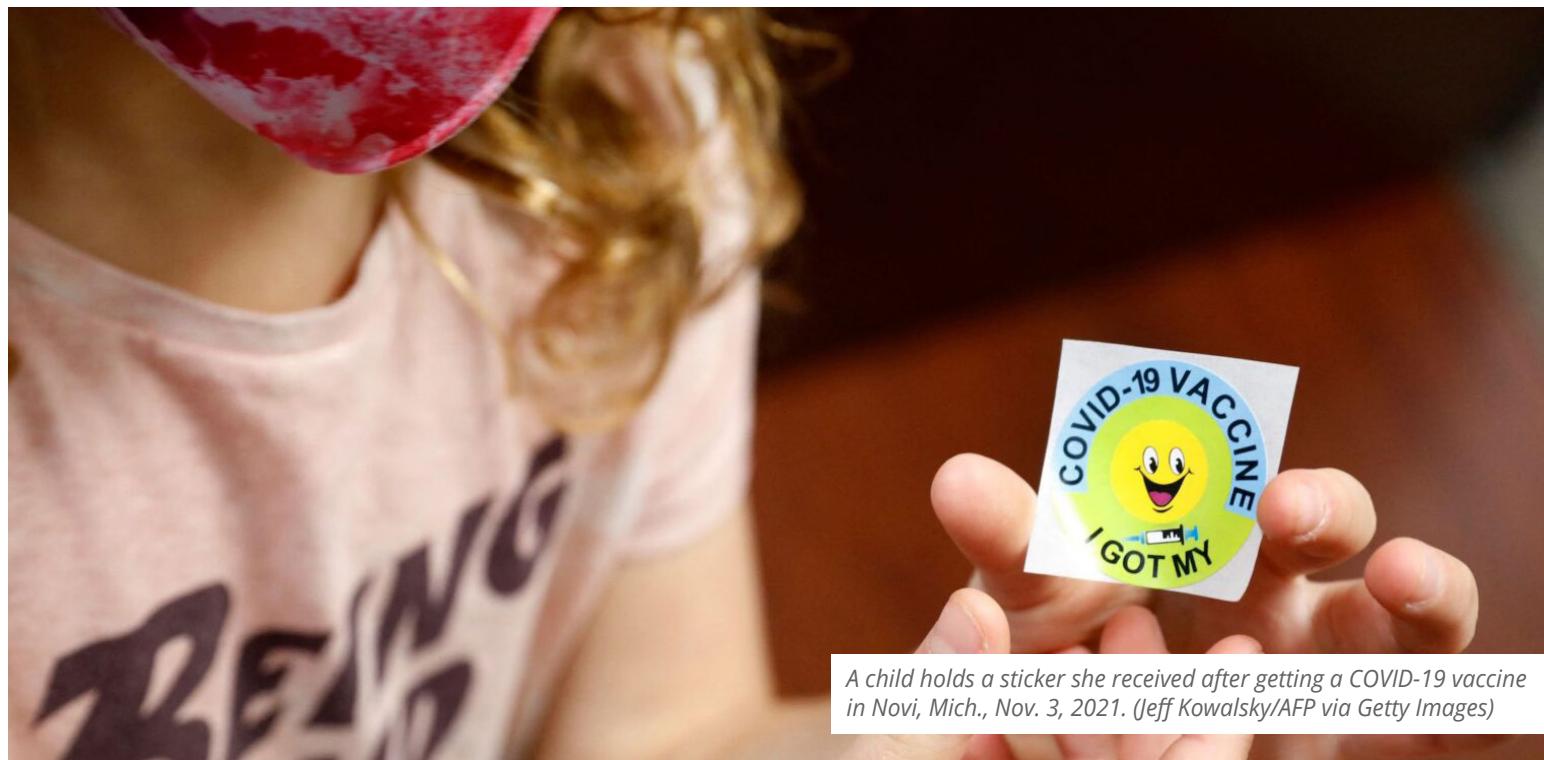


# The Jewish Week/end

New York

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A child holds a sticker she received after getting a COVID-19 vaccine in Novi, Mich., Nov. 3, 2021. (Jeff Kowalsky/AFP via Getty Images)

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## • NEWS

# Jewish Day Schools Rushed to Hold Vaccine Drives. Mandates May Come More Slowly.

By Julia Gergely and Shira Hanau

The morning after the Centers for Disease Control recommended a COVID-19 vaccine for children 5 and older, the Abraham Joshua Heschel School on Manhattan's Upper West Side had news for parents.

By Feb. 1, 2022, the school announced, all children eligible for the vaccine must be fully vaccinated. "Heschel's policy has been and remains that all eligible members of our in-school community must be vaccinated against Covid-19," wrote Head of School Ariela Dubler in an email to parents.

Ten miles away in the Riverdale section of the Bronx, the administration at another Jewish school, Kinneret Day School, waited longer before communicating with families about the new vaccines — then delivered a somewhat

different message.

"We strongly encourage parents to vaccinate their children," the school's top three administrators wrote in an email to parents, underlining that sentence for emphasis. But, they added, "until the FDA gives long-term approval for the vaccination we will stop short of a full mandate."

The contrasting approaches to the new vaccines come nearly a year after vaccines for adults first became available and after more than 18 months of vexing pandemic-related decisions for Jewish schools.

Children are required to be vaccinated against a host of diseases to attend schools all over the country. But state health authorities haven't yet added COVID-19 vaccines to the list, leaving it largely up to individual public school districts and private schools to make the call. Many public health experts say it's not yet the time for sweeping mandates, citing the fact that vaccine adoption is historically most effective when people are first given a chance to opt in.

"In the next three to six months, encouraging a self-directed push to get people to vaccinate their kids is probably what will help it to not be so 'line in the sand,'" Dr. Stella Safo, who runs a New York City-based health care company called Just Equity for Health, told NPR last month.

American Jews may need less of a push than others. They had the least COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy of any religious group in the United States according to a July survey by the Public Religion Research Institute. And in the days surrounding the pediatric vaccine's approval last month, Jewish parents posted online about how they eagerly anticipated their children's inoculations — and even prepared prayers to accompany them.

Capitalizing on that excitement, Jewish institutions across the country, including day schools, were some of the first to arrange on-site vaccine clinics and photo opportunities.

Jennifer Rak, whose children are in second and sixth grade at Heschel, said she felt a mixture of relief, excitement and hope when she took her kids to get vaccinated at the school's pop-up site.

"I'm so grateful that they have this mandate," she said.

At Beit Rabban Day School in Manhattan, students could get their first shot on site Nov. 14 during an event in

which teachers helped children say Shehechiyanu, the blessing recited upon reaching a new milestone, as they received their shots. Afterwards, kids were treated to a rooftop party with cupcakes and an art station where they could make their own pom pom coronaviruses.

"It was celebratory and beautiful," Stephanie Ives, Beit Rabban's head of school, said of the vaccine drive. "The children felt so comforted to be vaccinated at school, where they feel at home, especially seeing their teachers there to cheer them on."

Beit Rabban's policy is that all students and staff must be vaccinated against COVID-19 within 60 days of their eligibility.

Not all Jewish day school parents are rushing to get their children vaccinated; parents in two different states told JTA that they knew about a family leaving their children's school over vaccination expectations. The landscape is particularly different in Orthodox communities, which tend to be more right-wing and where misinformation about the pandemic, including false claims about the vaccines' effect on fertility, has spread widely.

Vaccination rates in many haredi Orthodox neighborhoods remain among the lowest in New York City, and when the city recently mandated vaccines for all employees at private schools, including yeshivas, haredi Orthodox leaders immediately objected. Parents at yeshivas, which have not widely enforced masking or distancing and in some cases operated in person when that was barred, say they have had no communication at all about COVID-19 vaccines for their children.

Blimi Marcus, a nurse in Brooklyn who has been outspoken about the need for her Orthodox community to take greater precautions against the virus, said her own children's schools had not communicated anything related to the pediatric vaccines, and she hadn't heard of any other schools that had.

"I'd be surprised to hear if they did," Marcus said.

Across the country, a few non-Orthodox schools schools are setting hard and fast vaccine requirements. Like Heschel in New York City, Milton Gottesman Jewish Day School of the Nation's Capital is requiring children to be vaccinated by Jan. 31; that's the school attended by the children of Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump until late

last year, when the family withdrew amid tension over its noncompliance with COVID-19 guidelines.

But other schools that have expressed excitement about the vaccines aren't yet requiring vaccination as a condition of enrollment — or have signaled that they may not in the near future.

At Hannah Senesh Community Day School, a nondenominational school in the Carroll Gardens neighborhood of Brooklyn, administrators have said vaccines will be required for children — but they have not yet set a vaccination deadline.

Two miles away, Luria Academy, a nondenominational school in Prospect Heights, held vaccine clinics on campus. But administrators there know that the school enrolls some families that are apprehensive or outright skeptical of the vaccines.

After some squabbling on an independent listserv for Luria-associated families, head of school Amanda Pogany wrote to parents Nov. 5.

"As vaccines entered the world, the decisions about how to create health policies for the school became even more complex," Head of School Amanda Pogany wrote to parents Nov. 5, after some squabbling on an independent listserv for Luria-associated families.

Pogany added, "We've worked hard to make the best decisions we can with the information we have, recognizing that, no matter which direction we choose on this complex topic, some members of our community will be impacted more than others, and some will not agree with Luria's decision. This does not, nor will it ever mean, that we don't want those people in our community."

With just days before the first under-12 children hit full vaccination, what's clear is that in many schools, children who are vaccinated will have a different experience from children who are not.

Kinneret outlined a typical approach in its letter to parents: Children who are fully vaccinated will no longer have to quarantine if they come in contact with someone who is positive for COVID-19. And children who are not vaccinated will have to present regular evidence of negative test results, undertaken on their own time.

Luria's program of testing students in school this year

will come to an end after the winter break; unvaccinated children will still have to test regularly outside of school. What's more, the school told families, "because classes will be mixed for [after-school] clubs, unvaccinated students will not be able to participate."

A parent at New York City's Shefa School, which serves Jewish children with disabilities, said the stakes attached to the school's decision around whether to require COVID-19 vaccines felt high.

"If you didn't want to get a vaccine at Heschel, you could find another Jewish school in the city without a mandate," said the parent, who asked for anonymity because of a personal policy against speaking on the record about her children. "It's not the same for Shefa students."

But she said she thought most families would choose vaccination regardless of what the school requires, both because they want to protect their children's health and because they are ready for the life that vaccination promises, so long as another wave or variant of COVID-19 doesn't upend everything yet again.

"It's not having to quarantine, it's being able to travel and see family in Israel," she said. "It gives the kids so much more freedom."

## ● NEWS

# Numbers Mark the Graves at a Former Psychiatric Hospital's Jewish Cemetery. Families Want Names — And Answers.

By Stewart Ain

While researching his family tree, Brian Madigan of Locust Grove, Virginia, found something strange: Although his maternal great-great-grandfather had lived in Brooklyn, he was buried in East Islip, on New York's Long Island.

Further research revealed that his relative, Napoleon Hedemark, had been committed to the Central Islip Psychiatric Center sometime before 1900. He died there on Nov. 21, 1916, at the age of 72. He was interred in its cemetery with simply a number to designate his grave.

Several weeks ago, Madigan wrote to the New York State Office of Mental Health asking for a copy of his relative's "full file" to learn the circumstances that led to him being committed, the exact location of his grave and a copy of his photograph.

"I'm just looking for some kind of closure," Madigan, 63, said. "I plan to visit there and I would like to know the location of his grave so I can erect a marker [with Hedemark's name]. I can't abide by my ancestors' graves going unmarked."

Madigan, a defense contractor, may get his closure — thanks to a twice-delayed agreement between a Jewishly affiliated law school and the Office of Mental Health. Before the COVID pandemic hit, they had agreed to care for the Jewish and non-Jewish portions of the cemetery and to assist relatives who believe a loved one is buried there.

For Napoleon Hedemark and other former patients interred at the cemetery, it is an opportunity to restore in death the dignity they may have been denied over the 120-year history of what had been one of the largest psychiatric hospitals in the United States. The unacknowledged dead include Holocaust survivors, who twice in their lives were given numbers instead of names.

Madigan was referred to the state by Sam Levine, director of the Jewish Law Institute at the Touro Law Center, which was built on a portion of the psychiatric hospital's property after it was closed in 1998. The cemetery is all that remains of the hospital, which was opened in 1889. The cemetery holds the graves of an estimated 5,500 former patients from not only the Central Islip facility, but the Kings Park and Pilgrim State psychiatric hospitals. After the Central Islip hospital closed, the state fenced off the cemetery, restricted public access and provided mowing and cleanup.

Shortly after Touro opened in 2007 as a law school "consistent with Jewish tradition," Ken Rosenblum, then the school's associate dean of admissions, walked out the south door of the school and saw a rusted fence at the

end of the parking lot.

Pushing aside overgrown brush, he began walking through a seemingly empty field until he realized he was stepping on graves and rectangular stones, flush with the earth, bearing numbers. He then saw two iron gates covered with vines, each marked with a rusting Star of David.

While Rosenblum was unaware that there was a Jewish cemetery with some 500 graves in Touro's backyard, others remembered. The Jewish section had been consecrated in 1980 by Rabbi Melvyn Lerer, the former Jewish chaplain at the psychiatric center. He had raised funds for the cemetery's restoration, the installation of the gate with the Star of David and the purchase of proper headstones for all future internments, which numbered about 100 until the hospital closed.

Ben Etkin, president of the Men's Club at the North Shore Jewish Center in Port Jefferson, Long Island, said that each year for the last 30 years the Men's Club has held a ceremony at the Jewish section of the cemetery at which they recited the Mourner's Kaddish for those buried there.

"We have never failed to have a minyan. These people have no one to say Kaddish for them," he said. "We go each year after the High Holidays. We walk around and clear some of the footstones that have been covered up. And we tell some anecdotes. The people buried there deserve it. It's a shame they were buried under just a number."

Until a few years ago, Rabbi Lerer attended this annual ritual and would often remark that those buried there were forgotten in life and discarded in death, Levine said.

In an interview, Lerer, 92, suggested how so many people would come to be buried in a hospital cemetery, without even a name to remind people who they were. "Most of them were bereft of families," said Lerer, who in 2018 retired after 42 years as the Jewish chaplain at Pilgrim State and before that at Central Islip. "Many had been in the hospital for 40, 50 or 60 years, and they were the only ones left in their family."

Some families were also "embarrassed that they had a relative in a psychiatric hospital and so they didn't want to claim the body. So I arranged the funeral and for the chevra kadisha [burial society] of Shomrei Hadas Chapels in Borough Park. At each funeral, the only ones there

were myself, the guy who died and the gravedigger."

Hired at Central Islip in 1976, Lerer he met with the hospital's deputy director and soon had an area designating the area as a Jewish cemetery.

From then on, each person buried in the Jewish cemetery had a headstone that contained a Jewish star, their name in English, both the Hebrew and English date and the words in Hebrew: "May their souls be bound up in the bond of eternal life."

In October 2013, the law school and the state signed their agreement in which the Office of Mental Health agreed to restore the cemetery and help relatives identify ancestors who lie under numbered stones. The project was delayed for a number of years before being revived in 2019.

There were plans to "hold a big event at which we would erect an historic marker at the cemetery, but then COVID came along and it was no longer a priority," Levine added.

James Plastiras, a spokesman for the Office of Mental Health, said that project is once again under way, and would include a historical marker and paving an existing walkway.

He added that families are free to erect approved markers at the graves of relatives "once direct lineage has been established" through the supervising facilities' Records Department.

Rosenblum, who is now retired, also noted that some of those interred at the cemetery were Holocaust survivors.

"I felt so moved to get involved in the cemetery when I learned Holocaust survivors are buried there," Rosenblum said. "That was one of the reasons I made a pest of myself to get funding for a beautiful new fence.... We want to pave the central walkway and put in benches so that students can use this as a place of quiet reflection and there would be limited public access."

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## ● NEWS

# At UJA-Federation's Wall Street Dinner, Held Under the Shadow of COVID, Attendees Pledge to Fight Antisemitism

By Ben Sales

Despite the swanky setting and the (mostly) maskless crowd in bespoke suits and dresses, UJA-Federation of New York's Wall Street Dinner Monday night made very clear that the city — and even its most affluent denizens — still lived in the shadow of the pandemic.

There was an atmosphere of relief in the room, with the usual scenes of hugging, smiling and schmoozing that typify fundraising dinners. Hors d'oeuvres were eaten, awards were given and speeches were made.

But the ongoing effects of COVID pervaded the event Monday night at the Marriott Marquis in midtown Manhattan, and lent it an air of guardedness. Former Mayor Michael Bloomberg received the night's main award, and Stephanie Cohen, an executive at Goldman Sachs, was also honored.

But in the first speech, former Goldman Sachs CEO (and current chairman) Lloyd Blankfein made a point of reminding attendees how the pandemic has bared their privilege.

"The lesson of COVID that's most pertinent to tonight's purpose is just how bifurcated our society is," said Blankfein, who emceed the event.

"So let me say, at the risk of being provocative and sounding tone deaf, I had a pretty good pandemic, and most of my friends who live in the same bubble as me had a pretty good pandemic too," he continued. "The market went up and we even made money. That is our

bubble. But what about the rest of the world, the 99%? People in service jobs who had to show up or whose jobs didn't survive the pandemic?"

The pandemic was also present in the attendees' interactions. Before checking their coats and passing through metal detectors, they stood in a snaking line to show their vaccination cards and IDs — a process that New Yorkers have gotten used to. A huge sign on the way to the ballroom read "UNDAUNTED. RESILIENT. READY," above a picture of people wearing masks. Those three words also scrolled on an electronic marquee around the room. Another sign was blunter: "LEADING IN COVID RECOVERY."

The event raised a record \$32 million for UJA-Federation, slightly above the \$31 million haul of last year's virtual dinner. And speakers reminded the crowd of the additional \$70 million above its budget that UJA raised for COVID relief.

But Monday night's proceedings were pared down from pre-pandemic levels, with only 700 in-person attendees instead of the 2,000 in 2019, and no actual dinner. Instead of sitting at tables, the crowd sat in rows to listen to the speakers. And conversations during the cocktail hour revolved around the strange normalcy of gathering after more than a year apart.

One attendee joked to his friend, "I don't recognize you not in casual clothes." Another estimated that half the men in the room had decided to go without ties this year. A group of younger men stood around a table talking about the results of the 2020 election in Orthodox neighborhoods.

And in addition to Blankfein, other speakers made plain that the purpose of the event was to give of their wealth to people who have had a harder time since COVID hit.

"The pandemic has been difficult for everyone, but it has highlighted the profound inequities in our society," said Cohen, who was given the Alan C. Greenberg Young Leadership Award. "These are the headlines that don't make it onto CNBC: One and a half million New Yorkers are struggling to feed themselves and their families right now."

The other theme of the night — which Bloomberg highlighted in his speech at the end of the event — was combating antisemitism across the political spectrum. Videos

and speakers throughout the dinner lamented rising antisemitism, particularly the spike in attacks in New York that followed the May conflict in Israel and Gaza.

UJA-Federation CEO Eric Goldstein condemned the 2018 "Tree of Life massacre by a white nationalist" in Pittsburgh, and received applause when he noted antisemitism and anti-Zionism on the left. "There's now a sense that having progressive values... is somehow inconsistent with living proudly Jewish lives or supporting Israel's right to exist," he said.

Before Bloomberg decried antisemitism in his own address, he basked in some of the crowd's wistfulness for his unsuccessful 2020 campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. TV star Judge Judy Sheindlin, who introduced him via video, said she wished he had been elected, drawing applause.

And Bloomberg got a dig in at Sen. Bernie Sanders, the Vermont Independent, in his speech. "I was not the only Jewish candidate trying to make history in that primary campaign, but I was the only one who didn't want to turn America into a kibbutz," the media mogul said of the democratic socialist.

The bulk of his speech, however, was a call to remove partisanship from the fight against antisemitism, which he said has turned into "a perverse form of whataboutism."

"Too many on the right seem only concerned about antisemitism when it occurs on the left — and vice-versa," he said. "When antisemitism appears in their own ranks, they try to ignore it. Or, they will say, in effect: 'Well, the antisemites in your party are far worse than the ones in mine.'"

He added that the fight against antisemitism should not be divorced from the broader fight against discrimination. He noted that while he opposes the movement to boycott Israel and the exclusion of pro-Israel students from progressive campus spaces, as mayor he also defended the rights of pro-boycott students to speak at The City University of New York.

Fragmenting the Jewish community along partisan lines, he said, only serves antisemites.

"This is a tactic designed to keep Jews in both parties quiet, and force us to tolerate what they deem to be accept-

able levels of antisemitism," he said. "Well, we need to make clear: There is no acceptable level of antisemitism – just as there is no acceptable form of racism, or ethnic hatred, or religious intolerance, towards any group."

## ● NEWS

# Student Government at NYU School Named for Steinhardt Calls for Removal of Philanthropist's Name

By Shira Hanau

Student government leaders at New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development are calling for the school to remove Michael Steinhardt's name after it was revealed that the philanthropist had acquired, owned and sold more than 1,000 looted items over the past 30 years.

The undergraduate and graduate students government released a joint statement Wednesday noting that the school's name had become "tainted by Michael Steinhardt's abhorrent actions."

"We, as leaders of our school's student government, unequivocally denounce the actions of Michael Steinhardt," they wrote in a statement shared to Instagram.

"Having someone be the namesake of our school that has committed actions polar opposite of what we teach on those very same topics to students, I think it would really be a disgrace," Anthony Cruz, president of the school's undergraduate student government told the Washington Square News, NYU's student newspaper.

Earlier this week, the philanthropist, who is a major donor to NYU as well as a number of Jewish organizations, forfeited 180 stolen antiquities worth \$70 million in a deal with Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance to avoid criminal charges.

On Thursday, NYU's board of trustees said it would

conduct an investigation into Steinhardt's conduct, the Washington Square News reported.

This was not the first time students at NYU have called for Steinhardt's name to be removed from the school, which was named in honor of his \$10 million gift to the school in 2001. In 2019, students at the school called for his name to be removed after Steinhardt was accused of propositioning and making sexually inappropriate remarks to several women with whom he interacted as part of their work in Jewish philanthropy or the arts.

At the time, Steinhardt denied the accusations and has not apologized, but acknowledged a pattern of comments "that were boorish, disrespectful, and just plain dumb."

## ● NEWS

# Despite Looming Cream Cheese Shortage, New York's Bagel Shops Are Still Laying It on Thick

By Julia Gergely

Over the weekend, bagel lovers across the five boroughs (read: Jews and everyone else) were shaken to the core when The New York Times announced a cream cheese shortage in the city. It was news no one expected to hear, even in their most dystopian predictions about our pandemic-ravaged society.

A cream cheese shortage affecting bagel shops: so niche, yet so terrifying. The piece, by Ashley Wong, detailed a frightening shortage of cream cheese base that New York bagel sellers use to make their signature cream cheeses.

"Supply chain issues have plagued the United States for months, causing scarcities of everything from cars to running shoes," the Times story reads. "Now, New York's bagel purveyors are starting to feel the effects in a sudden and surprising development that has left them scrambling to find and hoard as much cream cheese as

they can."

Not surprisingly, Twitter was aflutter with commentary. One person called the news a "schmear campaign." Others were quick to shift blame, insisting that supply-chain issues notwithstanding, bagel shops brought this scourge upon themselves — New York City's bagel places are notorious for spreading their schmear so thick that it's a common practice to wipe off massive globs of cream cheese with a cheap paper napkin before taking a bite.

"Let's be real: the cream cheese shortage is entirely self-inflicted from NYC bagel shops loading each bagel with a pound of cream cheese," tweeted Jake Anbinder on Sunday.

So what, exactly, does a cream cheese shortage mean for those of us who consume bagels on the regular? Is this as bad as it sounds? And does this mean that bagel shops might actually give us less cream cheese with our orders (something that a cadre of New Yorkers seem to want)? At the New York Jewish Week, it was clear that it was time to investigate. So I headed to the East Village where I was able to hit up several bagel shops within a 10-block radius.

My first stop was Tal Bagels at 357 First Avenue. The workers behind the counter there had heard of the shortage, but they assured me they had enough cream cheese.

"It's not going to affect your order," they told me. "You'll still see the same amount of cream cheese on your bagel."

They insisted I shouldn't worry so much — but that's easier said than done. "There's a cream cheese shortage?" the man in line next to me asked as a look of concern crossed his face. Clearly he had spent the weekend in a state of ignorant bliss.

"No, no, we're OK!" the guys behind the counter reassured him.

At Bagel Boss, 263 First Avenue, no one in the store had heard of any cream cheese shortage. "It's the same as always," the man behind the counter told me. The only shortage he'd noticed, he added, was of coins, which has been going on since the beginning of the pandemic.

At Ess-A-Bagel, at 324 First Avenue, the staff there acknowledged the shortage, but said it wasn't anything new.

"There have been shortages in everything since the pandemic started — cups, lids, napkins — it's not particularly a cream cheese shortage that's affecting us," explained Beverly Wilpon, the store's chief operating officer. "It's something we've learned to accept. We have no choice."

Tompkins Square Bagels, 184 Second Avenue, was the first place I visited that acknowledged the magnitude of the shortage.

"I've never seen anything like it in my 45 years in the industry," Frank Russo, director of operations, told me. "We're used to getting pallets of 50-pound packages, and for the last two weeks we've been getting it in 3-pound blocks."

Still, Russo explained, the shortage is less of true scarcity and more about inconveniences (i.e., the labor involved in unwrapping 3-pound packages versus 50-pound packages). Sure enough, the store's glass cases were filled with mounds of cream cheese in a variety of flavors, from scallion to peanut butter cookie dough.

It's now a matter of finding new and farther-flung suppliers to acquire the 1,800 pounds of cream cheese needed to get through the week, Russo said, adding that the average bagel patron is unlikely to notice the cream cheese shortage in their day-to-day lives.

Russo also remarked upon the various supply-chain issues that Tompkins Square Bagels has experienced — the only flavor of Snapple they've been able to carry, for example, is Raspberry Tea. As at Ess-A-Bagel, Wilpon also described a shortage of paper and plastic products such as napkins, lids and coffee cups.

The Times story detailed many bagel sellers' scramble to source enough cream cheese. But perhaps there is another approach: As Brooklyn-based civil rights attorney Joel Wertheimer — a former White House staff secretary to President Obama — tweeted on Saturday, echoing Anbinder: "Have they considered not putting a pound on each bagel?"

"I love a good schmear but bagel places put enough cream cheese on a bagel that it overflows," Wertheimer told me over Twitter DM. "It seems like they could cut down by like 25% and nobody would notice."

I floated the idea of using less schmear at all the bagel

stores I visited and was met with resounding pushback. "Imagine if Katz's didn't serve a 6-inch-thick pastrami sandwich," Russo said. "It wouldn't be Katz's."

Wilpon at Ess-A-Bagel concurred. "We'd rather say we have no cream cheese left than give someone less of the product they've ordered," she said.

"Absolutely not," said the guys at Tal's Bagels.

"I have very high standards of quality," Russo said. "Part of that is getting the cream cheese-to-bagel ratio just right. I would never alter that."

## ● NEWS

# A '70s Ad for Bernstein on Essex Will Make You Nostalgic for a Lost New York

By Julia Gergely

Throughout her childhood, filmmaker Bex Schwartz heard stories about Bernstein on Essex, a kosher Chinese eatery on the Lower East Side.

"The way my family talked about it, I thought that whatever the 'Bernstein on Essex Street' is — [it] was just this glowing utopia in the distance," she told The New York Jewish Week. "Kind of like Disneyland."

And in some ways — among a certain segment of Jewish New Yorkers, at least — Bernstein was a sort of Disneyland: It was the only kosher Chinese restaurant in town.

These days, options for kosher dining are practically endless; diners can choose among Italian, Middle Eastern, Chinese, Indian and more. But back in the 1960s and '70s, Bernstein on Essex — also known as Schmulka Bernstein's — was one of the few places an adventurous kosher diner could go for something besides

Old World favorites. It was the kind of establishment where Jewish patrons lined up for dinners on Christmas Eve and snacks after a late night of dancing. It hosted family gatherings and business lunches. The menu was wide-ranging, serving both traditional delicatessen food as well as Chinese fare like egg rolls and lo mein.

The once-popular restaurant closed in the 1990s, part of a wave of redevelopment and reinvention of restaurants and businesses — including Ratner's (closed in 2004) and the Garden Cafeteria (closed in 1983) — in the once very Jewish Lower East Side. Still there's something about Bernstein on Essex, with its yellow and red neon sign, that remains a source of nostalgia for New York Jews of a certain age.

And thanks to an old commercial made about the place, Schwartz had a chance not only to celebrate the place, but remember the cousins — yes, the fabled Bernsteins turned out to be her cousins — that her family was so proud of.

The ad was filmed sometime in the 1970s, and has repeatedly made the rounds on social and mainstream media since it was first posted on YouTube in 2018 by Kinolibrary, an independent British archive. They also posted a four-minute clip of footage taken inside the restaurant that has lost its sound.

"A kosher Chinese meal," the narrator says, as the ad shows a typical day at the restaurant: hot dogs on the grill, men taking deli orders behind the counter, women looking at the menu and chatting while eating their meals. "A curious, unlikely mixture, yes," the narrator says. "Maybe that's the secret of New York."

Schwartz, who grew up in New Jersey and now lives in Manhattan, discovered the footage while doing research on the Jewish tradition of eating Chinese food on Christmas — and immediately recognized the Bernstein name. They were the cousins her family was always talking about. She knew their restaurant was a big deal for the New York Jewish community, but still, the film surprised and delighted her.

On Monday, Schwartz posted the clip on Twitter. "For a project I'm working on, I found 35mm footage of my family's (on my dad's mom's side) kosher chinese restaurant, the Bernstein's on Essex Street," she wrote.

Others shared in the excitement in replies to her post. Writer Jason Diamond wrote, "My aunt used to talk about it like it was the height of all food."

"I was obsessed with this place as a kid! We affectionately called it Schmulka Bernstein's and I always got the spare ribs," wrote another user.

"Went there in the late 60s/early 70s when shopping downtown with my grandparents. My grandfather would order a hot dog to have as an appetizer while he waited for his corned beef sandwich. This is where I learned to love Cel-Ray!" said a third.

Opened in 1957 at 135 Essex St., Bernstein on Essex was operated by Solomon Bernstein, who named the restaurant after his father, Schmulka, who owned a kosher butcher shop on Ludlow Street. In 1959, Schmulka Bernstein's began to offer Chinese food, using veal, beef and chicken liver in lieu of pork in certain recipes.

The Bernsteins were the cousins of Schwartz's grandmother, who spoke of the restaurant owners as if they were celebrities.

"For the Bernsteins to come to my brother's bris was like the biggest possible deal," she said. "It became a song I played in my head when I was a kid: The Bernsteins are coming! The Bernsteins are coming!"

"To me it was just this thing my grandmother was obsessed with because they were family," she added, "so it's so nice to see how important the restaurant was to them, too."

Over the years, the memory of Bernstein on Essex has been kept alive in various forms, from a piece in Bowery Boogie last year, to a feature in the research project "Mapping Yiddish New York" out of Columbia University, to an explainer on the empty storefront in The New York Times. Columbia journalism professor Ari Goldman write a nostalgic essay in The Jewish Week in 2012.

Michele Clark, a niece of Sol Bernstein, has also written a blog about her childhood on the Lower East Side, in which Bernstein on Essex is heavily featured.

These days, 135 Essex looks to be occupied by Sons of Essex, a New American bar and restaurant. Before that it was a Chinese meat wholesaler. On the same block is a hookah bar, a taco joint, a dentist's office and a luxury

condo building.

In other words: a curious, unlikely mixture. But maybe that's the secret to New York.

## ● EDITOR'S DESK

# A White Jewish Guy's Defense of 'West Side Story'

*An object lesson in how to view a work of art through another's eyes.*

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

I first saw "West Side Story" in elementary school, when the first film version made its debut on network television. (This was decades before the VCR, when a television broadcast was about the only way to see a movie that had already left theaters, even yers earlier.) I remember the last scene, with Maria sobbing over the body of the slain Tony, and thinking, "If only everyone could see this movie, then people would stop hating and killing each other."

The next day at school, boys divided themselves into Sharks and Jets, and started "rumbling" during recess. The principle had to go on the loudspeaker and warn us that fighting during lunchtime would not be tolerated.

So much for world peace.

It wouldn't be the first time I misread the musical or how it would be perceived by others.

I've always loved "West Side Story," and thrilled to what is famously the creation of four Jewish men: composer Leonard Bernstein, lyricist Stephen Sondheim, choreographer Jerome Robbins, and book writer Arthur Laurents. I've seen it in various revivals, watched the film more times than I can count, and spent a memorable night at Tanglewood watching the film accompanied by a live orchestra. I couldn't imagine anyone not recognizing it for the masterpiece that it is.

And then I read the objections of various Puerto Rican and Latino writers and critics. In a New York Times essay last year, the Puerto Rican writer and translator Carina del Valle Schorske complains about the musical's "stereotypes of macho teenage gangsters and hysterical lovers." She and others remain aghast that the musical reduces the complex story of Puerto Rican migration to the United States and New York City in particular to a mere theatrical device. She notes that little about the film – the accents, the music, the choreography – is true to Puerto Rican traditions.

Others remain hurt that many of the lead roles in the film, as they did on Broadway, went to non-Latino actors, in brown-face yet: Natalie Wood as Maria, George Chakiris as Bernardo. Yes, Rita Moreno won the best supporting actress Oscar for her portrayal of Anita, an accolade that can make the film's creators and fans feel better about themselves only in hindsight.

There is also the question of who gets to tell a story – a question that is front and center as Steven Spielberg is about to release his own version of the musical, with a script by another Jewish-American, Tony Kushner. Spielberg is treading very carefully not to be seen as co-opting the Puerto Rican narrative, telling an interviewer that he "really wanted to tell that Puerto Rican, Nuyorican experience of basically the migration to this country and the struggle to make a living, and to have children, and to battle against the obstacles of xenophobia and racial prejudice." He has consulted with Latino cast and crew and held a listening session at the University of Puerto Rico with students and faculty.

That session demonstrated the disconnect between how a white American Jew like me and a native Puerto Rican can perceive the same work of art. To me, the "America" dance and song have always been a triumph, a matchless melody wedded to brilliant lyrics and heart-stopping choreography. When Anita sings, "Puerto Rico, you ugly island, island of tropic diseases / Always the hurricanes blowing, Always the population growing / And the money owing, And the babies crying / And the bullets flying" – I hear it as an immigrant's self-justification for a difficult move, and as a corrective to the rosy memories of her friends.

But as the film critic Mario Alegre told Spielberg, the lyrics were always hurtful to Puerto Ricans like him, and

all the immigrants who left the island out of economic necessity. "The musical always presented it like, 'Screw the island. I love America.' But every time there's been a massive migration from Puerto Rico, it's been over economic austerity," said Alegre. "The musical never explained that it was out of necessity."

In the same listening session, Kushner blamed the lyrics on the Jewish roots of the show's creators, whose ancestors were driven out of a Europe that few looked back on fondly. "They're using the Jewish immigrant experience, the notion that you look back where you came from and go 'yech,'" he explained.

*"I always felt the musical was deeply sympathetic to its Puerto Rican characters, who are cooler and more put-upon than Tony and his mixed gang of white ethnic hoodlums."*

And there, in a nutshell, is the way even well-intentioned art can hurt and divide. I always felt the musical was deeply sympathetic to its Puerto Rican characters, who are cooler and more put-upon than Tony and his mixed gang of white ethnic hoodlums. The anti-Puerto Rican sentiment of the time is embodied in the rank racism of Lieutenant Schrank, and the musical is an unmistakable appeal to accept brown immigrants as part of the American fabric. "Puerto Rico's in America!" is the last, defiant line of "America."

Clearly a lot of Latino viewers don't see it that way. Spielberg has his work cut out for him, and has enlisted Moreno, who stars in his film as a newly written character, as an executive producer and collaborator. Moreno said she was helping to "fix and ameliorate" the "white-washing" of the original film, and "I think they have done an incredible job." Kushner has already won high praise for capturing the African-American experience in the current Broadway revival of "Caroline, or Change."

With any luck, Spielberg's "West Side Story" will make the musical sing for a new era, and the film's release will allow us to acknowledge both the genius of the original show and how change begins with listening to other's voices.

**Andrew Silow-Carroll** is the editor in chief of The New York Jewish Week and senior editor of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (@SilowCarroll).

● SABBATH WEEK / PARSHAT VAYIGASH

# Joseph and the Amazing Turmoil that Can Haunt a Family

*One generation's triumph can't erase past hurts and regrets.*

By Beth Kissileff

The Torah is not a musical, although the Joseph cycle (Genesis 37-50) is the rare section of the Torah to have gotten the musical treatment.

It makes sense. The drama — with kidnapping and human trafficking, accusations of rape, beautiful men and women (Joseph, Benjamin and their mother Rachel), an elaborate garment and tales of parental favoritism, sibling rivalry of epic proportion — is worthy of the stage. This week's portion, Vayigash, is perhaps the section most amenable to a grandiose dramatic treatment. The de facto ruler of Egypt is confronted by 11 men he claims are spies, one of whom has ostensibly stolen the goblet he uses to divine. A brother of the accused man pleads eloquently and successfully before the jury of one, winning his brother's exoneration. The Torah is short on physical description in general; here, the fever pitch of emotion is enough to set the scene for us.

What is the substance of the closing argument, the clincher that finally breaks the composure of the famously self-controlled Joseph, who twice before hid his emotions from his brothers (44:18) and others (42:24)?

In his appeal, Judah imagines the "harm that will overtake my father"(44:34) if he returns to Jacob without the son of his beloved Rachel. Once Joseph realizes that his father has pined for him all these years and that his brothers regret the pain they caused, he finally stops the show. He can be a brother, connected to his siblings, rather than the powerful and imperious ruler. Joseph embraces his emotions and his Jewish identity, even going so far (according to Genesis Rabbah 93:8) as to reveal his circumcision to the disbelieving brethren.

The drama does not stop here though. Jacob, the one who set the whole plot in motion by sending his son Joseph off to seek the welfare of his brothers and their flocks in Shechem (Genesis 37:14), now needs to learn the denouement: Joseph lives. One might think that the longed-for news of the fate of his son would thrill Jacob. Instead, his heart "went numb for he did not believe them"(Genesis 45:26). The word translated here as "numb" appears also in Habakkuk 1:4, Psalms 38:9 and 77:3 and appears to be some kind of weakening or fainting.

To me, this is the central moment in Vayigash. Despite Joseph's lack of desire to take revenge ("It was not you who sent me here but God," he tells his guilty brothers [Genesis 45:8]), despite the success of Joseph and his ability to save his brethren and protect them during the years of a difficult famine, harm has been done. Joseph can forgive his brothers, but the damage to his father from their actions is ongoing. In fact, science shows that grieving a child increases a parent's chance of having a heart attack.

The years without his son – and without knowing his fate – did lasting harm to Jacob. All he can say, when asked his age by Pharaoh, is "Few and bitter have been the years of my life nor do they achieve the life spans of my fathers"(47:8-9). Jacob lives to 147, where Abraham lives 175 years and Isaac to 180. Jacob sees the entirety of his life through the lens of his suffering, and can't even temper his emotions for the mighty Pharaoh, the ruler who is sustaining them all.

**"Jacob sees the entirety of his life through the lens of his suffering."**

Yet Jacob does find some happiness once he learns that Joseph lives. On his journey to Egypt, Jacob stops for the night at Beer Sheva, the place he had set out from at the beginning of his journey (28:10) and the place where his father Isaac had a revelation, made an altar and dug a well (26:23-25). When Isaac experienced his dream vision at night, God explained that "I am the God of your father Abraham." This is the first time this patriarchal epithet, "God of your father," is used in the Torah, Nahum Sarna points out in his commentary on Genesis. Thus, Beer Sheva is the nexus, the place that connects past and future.

As Jacob journeys to see his favored son Joseph, he is

also aware that this place is where his father Isaac communicated with the God of his own father. The bitterness remains, yet God saying "I Myself will go down with you to Egypt and I Myself will also bring you back"(46:4) gives Jacob an assurance, a steadfastness that enables him to live those last 17 years in Egypt with that knowledge that God is with him, even if he perceives his life to be short and bitter.

Jacob is able to be at the place where he started his own journey and realize that his past will be activated for him, and that the God who protected the past two generations will be with him as well, even as he goes toward an uncertain future. His heart and his spirit may not be completely tranquil, but Jacob is able to get the message from God he needs. His connection to God and his transmission of it to his family makes continuity possible. It's an operatic moment, if not a musical one.

**Beth Kissileff** is the co-editor of "Bound in the Bond of Life: Pittsburgh Writers on the Tree of Life Tragedy" and author of the novel "Questioning Return."

## ● MUSINGS

# Why Don't We Bless One Another?

By David Wolpe

At the end of Genesis and the end of the Torah, Jacob and Moses offer extended blessings. We take this in stride – after all, they are biblical titans, and obviously they have both the power and the disposition to bless. Why do we feel so shy then about blessing one another?

## CANDLELIGHTING, READINGS:

**Tevet 6, 5782 | Friday, December 10, 2021**

- **Light candles at:** 4:10 p.m. (NYC)

**Tevet 7, 5782 | Saturday, December 11, 2021**

- **Torah reading:** Vayigash, Genesis 44:18–47:27
- **Haftarah:** Ezekiel 37:15–28
- **Shabbat ends:** 5:14 p.m. (NYC)

It is not because we are inadequate. After all, when you bless someone you are a conduit, not a source. The blessing does not come from me, but through me. You need not be a perfect person (as if there were such a thing) to bless another person. I am passing on to you what is not mine without losing it myself, a candle igniting a second candle, none of them the source of fire.

On Friday nights Jewish parents bless their children. Yet everyone can offer this boon to others; a blessing is a wish elevated by intangible power. May God bless you with the courage to offer blessings.

*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.*

## ● NY NOSHER

# When Concert Halls Closed, Jewish Musician Navah Perlman Frost Pivoted to Designing Cakes Too Beautiful to Believe

By Rachel Ringler

For most of her life, professional pianist Navah Perlman Frost spent at least part of each day practicing her music in preparation for upcoming performances. But when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, the music stopped. Concert halls closed. Recitals were cancelled.

At first, Frost, 51, took the drying up of her concert schedule as "a good moment to recharge my batteries," she told The New York Jewish Week. She never could have imagined that, as the months progressed, her career would pivot as markedly as it did.

Frost, a child of New York's Upper West Side, grew up in a musical family. Her parents are musicians; notably, her father is violin virtuoso Itzhak Perlman. Frost began taking piano lessons when she was 6 years old and performed professionally for the first time when she was 15. This meant that, by the time the COVID lockdown began, she had been a working musician for 35 years.

But Frost is also an accomplished cook and baker, and she did both enthusiastically for her husband, four children, extended family and friends. As the reality of the pandemic set in and the months passed by, Frost found herself obsessing — not so much about music but about buttercream frosting.

Frost said she couldn't stop thinking about creative ways to use buttercream to decorate her baked goods. Day after day, she was pulled back into the kitchen and what emerged became more elaborate, more beautiful and more awe-inspiring with each iteration.

"The artistry she showed as a musician translated into the beauty of the baked goods she was making," said her sister-in-law Stephanie Perlman. "Not just in how they tasted — they were delicious — but in how they looked."

Perlman — along with other friends and family members — urged Frost to try to sell her creations. But she demurred. With its wide variety of top-notch bakeries, New York City didn't need yet another cake baker, she said.

Except nobody else in this great city was beautifying cakes quite like she was. "Extraordinary" is how celebrated baker and James Beard Award-winning cookbook author Dorie Greenspan describes Frost's work. "What she does is a magical blend of passion for her art, technical skill and boundless curiosity," Greenspan said.

Frost's cakes are adorned with botanically themed decorations that are so realistic that one could swear they are looking at fresh flowers. She is best known for her cupcake "bouquets" — bunches of cupcakes covered with richly colored buttercream flowers, presented like sumptuous floral arrangements.

But that's not all: In a nod, perhaps, to her art history degree from Brown University, Frost also delights in recreating works of art in buttercream. Recently, she made a Casa Azul cake, inspired by artist Frieda Kahlo's cobalt blue home in Mexico City. Her cake that replicates Van

Gogh's iris paintings look almost too precious to eat.

Perhaps her love of cake decorating was destiny — after all, her married name is Frost. Her daughter, Frost said, coined the name of her newly minted baking business: Frosted by Navah. At first, she just sold her cakes to a devoted group of friends and family. But word spread beyond that small nucleus, and Instagram further escalated things. Frost then set up a web site, and Frosted by Navah was up and running by December 2020, less than eight months after she began baking and frosting regularly.

Client Ulrika Citron told The New York Jewish Week that, to celebrate her son's and his girlfriend's graduation from business school, she ordered two cakes: one banana, the other a dairy-free chocolate-raspberry creation. "The cake you get is as beautiful as pictured," she said. "You get what you see on Instagram."

While her "pivot" — which is how Frost describes her career change — may seem anomalous, Frost sees commonalities between playing the piano and cake decorating. Both art forms require intricate handiwork; playing the piano for so many years sharpened her hands' dexterity and control, allowing her to craft her precise floral applications.

And then there is the interpretation that she brings to both fields. "I may play the same Beethoven sonata 10 times, but each time I play it it is slightly different than the time before because I am not a machine," she said. "Something may occur to me that didn't occur the other times that I performed that piece. The same goes with my cakes. I don't make carbon copies. My work is more of an art than a science. Neither product can be cloned."

And just as Frost delights in playing to a receptive audience as a musician, she loves getting positive feedback on a cake she made. "It's a similar feeling of putting something out in the world that makes somebody happy," she said.

How have her parents reacted to her career change? "My parents think it's great," she said. "They are very supportive. What surprised them about my baking career was the highly decorative stuff that was not a regular thing for me until this moment in time."

Recently, for her father's birthday, she made him a special birthday cake — and no, it wasn't shaped like

a violin. Her dad's favorite candies are Kit Kats, so she prepared a beautiful floral cake with a surprise inside: Between the cake and the frosting, it was layered with Kit Kat bars.

When will her baking end and her musical career begin again? "I am not performing any more," said Frost. "I am trying to figure it all out, trying to not get ahead of myself. I am having such a good time that it is hard to think of abandoning this. But you never know."

Until then, you can find her performing in the key of F, for frosting.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

**December 11 | 7:30 p.m.** \$28+

### Hanukkah Afterglow Concert

Town & Village Synagogue, 334 E. 14th St., presents an evening of Yiddish, Hebrew and English songs and music featuring Yiddish vocalist Anthony Mordechai Tzvi Russell, Town & Village Synagogue Cantor Shayna Postman and T&V's Adult Choir and Junior Singers.

Get tickets at <https://bit.ly/3pMEFw5>

**December 12 | 2:00 p.m.** Free

### The Social Justice Torah Commentary

East End Temple (245 E. 17th St.) presents the New York City book launch of "The Social Justice Torah Commentary" (CCAR Press, 2021), featuring an in-person panel with local contributing authors followed by a book signing.

Register at <https://bit.ly/3dEH99U>

**December 12 | 7:30 p.m.** \$18+

### A Joyful Return

The Zamir Choral Foundation will present a concert at Merkin Concert Hall entitled "A Joyful Return." The

program will feature performances by the Zamir Chorale and Zamir Noded, individually and together, and will feature the music of Louis Lewandowski (1821-1894) and Yehezkel Braun (1922-2014).

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

**December 14 | 4:00 p.m.** Free

### Reckoning With Totalitarianism: The Legacy Of Hannah Arendt

Join the Museum of Heritage for a program exploring Hannah Arendt's legacy and the 70th anniversary of her landmark book, "The Origins of Totalitarianism," which explores the ways that totalitarian regimes come to power. With Samantha Rose Hill, author of the new book "Hannah Arendt," part of Reaktion Books' short biography series Critical Lives, and Ken Krimstein, author of "The Three Escapes of Hannah Arendt."

Register at <https://bit.ly/3rZKfh0>

**December 15 | 4:00 p.m.** Free

### Combating Antisemitism's Resurgence

Robert Siegel interviews five experts on ways to combat antisemitism's resurgence: Ira Forman (adjunct professor on Anti-Semitism, Center for Jewish Civilization, Georgetown University); Sharon Nazarian (senior vice president, International Affairs, Anti-Defamation League); James Carroll (National Jewish Book Award author, "Constantine's Sword: The Church & the Jews"); Kenneth Stern (director, Bard Center for the Study of Hate). Debate), and Michael Drescher (director, Emergency Medicine & Trauma, Israel's Rabin Medical Center).

Register at <https://bit.ly/31NhV6w>

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