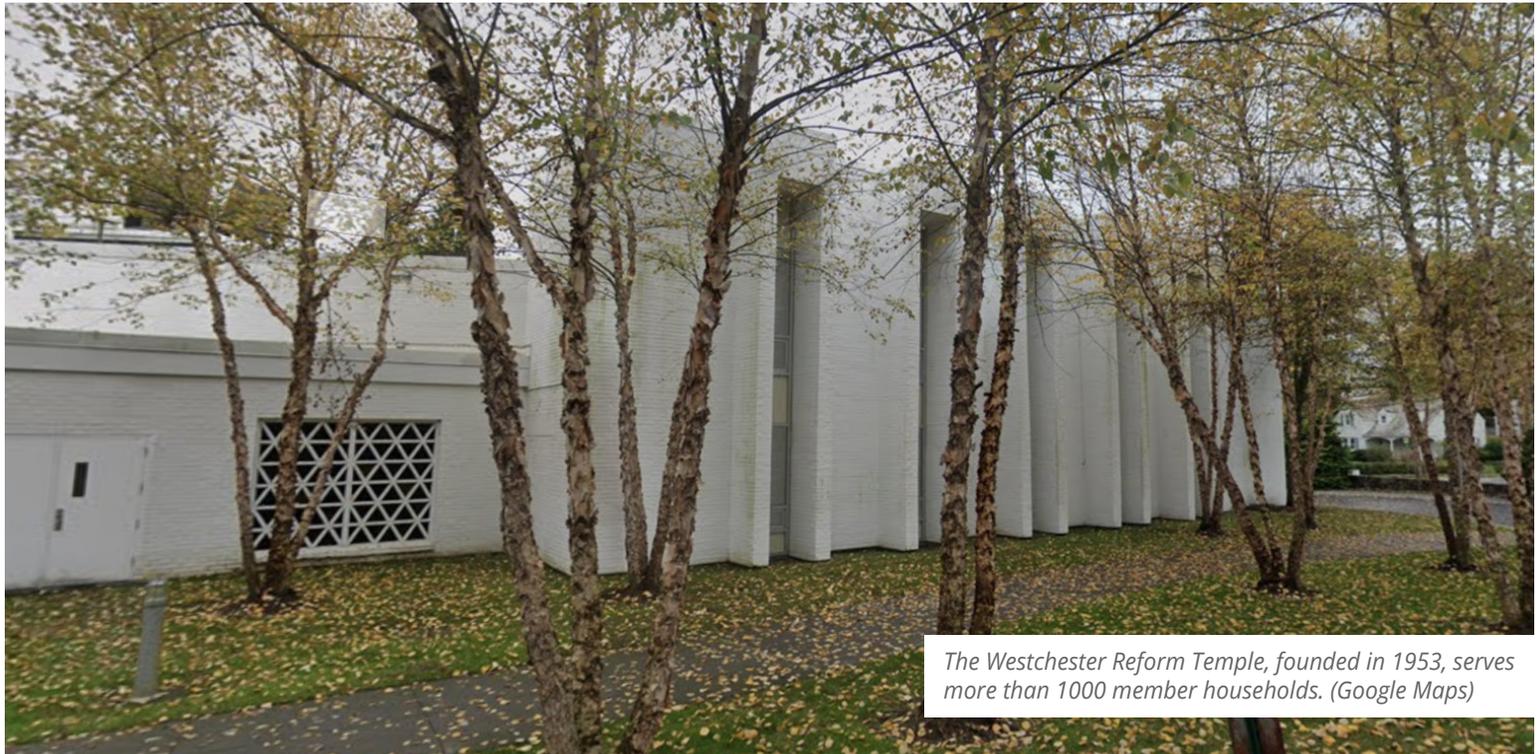


The New York Jewish Week/end

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The Westchester Reform Temple, founded in 1953, serves more than 1000 member households. (Google Maps)

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● NEWS

A Jewish Educator Sues a New York-Area Synagogue, Saying She Was Fired for Espousing Anti-Zionist Beliefs

By Julia Gergely

A Jewish educator is suing a New York synagogue, claiming that she was fired from her job for espousing anti-Zionist beliefs online.

According to the lawsuit filed Tuesday morning in the Supreme Court of the State of New York, Jessie Sander said she was fired from her position at the Westchester Reform Temple — a Reform congregation in Scarsdale — after less than three weeks. She believes her dismissal was a response to a blog post she wrote that expressed anti-Zionist beliefs during the Israeli-Gaza conflict in May 2021.

Sander, 26, had been hired as a full-time educator for the WRTeen Initiative, a

program connected to the synagogue's Jewish Learning Lab. Sander had written the blog post on May 20, 2021 — 10 days after she had been offered the position at Westchester Reform Temple, but before her start date on July 6, 2021. Nothing in the job description, the complaint says, required she should or should not have any particular viewpoint towards Israel and Zionism.

Among other things, she and a co-author asserted in her blog post that "[I]srael's legalized apartheid regime has been brutalizing Palestinians for decades" and that she is part of an organization that "rejects the Zionist claim to the land of Palestine."

"We reject the notion that Zionism is a value of Judaism," she wrote.

Per the complaint, Sander is contending that she was unlawfully discharged for expressing views during a "legal recreational activity" (blogging) that was conducted outside of work hours, off the employer's premises, and without use of the employer's equipment.

She is asking to be reinstated and awarded her back pay and compensatory damages, claiming she has "suffered economic loss, mental and emotional distress, damage to her reputation and harm to her career, lost business and professional opportunities, and other damages."

The Westchester Reform Temple did not immediately respond to The New York Jewish Week's requests for comment.

While there are protections in place for employees of non-religious institutions to express opposing beliefs, synagogues and other religious educational institutions reserve the right to fire an educator when their personal beliefs conflict with the institution's ideological mission, said Marc Stern, chief legal officer for the American Jewish Committee, which has no connection to the case. Deciding what the line is and when the educator has crossed it, Stern said, is up to the employer.

Additionally, educators at religious institutions cannot sue their employers for discrimination against their beliefs if those beliefs go against those of the institution, said Aliza Herzberg, managing member of Herzberg Law Group, an employment boutique in New York.

Sander was in the position for only 16 days before she

was fired during a Zoom call on July 22, according to the suit. Rabbi David Levy and Executive Director Eli Kornreich, both of whom are named as defendants in the lawsuit, were present. According to the complaint, when Sander asked the reason for the termination, Kornreich answered, "It's just not a good fit."

A week earlier, Sander had met with Levy ostensibly to discuss 11th and 12th grade programming — though, according to the lawsuit, he steered the conversation towards her blog post, asking her if she was aware that WRT was a Zionist institution. Sander agreed she would not share her anti-Zionist beliefs on the job.

In the same Zoom call, Levy asked what "anti-Zionist" meant to Sander and asked if she understood that some people may regard anti-Zionism as a "calling for a second Holocaust." Sander replied that she was "horrified" by the comparison, according to the suit, and that she "objected to the colonization of Palestinian land, with the accompanying displacement of the indigenous population."

Sander's blog, titled "israel [sic] Won't Save Us: Moving Towards Liberation," was posted on Medium and on Making Mensch, a blog and organization that Sander founded in 2020 dedicated to "fostering radical Jewish communities that explore Jewish values within the context of our daily lives."

In her post, Sander and her co-founder Elana Lipkin write, "We believe our role as white American Jews is to resist the American-israeli military-industrial complex and the ways in which American Jewish support for israel has enabled the genocide in Palestine to continue."

An open letter in support of Sander, addressed to the rabbis and board of WRT, was signed by 43 people. The signatories include a number of prominent liberal Jewish academics, including Peter Beinart, a journalist and professor at CUNY's Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism; Hasia Diner, professor of American Jewish History at New York University, and Shaul Magid, professor of Jewish Studies at Dartmouth College and rabbi of the Fire Island Synagogue.

It is also signed by Rebecca Vilkomerson, who heads the anti-Zionist Jewish Voice for Peace.

"Commitment to Palestinian justice is fully consistent with the Jewish values of, and commitment to, pursu-

ing justice that they learned in Hebrew school and from their families,” the letter reads.

Sander’s suit presses an issue that Jewish institutions, and even non-Jewish organizations, increasingly face: What positions on Israel are acceptable at a time when young leftists no longer regard Zionism or support for Israel as a given? Last May, for example, a Jewish reporter for the Associated Press was fired after posting tweets advocating for the Palestinian people and opposing Israeli policy. That same month, rabbinical and cantorial students taking part in WhatsApp chat group drafted an open letter accusing Israel of “apartheid.” At least one signatory said the letter cost him a rabbinic internship.

Sander hopes that her case will lead to wider acceptance of diverse opinions on Israel. “I’m hoping to see Jewish institutions welcome pluralistic perspectives to make our spaces more equitable,” she told The New York Jewish Week. “I am excited for a Jewish future that confronts the oppression of Palestinians and embraces all Jewish people.”

Jewish groups and thinkers on the left have long criticized Israel’s settlement movement and its military control of the lives of the Palestinians who are not citizens of Israel. But most groups have drawn the line at discrediting Zionism itself or supporting the anti-Israel boycott.

In his sermon on Rosh Hashanah last year, Rabbi Jonathan Blake, the senior rabbi at WRT, confronted his own difficulties supporting some of Israel’s policies. He asserted in his sermon that “a quarter of American Jews agree with the statement, ‘Israel is an apartheid state,’” apparently quoting a July 2021 poll by the Jewish Electorate Institute, a group led by prominent Jewish Democrats.

“In the Israel of today, extremists, cynical political officials, and wealthy patrons have co-opted the 54-year long military occupation of the West Bank for their own ideological purposes: a grandiose vision of Jewish totalitarianism in the Biblical Holy Land,” Blake told his congregation. “What began as a necessity for Israel’s security has become a moral and political morass with no end in sight.”

In his sermon, Blake invited conversation within the community and challenged his congregants to “reject one-dimensional narratives about Israel — both reflexive demonization and reflexive defensiveness.”

Blake’s sermon is quoted in Sander’s complaint.

“I do think it is hypocritical and wrong for rabbis and officials of Jewish institutions and schools to excommunicate the most idealistic members of our community for criticizing Israeli oppression of Palestinians, in service of what these young people perceive to be the Jewish moral and religious values they learned in their temples, synagogues, schools and families, as Jessie Sander did,” Robert Herbst, Sander’s lawyer, told the New York Jewish Week via email.

Based on her blog post, however, Sander’s beliefs go farther than just criticizing and questioning Israeli politics. She writes, with co-author Elana Lipkin, “We reject the notion that Zionism is a value of Judaism. Zionism is not equivalent to, or a necessary component of, Jewish identity.”

This statement is nearly opposite of what Blake expressed in his sermon: “I believe in more than just the necessity of Zionism,” he said. “I also believe in Zionism as a moral imperative that rectifies millennia of injustice and suffering.” The synagogue is affiliated with ARZA, the Association of Reform Zionists of America.

Responding to Sander’s claim that she was fired for a “recreational” activity conducted outside of work, the AJC’s Stern said that those protective employment laws are not applicable to organizations where speech and ideology are at the center of the organization’s mission — like a synagogue that views Zionism as a core tenet.

“You can’t force an ideological organization to associate with people who undermine its mission,” he said.

“[This suit] will generate endless discussion,” said Stern, about what beliefs should and should not be acceptable in mainstream Jewish congregations, especially regarding Israel. “But as a matter of law, it’s a non-starter.”

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● NEWS

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl Details Call With Texas Gunman in ‘Captives of Hope’ Sermon

By Philissa Cramer

The New York City rabbi who spoke twice to the man who held Jews hostage in their Texas synagogue last week detailed the experience in a sermon Friday night.

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl of Central Synagogue also outlined her anxiety as an American Jew and exhorted her congregants to heed a prayer that the Reform movement has made part of its liturgy on Tisha B'Av, the Jewish day mourning the destruction of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem and other traumatic events in Jewish history: “Blessed are you, Adonai, who makes us captives of hope.”

Buchdahl had previously acknowledged being contacted by the gunman, whom he reportedly found by searching for influential rabbis. But in her sermon, she recounted the voicemail from Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker, delivered in what she said was an “unfaltering voice,” that alerted her to her involvement.

“We have an actual gunman who is claiming to have bombs and he wants to talk to you,” Buchdahl quoted. “If you can call me back at this number that would be greatly appreciated. This is not a joke.”

On her second call with the hostage-taker, she recalled, “He said, ‘I’m running out of patience, and you are running out of time.’ I had already talked to the authorities. I knew there was nothing else I could do but wait and pray.” The prayer she offered, she said, was Hashkiveinu, an evening prayer that envisions God as a protector.

Buchdahl began her sermon by expressing gratitude — to God, to Cytron-Walker and the other three hostages who emerged safely from Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville last Shabbat, and to the security officials and

Jewish organizations “who work to keep our communities safe in ways we don’t always see or acknowledge.”

But she said she had not been certain what more to say, in part because she knew that her congregants at Central Synagogue, where she has been senior rabbi since 2014, would “want and need words of comfort and hope from your rabbi” and she did not yet have those words for them.

Instead, she said, her own feelings are “ominous” and entwined with both the dangers that Jews face today and the discourse about antisemitism that was invigorated by last week’s attack.

“If you are a Jew in America and you are not feeling unsettled,” Buchdahl said, “then you are not paying attention.”

She went on:

I’m unsettled because the world only has the most simplistic understanding of antisemitism. If someone says they hate Jews, or they want to kill Jews, we call it antisemitism. But even educated people, the director of the FBI, do not recognize its far more insidious guise as the trope that Jews are all powerful and control everything. We saw how dangerous that age-old conspiracy theory can be.

I’m unsettled because I saw firsthand that you cannot negotiate with a terrorist. And more and more people in our country and around the globe are captivated by terrifying hateful ideologies, which they value more than their own lives.

I’m unsettled because Rabbi Cytron-Walker’s kindness and humanity were used against him. He opened his doors to this man and gave him a cup of tea. This rabbi welcomes the stranger and this is his reward? We have to protect ourselves. We cannot be naive. But I also know that if we only build fortresses around our sanctuaries, and around our hearts, then he wins.

I’m unsettled because I heard the terrifying voice of radical extremism filtered through the mind of a deranged person who was able to get a gun and then hold for people and an entire Jewish community hostage for 11 hours. I think of the ripple effects that this man set off and the countless resources that we will spend to prevent it from happening again.

She ended her sermon by looking to the week's Torah portion, Yitro, in which Moses's non-Jewish father-in-law tells Moses that he is not leading the Israelites to freedom alone.

"This message is truly for all of us. None of us can do this alone," she said. She later added that seeing so many congregants attend services — something that Biden administration antisemitism envoy nominee Deborah Lipstadt encouraged Jews to do as an act of courage — was heartening.

I could not do this without all of you showing up tonight, whether in this sanctuary or online. You are showing up not just for Central, but for Judaism. You're showing up for fearlessness in the face of fear. None of us can do this alone, even as this pandemic has tested us and forced us to feel more alone than we ever thought we would have to be. But our tradition keeps pushing us back into community and tells us not only that we need to do this with each other.

Among those who were at Central on Friday night was New York City Mayor Eric Adams, who spoke earlier in the service, before leaving for Harlem, where two police officers had been shot, one fatally.

"I want you to know I get it," Adams said. "I get it that we are feeling a level of anxiety not only from COVID but from the sirens we hear often. I get it that you're looking at the increase in antisemitism and you're worried about your children. I get it that we are concerned about the economic stability of our city. But I also get it that we have a rabbi here who showed a level of calmness and true belief in her faith as the hostage situation unfolded."

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● NEWS

Sheldon Silver, Powerful Jewish NYC Politician Brought Down in Corruption Scandal, Dies at 77

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

Sheldon Silver, who for two decades wielded enormous power as the speaker of the New York State Assembly before being brought down by a corruption scandal, has died at 77.

An Orthodox Jew and Democrat who represented New York's Lower East Side, Silver died at Otisville Correctional Facility in upstate New York, where he had been serving a 6 1/2-year sentence on federal corruption charges. Reports said he had been treated for cancer and recently had back surgery at a federal prison hospital in Massachusetts.

Before relinquishing the gavel in 2015, Silver was one of the most influential political leaders in the state, using the power of his office to guide legislation and stall opposition even when, for 12 years, Republican George Pataki was governor and Republicans held a majority in the state Senate.

Silver's arrest and conviction sent shock waves through New York's Jewish establishment, where he was well-known and generally highly regarded. Silver received an honorary degree from Yeshiva University, where he obtained his bachelor's degree in 1965. He also was honored in the past by Jewish federations, feted by the Council of Jewish Organizations of Flatbush and was a mainstay of New York legislative missions to Israel.

Silver was also a fixture on the basketball court at the Educational Alliance, the downtown community center, where the otherwise button-downed power broker was known for having a nice shot.

Silver was first elected to the Legislature's lower house

in 1976, and became speaker in 1994. According to Newsday, Silver was praised by liberal Democrats for his legislative wins on issues like record school aid increases, expanding pre-kindergarten and civil rights legislation. He worked with Pataki and the Senate to fund the renewal of lower Manhattan after the Sept. 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, which was in his district.

For most of his tenure, Silver controlled the purse strings that doled out up to \$85 million in annual spending for Assembly members' districts (a power curtailed starting in 2010). As speaker, he could help members by shepherding their bills quickly to a vote, or punish dissenters by letting their bills languish.

Silver also helped causes he cared about. In 2010, he green-lighted a \$445,000 capital grant to Hatzalah, the Orthodox volunteer ambulance corps, for a new communications center, even as the state grappled with a massive budget deficit.

Last year, Silver was briefly on track to serve the remainder of his sentence under confinement in his home on the Lower East Side. However, the Manhattan federal prosecutor's office vigorously opposed Silver's release, as did some lawmakers, while others called for compassion. He was returned to prison.

With reporting by Adam Dickter

● NEWS

'Antisemitic, Anti-Jewish and Anti-Israel': CUNY Professors Sue Faculty Union Over Controversial Resolution

By Julia Gergely

Calling their faculty union "anti-Semitic, anti-Jewish, and

anti-Israel," six professors at the City University of New York have filed a federal civil rights lawsuit challenging what they call the union's "monopoly" power to represent them.

The suit stems from a June 2021 resolution from the union, known as the Professional Staff Congress, condemning Israel for "the continued subjection of Palestinians," and a subsequent call by the union for its state chapters to consider supporting the academic boycott of Israel.

The plaintiffs claim that in the wake of the resolution and its followup, they were subjected to a hostile work environment on the basis of religion, and had no choice but to resign the union. The suit asserts that the plaintiffs have a right to fair representation despite no longer being members of the PSC.

Five of the six plaintiffs — Avraham Goldstein, Michael Goldstein, Frimette Kass-Shraibman, Mitchell Langbert, Jeffrey Lax and Maria Pagano — are Jewish.

The suit claims that in the case of Lax, a professor at Kingsborough Community College, "CUNY and PSC leaders discriminated against him, retaliated against him, and subjected him to a hostile work environment on the basis of religion."

Another plaintiff, Michael Goldstein, an administrator and adjunct professor at Kingsborough Community College, has experienced "anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist attacks from members of PSC, including what he sees as bullying, harassment, destruction of property, calls for him to be fired, organization of student attacks against him, and threats against him and his family," according to the suit.

Although spurred by the union's moves on Israel, the substance of the suit is a challenge to the union's power to organize and negotiate on the part of public employees. Two organizations that frequently challenge the legal authority given to unions — The National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation and The Fairness Center — are providing free legal assistance to the plaintiffs. The lawsuit challenges a New York State law that allows unions to minimize representation of public employees who are not union members.

Goldstein called the faculty union "effectively a state-sanctioned

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Nate Geller

נח בן חיים ודינה

1958 – 2022

Passionate learner,
Jewish news hound,
extraordinary co-worker,
devoted friend

May his memory be a blessing.

tioned monopoly.”

“By forcing these professors into a union collective against their will, the state of New York mandates that they associate with union officials and other union members who take positions that are deeply offensive to these professors’ most fundamental beliefs,” said Mark Mix, president of the National Right to Work Foundation, in a press release.

The plaintiffs also named New York State comptroller Thomas DiNapoli as a defendant in the lawsuit because union dues are being taken out of their paycheck even though they resigned the PSC.

In a response, Frank Clark, a spokesperson for PSC, called the lawsuit “meritless,” and “just another attempt to erode the power of organized labor to fight for better pay and working conditions and a more just society.”

In August, CUNY President James Davis called the anti-Israel resolution “problematic,” and said that “any position the union develops on Israel and Palestine should be preceded by conversation among the members in our chapters.”

● NEWS

A Holocaust Survivor Spends Her 110th Birthday Knitting — The Craft That Was Key to Her Survival

By Tanya Singer

A recent fall meant Rose Girone spent her 110th birthday in a Long Island rehab facility. But nothing could stop her friends and family from giving her exactly the right gift: red wool and brand-new knitting needles.

“Rose cannot imagine her life without knitting,” Girone’s daughter, Reha Bennicasa, 83, told the New York Jewish Week.

Dina Mor, who owns The Knitting Place in Port Washington, New York, was among the guests to join Girone for the birthday celebration Jan. 13 that turned her dear friend, mentor and former employee into a supercentenarian — the official term for someone who lives to 110 and beyond.

“When Rose turned 105, she turned to me and said, ‘I need to retire,’” Mor recalled. At 110 and even after a COVID-19 scare, Mor said, Girone still “had it.”

Girone’s passion for knitting has made her well known in the New York-area knitting community in recent decades, but it also played a critical role in her family’s survival earlier in her life.

Girone (née Raubvogel) was born in 1912 in Janov, Poland. After a brief move to Vienna, the family settled in Hamburg, Germany, where they ran a theatrical costume shop. She loved playing there — especially sliding down the banisters of the two-story building. In Hamburg, Girone learned to knit from an aunt, according to Bennicasa, and she enjoyed it immediately.

Rose married Julius Mannheim in an arranged marriage in 1938; later that year, the couple moved to Breslau, Germany (now Wrocław, Poland), just as the Nazi-run pogrom known as Kristallnacht initiated waves of violence against Germany’s Jews. Mannheim was arrested and transported to the Buchenwald concentration camp and Girone, eight months pregnant, briefly fled the city with her mother and uncle to stay out of harm’s way.

Alone and afraid, Girone was determined to get out of Nazi Germany. She found a brief window of opportunity when, in 1939, her cousin, Richard Tand, sent her a paper he said was a visa, written in Chinese. Shanghai was one of the last open ports in the world and Girone presented the visas to the Nazi authorities and was able to get her husband released from Buchenwald.

As Bennicasa recalls, “They let my father out with the proviso that we pay them and get out of the country within six weeks, and so we did.”

They were allowed to leave with 10 reichsmarks — roughly \$40 today — and no valuables or jewelry. After a month-long voyage aboard a German liner — which required Jews to dine and swim separately from non-Jewish Germans — the young family arrived in Shanghai.

Conditions in the Chinese city were difficult. The family traded whatever linens and trinkets they brought with them and then needed to depend on aid from relief agencies. Eventually, Mannheim found work as a taxi driver. Girone recalls living on “oodles of noodles,” according to her 1996 interview with The USC Shoah Foundation.

Still, Girone was able to find wool, and she knit clothes for her baby girl. An entrepreneurial Viennese Jewish man saw her creations and thought she could put her talent to use, earning them both money. He invited her to sell her work, saying he would teach her about business. Together, they brought her sample knits to an upscale store in Shanghai where the boutique’s owner suggested ways to make the pieces more elegant. Girone took the feedback and began to design and knit sweaters, with help from Chinese women, as a way to make a living.

Knitting was more than a source of much-needed income: She credited her colleagues with giving her the strength she needed to survive. Girone, according to Bennicasa, “lived a sheltered life in Germany. The other women in Shanghai made her stronger.”

In 1941, Nazi-allied Japan, which occupied parts of China, forced the Jewish refugees into a one-square-mile ghetto in Hongkou, the poorest part of Shanghai. Girone’s family moved into a tiny room under a staircase that once served as a bathroom. There was a single bed for the three of them; the mattress was infested with roaches and bed bugs. Rats would gnaw their way through the hardwood floors and climb over the family while they slept.

There was a bright spot of ghetto life: At one of the Heims, or community homes set up for refugees, a rabbi would give inspirational sermons to the community. “He was a fabulous speaker and I would always stand in line to hear him,” Girone said in the Shoah Foundation interview.

The final years of the war were filled with frequent bombings. “It was really horrible,” Girone continued. “I was panic-stricken.” Bennicasa remembers playing with hot shrapnel in the streets once air raids ended.

Fortunately, another voyage would provide refuge. In 1947, the family was granted a visa for the United States. Girone insisted on completing her knitting commissions

before they set sail. “I had to finish what I promised,” she said.

Again, there were limitations on what the family could take. Each person was only permitted to leave China with \$10, but Girone hid \$80 cash inside buttons on her hand-knit sweaters, according to a Patch article about her 99th birthday. They traveled by ship to San Francisco, ultimately ending up in New York via train where they were reunited with Girone’s mother, brother and grandmother, who had all survived the war.

The couple and Bennicasa, then 9, moved into a hotel as part of a refugee settlement program. Girone was determined to help provide for her family. She found work as a knitting instructor — but her husband did not muster the same motivation. After years of Girone urging him to find his footing in America, they divorced.

In 1968, she met and married Jack Girone and they moved to Whitestone, Queens. Rose Girone was thriving as a knitting teacher and was cultivating her own knitting community. She soon opened a knitting shop in Rego Park, Queens, with another knitter; after a short while they expanded to a second location in Forest Hills.

After a year or two, the partners split and they each kept a store — Girone’s design expertise made her store on Austin Street stand apart.

“Mother was pretty proud of all her designs,” Bennicasa said. “People would bring ads from Vogue and the like and say they wanted something just like this particular picture. Some with intricate patterns, Mother would sit, figure it out, lots of times with graph paper. She loved it.”

When Girone turned 68 in 1980, she sold her business. But she never stopped knitting. She began volunteering at a not-for-profit knitting shop in Great Neck — which is where Girone first met Mor.

One day, according to The Knitting Place podcast, Mor arrived at the shop; she was struggling with a sweater she was knitting for her husband, Erez. Girone offered to rip out the back panel and urged her to go distract herself at an adjacent cafe so “it would hurt less” to see her stitches unfurled.

Girone took great care to help Mor improve her knitting technique, and the two became close. “Mother saw that

Dina had a knack for knitting, so that when Dina voiced that she would love to open her own store, she was happy to help,” Bennicasa said.

“‘If you go, I go,’ Rose said to me,” Mor said — and subsequently Girone worked at Dina’s shop in Port Washington for nearly 15 years.

Even after Girone’s retirement five years ago, the two remained close. During a visit last fall, Mor recalled, the first thing Girone said was: “How’s business?”

Mor’s affection for Girone runs deep. For her 100th birthday, she commissioned a surprise painting of Girone at the center of a table in The Knitting Place, surrounded by her knitting friends and students.

“Looking at it gives [my mother] memories and makes her feel good,” said Bennicasa.

● EDITOR’S DESK

What Your Favorite Puzzles Say About You — By Which I Mean Me

Wordle and its cousins are a great way to kill time — and your soul.

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

Omicron has forced a lot of us back indoors, which means we now have time to catch up on the classic books we never read, but will actually spend our time doing puzzles and brain-teasers.

Happily, new research suggests that the kind of puzzle you enjoy reveals just what kind of neurotic you may be:

NEW YORK TIMES’ SPELLING BEE

How many words can you create using seven letters? You used to think about this while playing Scrabble, but the pandemic has crushed any hope you have of ever feeling

safe enough to sit across the table from a partner. You are the kind of person who barely has the will to concentrate on the latest memo from the management team, but you justify playing the Spelling Bee by telling yourself that this will warm up your brain for more productive work. (Besides, when was the last time your boss called you a Genius?) If you regularly complain that the game does not accept words like “tallis,” you may also be Jewish.

CROSSWORD PUZZLES

You are the type of person who knows both the names of current television personalities (Issa Rae!) and minor celebrities from almost a century ago (Yma Sumac!). This suggests you are either very old and have a New Yorker subscription, or very young with a parent who insists you watch the “good stuff” on Turner Classic Movies. You also have the patience to figure out bad puns and strained definitions, which means you are a Dad.

WORD FIND

You like doing crossword puzzles backwards: Someone gives you the answers, and then you just circle them.

WORDLE

The latest puzzle craze asks you to guess a five-letter word in six tries, using code-breaker’s logic. You not only like to test your brain, but to annoy people by posting your results on Twitter, where your friends are too polite to point out that the game is sort of diverting but at the end of the day not that challenging, especially if you always start with the word “A-E-G-I-S.”

SUDOKU

You like numbers more than words; you are either an engineer or a psychopath.

NPR’S “SUNDAY PUZZLE” WITH WILL SHORTZ

You like waking up early Sunday morning to the sounds of “Weekend Edition,” whose very theme song sends a chill through any teenager trying to sleep off last night’s shenanigans. You love guessing along with the contestants and feeling superior when they can’t name a two-word phrase both of whose words begin and end with “E” (“Nice going, Eagle Eye!”). You are a dreamer who wants to be chosen to appear on the show from among the thousands of people who enter each week, and then

think you may want to save your good luck for something more valuable than a “Weekend Edition” lapel pin, which you wouldn’t wear anyway.

JIGSAW PUZZLES

You are an enigma. You consider yourself a person of class and taste but spend most of the weekend trying to piece together a picture that you wouldn’t allow to be hung on your living room wall. You are also an optimist: Despite the 100 percent certainty that you will be missing at least one piece when you get to the end, you plow on, and then spend a frustrating hour on your hands and knees looking for the chicken’s tail feather.

ONLINE SOLITAIRE

You are a character on a sit-com signaling that you hate your job, or an elderly character on a medical drama who turns out to have more life wisdom than the show’s handsome star could ever have imagined.

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

● OPINION

Jewish Women Are Leaders on Abortion Rights. But They Can’t Do It Alone.

By Barbara Dobkin

In 1966, I was a student at Boston University’s School of Social Work when I received a phone call from a college friend. She explained in hushed tones that she needed an abortion and thought I could help her.

At that time, I didn’t know anyone who had terminated a pregnancy; all I knew was that abortion was illegal. I quietly asked some classmates if they knew how to end a pregnancy safely. One of them had an answer.

It didn’t take long before I received the phone number for a doctor who performed abortions in a kitchen that

functioned as an underground health clinic. “He won’t call you back unless you say the right word,” my classmate instructed me. I nervously left the doctor a message with the code word, knowing that my friend’s fate hung in the balance. When the doctor called me back, I booked my friend an appointment. For \$500, she terminated her pregnancy, regained her independence and moved on with her life. We never spoke of her abortion again.

My friend was lucky to have had a small community of resourceful people during an era when accessing an abortion was illegal and shrouded in fear, intimidation and shame. She was also lucky to be able to pay \$500 — about \$4,300 in today’s dollars — for a risky procedure and not suffer health complications.

I fear that we are approaching a time when secret abortions in makeshift kitchen clinics will become commonplace in the United States once again. According to a report published by the Guttmacher Institute in 2018, more than 22,000 women and girls worldwide die each year after having an unsafe abortion. Now, all signs suggest that the U.S. Supreme Court is poised to overturn or substantially erode *Roe v. Wade*, its landmark decision that legalized abortion in 1973.

If it does, at least 24 U.S. states would deem it illegal to receive or perform abortions. Consider the number of people who will die or suffer long-term health problems as a result of unsafe abortions if we return to a pre-*Roe* world.

I am a Jewish philanthropist who has supported many initiatives for the dignity of women in the American Jewish community, Israel and the broader world. I never thought I would live to see the day when abortion would become illegal once again. But here we are. I look around and wonder: Why are so few Jewish leaders speaking out?

Most Jews — 83% according to the Pew Research Center — favor abortion rights, making the Jewish community among the most progressive religious groups in the nation that support reproductive justice. Given that percentage, I would expect Jewish groups to use their influence to protect abortion access at this urgent moment in our history. And yet the vast majority of American Jewish organizations have been chillingly silent.

For years, I have pushed to make sure that issues affect-

ing women and LGBTQ+ people become a central part of the Jewish communal agenda. But time and time again, I have been disappointed when Jewish institutions that aren’t explicitly serving women or LGBTQ+ people fail to prioritize — or entirely ignore — the needs, struggles and life experiences of more than half the Jewish population. It’s time for that to change.

Jewish women have an enduring legacy in advancing reproductive justice. The Jewish Women’s Archive documents that history in its digital collection “Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution” as well as in a recent podcast episode about The Jane Collective — an underground abortion counseling service in Chicago founded by Jewish activist Heather Booth that operated from 1969 to 1973, when abortion was illegal.

Similarly, *Lilith Magazine* has devoted many of its pages and blog posts to abortion access, spanning many decades. The 1981 issue of *Lilith* featured a cover story called “The Jewish Stake in Abortion Rights” with an image of two bent hangers that formed the shape of a Star of David. Hangers were frequently used to terminate pregnancies before *Roe*, and they remain dangerous (albeit accessible) tools even today.

Since its founding in 1893, the National Council for Jewish Women has been a leader in the reproductive health and rights movement. Recently, it launched the “Rabbis for Repro” campaign and convened a Jewish Abortion Access Coalition with partners inside and outside of the Jewish community. This week, NCJW is organizing *Repro Shabbat*, an opportunity for congregations, organizations and communities to celebrate the critical importance of reproductive health and justice, and to learn more about Judaism’s approach to these issues.

I am grateful for all of these efforts. But the burden to mobilize Jews around abortion access should not fall to women and LGBTQ+ people alone. Leaders of the organized Jewish community — dominated by men — have never been shy in voicing outrage about crises that undermine our basic humanity, such as antisemitism and violence in Israel. Nor have they been shy in expressing anxiety about assimilation, intermarriage, infertility and Jewish continuity. But what about the crisis of losing the right to make decisions about our own bodies? Where is the communal outcry about that?

To be clear, I admire the brave Jewish leaders who have shared their abortion stories publicly in recent years. There are, no doubt, thousands of people in the Jewish community — rabbis and educators; donors and congregants; friends and neighbors — who have had abortions or will need them in the future. Their reasons may vary, but one thing remains true: Keeping abortion safe and legal reflects our most cherished Jewish values: *pi-kuach nefesh* (saving a life), *briyut* (health and safety), *kavod* (human dignity) and *tzedek* (justice).

So I call on every Jewish leader and institution — not just the ones run by and for women — to speak out boldly in defense of abortion access and safety. Our lives, our families, and our futures depend on it.

When my friend who needed an abortion called me for help nearly 50 years ago, I know she felt profoundly afraid of what her future would look like if she were forced to become a mother before she was ready. I never want another friend of mine — or anyone — to experience that same fear, or face an even more dire outcome, or suffer the effects of an abortion done carelessly or without proper medical care.

The Jewish community knows how to stand up for dignity, justice and the health of those we love, including those who are strangers among us. We've done it before, and we must do it again. The time is now.

Barbara Dobkin is a feminist philanthropist.

CANDLELIGHTING, READINGS:

Shevat 26, 5782 | Friday, January 28, 2022

- **Light candles at:** 4:51 p.m. (NYC)

Shevat 27, 5782 | Saturday, January 29, 2022

- **Torah reading:** Mishpatim, Exodus 21:1–24:18
- **Haftarah:** Jeremiah 34:8–22; Jeremiah 33:25–26
- **Shabbat ends:** 5:53 p.m. (NYC)

● SABBATH WEEK PARSHAT MISHPATIM

God's Work, Like Theater, Is a Partnership Between Playwright and Director

Moses uses theatrical elements to bring the words of Torah to life.

By David Shmidt Chapman

Bertolt Brecht once commented, "Don't expect the theater to satisfy the habits of the audience, but to change them."

Brecht, the influential 20th-century playwright/director, believed that the theater's highest aim was social change. A play's goal is achieved if, when the curtain falls, each audience member possesses a deeper understanding of their personal responsibility to improve the world.

But Brecht knew that a writer's words alone, no matter how compelling, would not elicit that response. So, he used theatrical elements such as lights, sound, music and movement to stimulate the hearts and minds of theater-goers.

While Brecht directed his own plays, the process he describes typically happens through collaboration between playwright and director. I've had the privilege of experiencing this firsthand: For over a decade before starting my path to the rabbinate, I was a professional theater director, with a special love for new plays. My job was to advocate for both the playwright and the audience-to-be, guiding the work toward a final form that was both coherent and meaningful. The play is ultimately the playwright's vision, but a director helps make that vision manifest.

The metaphor of a playwright and director crafting a new play together can be applied to this week's portion, Mishpatim. The playscript God is developing is the set

of mishpatim (rules), expanding on the Ten Commandments. God begins developing the “script” in a speech to Moses in Exodus 21:1: “And these are the rules that you shall set before them....”

In this formulation, God is undoubtedly the source of the text, but Moses has an important role, too. Moses must “set” or “place” (tasim) the forthcoming rules in a way that will enable the people to understand them. The Mekhilta d’Rabbi Yishmael compares Moses’s task to preparing a banquet table for a guest. The verse and the midrash suggest a different creative collaboration: God as playwright, with Moses as God’s director.

Several chapters (and many rules) later, it is time for Moses to “workshop” the script with the audience — the Israelites. Exodus 24:3 illustrates what might be called the first preview performance of God’s new play:

Moses went and told the people all of the words of God, and all of the rules; and all of the people answered in a single voice, saying, “All of the things that God has spoken, we will do (naaseh)!”

Not bad for a first workshop reading! But Moses could sense from the audience reaction that something was still missing in the delivery. The people responded positively, but they had not experienced deep personal change of the nature that Brecht described.

And that’s when Moses steps up as God’s director. Moses sees that God’s words alone aren’t enough, so he supports God’s vision by creating a theatrical environment that will lift God’s text up even higher:

Moses then wrote down all of God’s words. Early in the morning, he set up an altar at the foot of the mountain, with 12 pillars for the 12 tribes of Israel. He designated some young men among the Israelites, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed bulls as offerings of well-being to God. Moses took one part of the blood and put it in basins, and the other part of the blood he dashed against the altar. (Exod. 24:4–6)

In other words, Moses a) makes notes on God’s script; b) oversees the design and decoration of a set; and c) casts some young Israelites as the proverbial spear-carriers to round out the dramatic effect.

These theatrical elements are not intended to cast illu-

sions or play tricks on the audience. On the contrary, good theater reflects vital truths about the world. We retain some of these very elements in our synagogue worship today. Consider the Torah service, which blends text, music, movement, audience response and even a dramatic entrance for the central player when the Sefer Torah emerges from the aron. Staging our Torah reading in this way heightens our awareness that what we are about to hear is not simply a text, it is a way of life.

“The Torah service blends text, music, movement, audience response and even a dramatic entrance for the central player.”

His staging prepared, Moses is now ready to bring the audience back in for a second showing. This time, the performance includes theatrical elements that bring it much closer to its final form. And Moses does not simply repeat the text that he heard from God; he recites the scripted version. The production now even has a title, Sefer Habrit (The Book of the Covenant).

And sure enough, this time, the people’s response signifies a new way of thinking and behaving. After this reading, the people again respond that they will do the things that God prescribes (naaseh), the same expression they used the first time. But this time, the people also exclaim that they understand them (v’nishmah). (Exod. 24:7) The added verb shows us that God’s goal as playwright is realized, and Moses’s directorial mission is accomplished.

Brecht expressed a hope that his theater would offer “a new lease on life.” This is exactly what God hopes the mitzvot will provide for the Israelites, after generations of soul-crushing slavery in Egypt. But God can’t do it alone. It turns out that God’s work, like theater, is collaborative. Without Moses’s contributions as “director,” God’s play might have been well-written, but it would not have given its audience the clarity of purpose that only great theater — and Torah — can offer.

David Shmidt Chapman is a Rabbinical School student (Class of 2022) 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).

● MUSINGS

He Didn't Lie

By David Wolpe

Two stories comment on one another. Once R. Levi Yizkhak of Berditchev, known as “the lover of Israel,” saw a man smoking on Yom Kippur. He said, “You must not have realized that today is Yom Kippur.” “No,” the man responded, “I know it is Yom Kippur.” “Then,” said the Rebbe, “you must not have realized that it is forbidden to smoke on Yom Kippur.” “No,” said the man, “I know it is forbidden.”

The Rebbe turned to the heavens and said, “See how good are Your people, O God. Even though I found him smoking on Yom Kippur, he refuses to lie!”

An echo of that story is told about the great Hebrew poet, Chaim Nahman Bialik. Once the rabbi of the town walked by the house and saw him inside with two friends, smoking on Shabbat. The rabbi walked in. One friend said, “I’m sorry, I forgot it was Shabbat.” The second said, “I’m sorry, I forgot it was forbidden to smoke on Shabbat.” Bialik said, “I’m sorry – I forgot to close the curtains.”

We can imagine R. Levi Yizkhak saying of the famed poet – you see God, he wouldn't lie!

*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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● FOUR QUESTIONS

An Opera Reimagines a Classic Story About an Italian Family on the Eve of World War II

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

The Guardian recently called Vittorio de Sica’s 1970 film “The Garden of the Finzi-Continis” a “forgotten Italian masterpiece.” And yet, the lushly beautiful film, about a privileged Italian Jewish family on the eve of World War II, has long been on Jewish critics’ lists of best films about the Holocaust.

Based on a novel by Giorgio Bassani, the film won Oscars in 1972 for best foreign feature and best adapted screenplay.

And now, composer Ricky Ian Gordon has composed a new opera based on Bassani’s novel. Also titled “The Garden of the Finzi-Continis,” the opera, presented by New York City Opera and the National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene, opens on Jan. 27 at Edmond J. Safra Hall in the Museum of Jewish Heritage – A Living Memorial to the Holocaust in Lower Manhattan. It features a libretto by Michael Korie and a 15-piece orchestra conducted by James Lowe.

Gordon — who has a second opera, “Intimate Apparel,” opening at Lincoln Center Theater this month — fielded The New York Jewish Week’s four questions about his process and his connection to the story of the Finzi-Continis.

1. The film version of “The Garden of the Finzi-Continis” was beloved starting from its release in 1970. Does the opera draw on the movie, or does it go directly back to the book? Were you eager or anxious to adapt a classic?

Gordon: We went back to the book because movies, by the pure nature of the medium, must rely on imagery, and opera must rely on dialogue that is set. Bassani in the novel fleshes out the people more, including having them talk!

2. What was the genesis of the project, and who had the initial vision that the novel could be adapted as an opera?

In 2008, Michael Korie and I had premiered the opera “The Grapes of Wrath” [with Minnesota Opera] to enormous success and we were looking for our next project. I saw the de Sica film about every five years since I first saw it when I was 15, and rewatching it during this period of searching, the movie had a cathartic effect on me. And in a moment of clarity I realized it was what Michael and I needed to write. We are both Jewish and had a lot of inner turmoil about what that meant, and even then we could see the rise in antisemitic sentiment. Now, with what feels like an encroachment of autocratic tendency and hate speech in this country and the world around it, the story seems to have even more cogency.

3. Why opera? What does it lend to telling the story?

The story is about big, fat emotions and that is opera’s specialty. It seemed like everyone in this story would have something to sing about!

4. Tell me about the musical ideas. Are there certain Italian, Jewish or period influences that the score draws upon?

I drew upon my Jewish youth and teachings but, also, I have been obsessed with opera since I was 8 years old. I would say I put my love of Puccini and my mother’s Yiddish singing — she was a singer and comedian in the Borscht Belt [under the name Eve Saunders] — in a blender and came out with this score.

Bonus question: What is the work’s message for today, so many years after the events depicted?

That even in the worst of times we live, we ache, we want, we love, we are rejected, we are embraced — and always, in the background, is imminent catastrophe, and no one, rich or poor, is impervious. The impulse to control is strong in human beings and the difficulty in owning one’s shadow so vast that projecting it onto others is often the solution, and historically, the Jews are often the recipients of this great projection. But one need only look at the political situation in America right now to shudder from the work’s message. The garden cannot protect you, though it may provide safe haven, for a little while.

UPCOMING EVENTS

FEBRUARY 1 | 7:30 p.m. Free

Once We Were Slaves: The Extraordinary Journey of a Multiracial Jewish Family

Historian Laura Arnold Leibman, author of “Once We Were Slaves: The Extraordinary Journey of a Multiracial Jewish Family,” unravels the mystery of a famous Sephardic Jewish family and the ancestors who began their lives as poor, Christian and enslaved people of color in Barbados. The virtual talk is sponsored by the Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life at Rutgers University.

Registration required at <https://bit.ly/3HabISb>

FEBRUARY 3 | 12:00 p.m. \$5

SNL’s Jews

David Benkof, of TheBroadwayMaven.com, will discuss some of the most memorable Jewish performers and sketches in the 45-year history of “Saturday Night Live,” from “The Chanukah Song” to “Coffee Talk with Linda Richman.”

Get tickets at <https://bit.ly/3g2IARR>

FEBRUARY 3 | 12:00 p.m. Free

The Letters Project: A Daughter’s Journey

Eleanor Reissa discusses her memoir, “The Letters Project: A Daughter’s Journey,” with journalist and author Sandee Brawarsky. The book was inspired by 56 letters handwritten in German by Reissa’s father in 1949— only four years after Auschwitz — to her mother, also a refugee, already living in the United States.

Get tickets at <https://yivo.org/The-Letters-Project>