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Rabbi Benjamin Goldschmidt and his wife, journalist Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt, announced the name of their new congregation via social media on Feb. 16. (Screenshot from Instagram)

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● NEWS

Rabbi Ousted From Park East Synagogue Announces New Congregation on the Upper East Side

By Julia Gergely

Rabbi Benjamin Goldschmidt, who made headlines when he was abruptly fired from his position at Manhattan's swanky Park East Synagogue, has officially launched a new congregation.

In a sermon Goldschmidt gave this past Shabbat, which he also posted to Medium on Tuesday, the rabbi announced that the name of his new congregation — which he's starting with his wife, journalist Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt — will be "Altneu," a portmanteau of the Yiddish words for "old" and "new."

"The truth is, this is the closest I will ever get to feeling what it means to give birth to a child," he wrote.

The Goldschmidts started the congregation informally in the fall of 2021, shortly after the 34-year-old rabbi was unceremoniously dismissed from his post as assistant rabbi at Park East, a venerable Modern Orthodox congregation, in October, after a decade working there.

The firing followed what one well-placed Park East congregant described as an attempted “coup” by Goldschmidt, itself the result of “simmering tensions” between Goldschmidt and the synagogue’s senior rabbi, Arthur Schneier, 91. Goldschmidt denied the accusation.

Goldschmidt’s supporters in turn said he was a talented rabbi who was popular with younger members, as the New York Jewish Week reported at the time. Some 70 members signed a petition saying they were “shocked and disheartened” by his firing.

Shortly after the brouhaha broke, the Goldschmidts began hosting Shabbat services in the neighborhood. In November, the New York Jewish Week reported that over 80 people RSVPed to an invitation to attend Shabbat services, some of them members of Park East. Chitzik-Goldschmidt said there ended up being over 200 in attendance that weekend. On a recent Shabbat, they welcomed Dr. Michael Oren, the former Israeli ambassador to the United States.

According to the shul’s new website, the congregation meets on Shabbat Friday evenings and Saturday mornings at “unique venues” on the Upper East Side. Photos and videos posted online by the couple show the Explorer’s Club, a five-story mansion at 46 East 70th St., which Goldschmidt also mentions by name in his Medium post.

In a tweet Wednesday announcing the new venture, the rabbi and his spouse are seen entering wrought-iron gates, waving the viewer inside. “Shehecheyanu,” he writes, referring to the blessing commonly used when doing something for the first time. “Welcome to the Altneu. On the old and the new. The dreams — and the conditions — of a 21st century Diaspora synagogue.”

“I feel like it is a tremendous opportunity to start a new synagogue in Manhattan; it’s not something that happens too often,” Goldschmidt told The New York Jewish Week. “It’s given me an opportunity to rethink many things that were taken for granted. We now have an ability to figure out what format will work best for the

next century.”

For example, Goldschmidt said he plans to have community members introduce the Torah portion each week in a sermon — a job traditionally assigned to the rabbi — in order to allow his congregants to connect and learn with both the text and their community in a more personal manner.

The name, as Goldschmidt explained in his article, is a homage to the historic Altneuschul in Prague, the oldest operating synagogue in Europe. The congregation’s mission, he wrote, is “to renew and reinvigorate its Judaism while still building on and learning from traditions and ways of life in the past.”

The name also has a Hebrew meaning: “al-tenai,” which means “on condition.” “[T]he synagogue will only thrive on the conditions of kindness, respect, and unity, among other values,” he writes.

In an Instagram caption announcing the name, Chitzik-Goldschmidt described the diversity of people attending the new congregation.

“I saw a Hasidish Jew from Williamsburg sitting near a Broadway actor; a young investigative journalist next to a group of long-time Upper East Side ladies; Jews who never went to shul before regularly next to Haredi Jerusalemites next to a beautiful young couple (Mexican-Persian & Russian) celebrating their wedding,” she wrote.

“In the last several years, we’ve had time to really think deeply about what communities need more of — especially in urban areas like Manhattan, that have unique needs and unique voices,” Chitzik-Goldschmidt told The New York Jewish Week. “We’re taking the learnings of the years we’ve accumulated and trying to put them into practice here.”

Goldschmidt is the son of Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, the chief rabbi of Moscow, and has studied at prestigious yeshivas in Israel and the United States. He does not have a university degree, which defenders of his firing said was a reason that he was not in line to succeed Schneier as Park East’s senior rabbi.

At Park East, Rabbi Goldschmidt focused on outreach to the Upper East Side’s overlapping communities of young families and Russian-speaking Jews.

At Altneu, he plans to continue outreach towards young Jews in the formative periods of their life. “Thousands and thousands of young, talented Jews from all over the world pass by [New York] a year, five years, 10 or 15,” he said. “But these are usually the years where they get their first job, where they choose who they marry, have a kid, and choose schools. Even as they’re passing through the Big Apple, if we could catch people and impact their lives and be a home for them, I think it’d be a great accomplishment.”

● NEWS

New York Federation Funds Security at Smallest Orthodox Synagogues

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

UJA-Federation of New York created a \$250,000 fund to beef up security at at least 50 small synagogues in Brooklyn.

Monday’s announcement follows a spate of street attacks on visibly Orthodox Jews in Brooklyn, as well as last month’s hostage-taking at a synagogue in Colleyville, Texas.

The fund will serve “shtiebels” — congregations with fewer than 200 people and little or no staff — in the Midwood, Kensington, Williamsburg, Crown Heights, Borough Park and Flatbush neighborhoods. It will be administered by the Community Security Initiative, through the UJA’s affiliated Jewish Community Relations Council of New York.

Community groups and civilian patrols serving the densely populated haredi Orthodox communities will help coordinate the funding.

“No synagogue should be left without proper security measures just because they lack access to necessary funding,” Eric S. Goldstein, CEO of UJA-Federation, said in a statement. “Whether praying in the largest shul in Manhattan or the smallest shtiebel in Brooklyn, every

Jew deserves the right to worship in peace and security.”

Goldstein said smaller synagogues often lack the staff or capacity to access funding from government programs like the Nonprofit Security Grant Program, or other sources for security dollars.

State Assembly member Simcha Eichenstein, representing Borough Park and Midwood, welcomed the funding announcement.

“Unfortunately, criminals who hate do not distinguish between small or large houses of worship,” he said in a statement. “That’s why security is imperative in every single house of worship.”

● NEWS

New York Is Lifting Its Mask Mandates. Will Synagogues Follow Suit?

By Julia Gergely

New York State’s mask mandate — which required businesses to ask patrons for proof of vaccination or keep masks on all times while indoors — expired on Thursday.

The shift has opened a window of opportunity for local synagogues to revisit their own masking policies, just in time for Shabbat.

Synagogues that had loosened restrictions last fall only to tighten up with the spread of Omicron are again asking how far they can go in keep congregants safe and feeling secure. Many are adopting a wait-and-see approach — especially in keeping mask requirements in place, for now.

In her announcement, Gov. Kathy Hochul emphasized that New York’s counties and cities, as well as individual businesses, can enforce their own mandates. In New York City, for example, the “Key to NYC” program, renewed by Mayor Eric Adams, still requires proof of vaccination for indoor dining, gyms and entertainment.

The New York Jewish Week called several congregations, representing a variety of denominations across the city, to ask what, if any, changes they may be making in advance of Shabbat.

The East Midwood Jewish Center, a Conservative congregation in Midwood, Brooklyn, has decided to maintain an indoor mask policy for all individuals, regardless of their vaccination status, who enter its facilities.

Throughout much of the pandemic, the congregation has held services only on Zoom, even when other synagogues offered hybrid options. EMJC hopes to return to in-person services in the next few weeks, with masks required at all indoor gatherings.

The congregation has multiple venues and programs — including gymnastics, basketball and swimming programs, as well as a robust senior center. The senior center, according to executive director Wayne Rosenfeld, was one of the main reasons that EMJC decided to keep its mask policy.

“We’re trying to get our lives back to normal,” Rosenfeld told The New York Jewish Week. “We’ve been rolling with it ever since the pandemic started. We’re just trying to do what’s right for our community, both for our membership and the community beyond our walls.”

Central Synagogue, a large Reform synagogue in Midtown Manhattan, announced on Feb. 3 that masks and vaccinations are still required, and that Friday night services will be limited to a capacity of 300 members. Children under 5 are not be permitted at services because they cannot be vaccinated. The Saturday Mishkan services — the synagogue’s more participatory, musical service — will be live streamed. The synagogue is still closed to the general public.

Masks will still be required at Park East Synagogue on the Upper East Side. The Modern Orthodox synagogue will also continue to require proof of vaccination to attend in-person services, and on their website they strongly encourage congregants to receive booster vaccinations.

B’nai Jeshurun, an unaffiliated congregation across the park, announced a similar policy on their website on Feb. 3, though they are also capping their services at 100 participants and are specifically requiring KN95, N95 or surgical masks.

In Queens, the Forest Hills Jewish Center will also continue to require masks. “We’re going to see how things go, but as of right now our policy will not change,” said Laurie Worthman, the office manager. The Conservative synagogue also requires proof of vaccination to be submitted before guests attend services in person. Services are also available to livestream on Zoom.

Orthodox synagogues, which have stricter rules than their non-Orthodox counterparts regarding the use of electronic devices on Shabbat and holidays, have not been streaming their services. As a rule, they have been more likely to encourage in-person gatherings, and now to ease mask requirements.

Lincoln Square Synagogue, a Modern Orthodox congregation on the Upper West Side, told congregants Thursday that masks would be now optional for vaccinated individuals, though they invite guests who are still feeling anxious to continue to wear masks. The synagogue is still deciding on their policy for the Youth Department — kids age 12 and under — and ask that for this Shabbat they wear masks.

“We believe that following the State rules are the best way to go. Baruch Hashem [praise God] we were able to open and operate shul safely for more than the last 20 months while strictly following all of the health protocols,” reads an email to congregants from Rabbi Shaul Robinson. “Like many things in life, Covid will remain a challenge for many years to come. But as the situation improves the correct thing to do is to allow Shul life to return to as near normal as possible.”

Another Modern Orthodox congregation, the Riverdale Jewish Center in the Bronx, wrote in their weekly bulletin that they will also be dropping the mask requirement, though they will provide masks for those who wish to continue wearing them.

Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun on the Upper East Side, another Modern Orthodox synagogue, has lifted its mask requirement for vaccinated individuals over the age of 12, and is even hosting a “Grand Shabbat Celebration” this weekend to usher in what they see as a more relaxed stage of the pandemic. This Shabbat will include a “Welcome Back Kiddush” after services for those returning to in-person services.

"We are relieved that the recent omicron surge has receded significantly in our area," read an email sent to KJ congregants. "As we come up on two years since the start of the pandemic, the absence of community and gathering together have had a noticeable effect on our lives. We need community now more than ever; now is the time to come back to shul on Shabbat."

● NEWS

NY Rep. Jamaal Bowman Withdraws Support for Abraham Accords

By Ron Kampeas

WASHINGTON — U.S. Rep. Jamaal Bowman, the New York Democrat who has been less critical of Israel than other members of the progressive "Squad," is dropping his support for a bill that would help Israel expand normalization agreements with Arab countries.

In a letter to constituents, Bowman said he has been persuaded that the normalization agreements, launched in 2020 as the Abraham Accords, serve to isolate the Palestinians, and do not advance a just outcome. The letter was first reported Tuesday by Jewish Currents.

He also expressed concern that some of the incentives for the accords are at odds with his values. The United Arab Emirates has scored the sale of advanced fighter jets and Morocco earned U.S. recognition of its claim to the disputed Western Sahara.

Critics of the accords say they remove from the Palestinians one of the few leverages they have over Israel: full acceptance in the Middle East.

The bill has overwhelming bipartisan support and Bowman's change of mind won't stop it from passing. Under accords, brokered by the Trump administration, Israel has normalized relations with Bahrain, Sudan, Morocco and the UAE. The bill would facilitate normalization with other countries.

Bowman is a member of the "Squad," a grouping of six progressives that includes Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-Mich.), who says Israel should not exist as a Jewish state, and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.), who has called Israel an apartheid state. Bowman, however — representing a district that encompasses substantive Jewish communities in the Bronx and Westchester — has not been as adamant in his Israel criticism. Alone in the Squad, he backed additional funding last year for the Iron Dome anti-missile systems for Israel. So did the vast majority of the party's Progressive Caucus.

Bowman in the letter said a recent visit to Israel and the West Bank helped bring about his change of mind. He did not note that J Street, the liberal Jewish Middle East policy group, organized the visit, nor that the group backs the bill that would expand the Abraham Accords.

Some progressives criticized Bowman for going on a trip with J Street, which describes itself as pro-Israel.

● NEWS

Ezra Goldstein, Literary Tastemaker Who Saved Brooklyn's Oldest Independent Bookstore, Is Retiring

By Julia Gergely

When he was 60 years old, Ezra Goldstein never expected to start a new career running a bookstore.

But that's exactly what happened when he took over Park Slope's Community Bookstore, the oldest independent bookstore in Brooklyn, in 2009. The unexpected turn of events turned out to be a surprisingly rewarding path: He brought the bookstore out of debt, became a fixture of Park Slope and has been called the "oracle" of Brooklyn's literary community.

Now, at 73, Goldstein is ready to shelve his last book.

On Friday, Goldstein will retire, leaving the reins in the hands of the Community Bookstore's co-owner, Stephanie Valdez, who is 35 years his junior.

"I am retiring because I'm old enough to do so, wise enough to get out while I have my wits about me, still fit enough to keep up with my hyper-active, outdoorsy wife and offspring," he wrote in a letter that was posted on the store's social media pages and on Park Slope community forums, as well as sent in an email to customers.

Prior to running the store, Goldstein had spent the previous 40 years of his career as a writer for local newspapers, including the Long Island Jewish World. In the 2000s, he was a freelance editor and writer, and helped ghostwrite memoirs for some local Holocaust survivors.

It was working on a story in 2009 for the Park Slope Civic Council's newsletter that changed the course of his life. He was interviewing his friend, Catherine Bohne, who had owned Community Bookstore since 2001. By the end of the third bottle of wine, Bohne confessed that she was ready to abandon the bookstore and move to Albania, a lifelong dream of hers.

If only she could find someone to take it off her hands, she joked. She had felt extreme pressure from Amazon as well as Barnes & Noble, which had arrived in 1997 and was only six blocks away. Bohne was eager to get out from underneath the stress.

Goldstein went home to tell his wife, Annette, whom he met while volunteering with the progressive group New Jewish Agenda. But instead of the laugh he expected, she took Bohne's threat seriously. "She said, 'Well, why don't you do it? It'll get you out of the house,'" Goldstein recalled.

Soon enough, Bohne had booked a flight across the Atlantic and was handing Goldstein the keys for a trial run. "If you like it, we can work something out," she said.

Twelve years later, it's clear that the friends' gamble paid off. Goldstein transformed the struggling store into a thriving community hub, even acquiring a second bookstore, Terrace Books in neighboring Windsor Terrace, in 2013.

Bohne, meanwhile, never returned stateside, and has spent the last decade working in various grassroots or-

ganizations to promote sustainable tourism and conservation efforts in the Albanian Alps.

Still, the first few months weren't easy. He turned to Valdez, an especially competent and passionate member of the team. Goldstein may have made a late-life change in his career but, at 25, Valdez was just beginning hers. It was a perfect match.

"Within a fairly short time, it was thriving," Goldstein told The New York Jewish Week. "Once we got books back on the shelves and showed the neighborhood that we were serious about this, everyone got behind us and we just kept going from there."

"Ezra really turned things around by through a combination of discipline, care and diligence," Valdez said.

"When Ezra and Stephanie took over the store, they were simultaneously able to nurture the cozy, personal, neighborhood feel of the place and transform Community into one of the country's leading independent bookshops," said Tim Mohr, a literary translator and the author of "Burning Down the Haus," a history of German punk rock, who lived nearby for 15 years. "Thanks to Ezra and Stephanie's leadership, it became not only a beacon for the Brooklyn literary scene, but a national tastemaker."

The day-to-day running of the bookstore mostly includes ordering and stocking all the books that Park Slopers could ever want — bestsellers, books from local authors, cookbooks, coffee table books and more. "A lot of what we do is shaped by the neighborhood we are in," he said. "It's a very intelligent readership and a very sophisticated audience. So we were very lucky because we never had to stock a lot of schlock. We could always have good books."

"More so than any other local business, checking out the display window at Community offers a gauge of how the neighborhood is thinking and feeling at any given moment," said Mohr, who would often start his days drinking coffee and chatting with Ezra as he opened the store. (Items in the display window are also available to view on the bookstore's website, for those who have moved out of the neighborhood.)

Originally from Zainesville, Ohio, Goldstein moved to Park Slope in 1986, when the neighborhood looked and felt very different. "There were drug deals going down

two blocks down the street in a bodega, you know, openly in the daylight," he said in a 2015 interview for the Urban Memory Project. "You know, for an Ohio kid who didn't know what was going on, it was very scary."

Of course, these days, Park Slope is a destination neighborhood in uber-cool Brooklyn — and one of the most expensive neighborhoods in New York. Park Slope is probably best known for its quality public schools — and the young families that populate the neighborhood — as well as its cadre of A-list writers, including Paul Auster, Siri Hustvedt and Jonathan Safran Foer.

Supporting local authors, Goldstein said, is one of his favorite parts of the job. He has also gotten to know hundreds of customers who have come and gone over the last 12 years. "There's great continuity in a small shop in a tight community," he said. "I have watched children grow up."

In turn, the loyalty of many Park Slopers was critical when the pandemic first hit and the shop — like nearly everything else in the city — was forced to close its doors. He was relieved and honored when floods of online orders started coming in, not just from Brooklyn but from all over the country.

These days the bookstore is still able to hold the community together through virtual events that bring together writers and readers from across the globe. For example, Gal Beckerman will present his newest book, "The Quiet Before," a study of radical social movements, on Feb. 16, and Nobel Prize-winner Olga Tokarczuk will present her newly translated novel "The Books of Jacob" on Feb. 19.

"Community Bookstore is such a fixture in Park Slope, as much a community center as a place to buy books," said Beckerman, who is senior editor for books at The Atlantic and a Park Sloper for nearly two decades. (Beckerman is also the spouse of Deborah Kolben, who is the chief content officer of The New York Jewish Week's parent company, 70 Faces Media.) "And Ezra made that happen. He cares deeply about books and literary culture and it was always a pleasure to walk in there and chat about what he was reading."

Goldstein's love of books runs deep. He grew up in a household filled with books — something that he said helped shape his Jewish identity.

"You don't have to be Jewish to be a successful bookstore owner," Goldstein, who has served as vice president of the Park Slope Jewish Center. "But it is very fulfilling. I love reading, I'm passionate about books, and I'm sure that my Jewish roots have a great deal to do with that."

In retirement, Goldstein plans to spend time with his new grandson and Tiny the Cat, the bookstore's unofficial mascot, who was a kitten when Goldstein first took over the store.

He also plans to regularly visit the Community Bookstore, a place he said gave him back twice as much love as he put into it. "It was definitely random but it turned out to be bashert," he said, using the Yiddish word for destiny. "It was something I think I was meant to do all along."

● EDITOR'S DESK

Holocaust Comparisons Are No Laughing Matter

The real issue behind Marjorie Taylor Greene's "gazpacho" gaffe.

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

The ribbing of Marjorie Taylor Greene last week was straight out of the Borscht Belt.

When the Georgia Congresswoman railed against Nancy Pelosi's "gazpacho police," Twitter ladled on the ridicule. Jokes flew about "soup Nazis." GOP Never Trumpers said their party had gone from "soup to nuts." My colleague Ron Kampeas had my favorite tweet: "This is what happens when you're uncumbered by history."

Before Taylor Greene's gaffe (a spoonerism in spirit if not in fact) stopped spreading, she too had joined in on the fun, saying her critics would be "thrown in the goulash."

Confusing "gazpacho" with "Gestapo" is silly, of course, but comparing the Congressional investigation into the Jan. 6 Capitol riots with the Nazis is no laughing matter.

Taylor Greene has gone down this road before, joining the throngs likening COVID-19 restrictions to the Third Reich. Jewish groups begged her to stop, and she even went on a repentant tour of the U.S. Holocaust Museum.

Because Taylor Greene also appeared to buy into some weird theory about Jewish space lasers, a lot of people assume her Nazi comparisons are further evidence of her antisemitism. I'd argue, however, that Nazi comparisons are not antisemitic, but ignorant and dangerously provocative. Remember: If you are calling your opponent a Nazi, you are at least acknowledging that the Nazis are the bad guys. What responsible Jewish groups have been saying about Nazi comparisons is not that they are anti-Jewish, but that they trivialize a unique historic event, traumatize its survivors and poison public discourse.

That's not a Jewish issue. That's an everyone issue.

Of course, comments that are not antisemitic in intent can be antisemitic in effect. When Whoopi Goldberg made her uninformed comments about the Holocaust, groups like the Anti-Defamation League objected not because what she said was antisemitic, but because any unchallenged distortion of the historical record suits the purposes of Holocaust deniers — who invariably are antisemitic.

When swastikas were plastered on the walls of Washington, DC's Union Station last month, no one seriously debated the motivations of the vandals. It doesn't matter who flashes the swastika: a bored teen, a disaffected punk rocker, a Canadian truck driver, an anti-fascist. The swastika feels to Jews like an assault, the way a noose feels like a threat and a desecration to Blacks.

Inappropriate Holocaust comparisons are not the folly of any one party — the left has distorted the Holocaust to condemn immigration policy and to smear the Israeli government, to take two examples.

There is a difference, however, between comparing everything to the Nazis, and asking in good faith if certain politicians or movements have embraced tactics or rhetoric that genuinely appear totalitarian. The Nazis were not known for assembling bipartisan investigative committees and subpoenaing colleagues and eyewitnesses for public hearings into, say, the Beer Hall Putsch. The Nazis did not make Jews wear yellow stars in what any sane

person would consider the interests of public health. But they did understand how a big lie, repeated often enough and embraced by politicians and pundits who should know better, can erode confidence in democracy.

Still, not every would-be strongman is another Hitler. We can talk about — and challenge — threats to democracy without playing the Nazi card. We might even be more effective in doing so.

"Polarization and escalating rhetoric have made once verboten political speech routine."

Jews aren't immune from making bad Holocaust analogies, or other inappropriate comparisons. In a suit filed last week by a number of Orthodox Jewish New Yorkers, challenging the city's vaccination mandates, the plaintiffs asserted that "a government dictate that conditions freedom on vaccination is a form of slavery and subjugation" and "violates numerous commandments in the Torah that require one to remember and internalize the great Exodus from slavery in ancient Egypt."

That is not only questionable Torah, but a deep misunderstanding of slavery.

There was a time when one could be reasonably confident that outrageous historical comparisons did more harm to the person who made them than the target they were aimed at. But polarization and escalating rhetoric have made once verboten political speech routine. The Republican National Committee declared the House select committee investigating the Jan. 6 insurrection a "persecution of ordinary citizens engaged in legitimate political discourse." As Aidan Scully writes in the Harvard Political Review, "Once a country's window of mainstream political discourse shifts far enough to the extreme, it passes a point of no return..."

Marjorie Taylor Greene might have learned the difference between "gaspacho" and "Gestapo," but does anyone seriously think she is done calling Nancy Pelosi a Nazi?

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

● OPINION

I'm a Queer Mizrahi Jew Who Left the NY Orthodox World. This 'Bubby' Took Me In.

By Je'Jae Cleopatra Daniels

In Orthodox Judaism, a child's Hebrew name is given within the first week. The rules for our lives are predetermined, assigned based on our gender at birth. Since I was born, I knew inside that I was created differently from others — and I was labeled a non-conforming case who needed fixing.

Growing up on the Lower East Side as a '90s baby, I lived in an era when the neighborhood, a historic region in New York City and American Jewish history, was experiencing major changes and gentrifying rapidly. The Jewish presence was in decline, and the immigrant melting pot for which the neighborhood was known was being whitewashed in a boom of galleries, 5-star clubs and high-rise buildings.

In the middle of all of it was me: queer, hip, Mizrahi, not easily fitting in. My family and I were more accustomed to bonding with the local Puerto Rican and Black communities than with the wealthy Ashkenazi Jews who seemed to control the majority of Jewish life in the temples of our area.

I always wrestled with my identity and the alienation of not fitting into the class, race and "formal" gender expectations of the Orthodox world. It took me many years to realize that not fitting in a box was actually an immense opportunity. It gave me the ability to connect with a multitude of under-recognized people — like my adopted Bubby Roz.

Bubby Roz, or Ms. Roslyn Engelmayer, was a lovely bala-boosta who became my adopted grandmother when my own grandparents on both sides of the family passed before I reached third grade. I met Bubby Roz in first grade when she held a festive Purim party in her cozy

apartment. My mother took my brother and me; I was dressed as a tiny brown rabbit. I remember arriving at the door and looking up at a towering woman who had so much warmth in her eyes that her statuesque height didn't frighten me. Her first words to me were "I love you as one of my own grandchildren," and since then we have been inseparable.

Bubby Roz was disabled, feminist, charismatic, a bit of a hoarder of memorabilia (but always clean) and had the biggest heart. She had become estranged from her family — her husband walked out the door without a civil divorce and left her to raise three kids alone. So Bubby and I always knew what it was like to feel excluded, for life to present a challenging but unique path. And we used our alienation as a form of empathy to welcome the stranger.

Well into her later years, Bubby Roz would host free meals every Shabbat for the "misfit" Jews of the LES who weren't easily welcomed in their neighbors' homes, or didn't have a "male" to lead services. Although I was demonized by my fellow archaic tribe members for being "different" and not conforming to Jewish values, I actually spent my time appreciating the company of my elders and wanted to hold mature and philosophical conversations — thanks to the relationship Bubby and I developed.

Living in a world that repressed my inner authentic self made NYC seem like a conservative bubble. We could peer at the secular world, but couldn't step into it. Decades before I found queer-inclusive spaces, my limited knowledge of my orientation and gender identity was based on the queerphobia of my Modern to ultra-Orthodox surroundings. Even in the closet, I was always automatically labeled without being given a chance to define myself, and the harmful labels and bullying buried me in depression and self-deprecation. My parents, too, were policed for trying to affirm my gender presentation, receiving reprimands from my day school. While they defended my differences when they could, they didn't want to acknowledge my coming out in public.

In synagogue, rabbis would preach about loving thy neighbor, but then make queerphobic jokes during Shabbat services — and racist ones in Yiddish so the maintenance workers of color wouldn't hear. I felt like the only one who was "different" in a normalized bigoted world — and at the same time, I was confused because

I was trying to live by Jewish values, which emphasize welcoming the “other.”

I left Orthodoxy in 2011 and my former religious world didn’t want to hear my side of the story. Families who used to consider me one of their own now harassed me weekly on the streets walking to school. I was truly grieving the estranged relationship with my mother, former peers and neighbors. By 2015, I was ex-communicated and found myself homeless. I went to Bubby Roz’s home to find comfort. I didn’t expect her to open her home to me, but she welcomed me to live with her, like a one-eyed cat receiving warm milk.

For nearly two years, I was Bubby’s new roommate. Her home was an unlisted shelter for decades where many cis male Jews who were homeless were given a roof over their heads: the failed Talmudist who never got his ordination, a Hasid who thought he was the Messiah, an ex-con and dirt bike rider, an Israeli lawyer with a cannabis business before it was legalized — and me, the first gender non-conforming artist in her house. Art, nature and Bubby seemed to be the only comfort to heal my open wounds from being disowned.

Eventually, along with my trans Jewish collaborator Hazel Katz, I made a documentary called “Bubby & Them,” which follows Bubby Roz’s and my journey through our challenges: disability, gender dysphoria, trying to meet our needs and co-existing in a cluttered home. The film discusses a two-page homophobic edict, written and signed by prominent local rabbis, which was illegally mailed to every Jewish and non-Jewish co-op in the LES to warn them that Jewish organizations were including queer Jews. As upsetting as this letter was, it also reflected the shifting landscape of the neighborhood: Where Orthodoxy once held power, now progress towards acceptance was being made.

“Bubby & Them” premiered in Brooklyn through our sponsor UnionDocs in June 2017, followed by over 25 film festivals. But sadly, barely any Jewish venues have shown it. One major New York producer told us that our content wasn’t “appropriate for our audiences.” They rave about diversity and showcase gay series, but trans Jews are told to wait their turn, even if they’re telling a heartfelt PG story like mine.

But I refused to be discouraged. While the struggle to

tell trans Jewish stories for wider audiences continues, I hope my creative expression can protect and heal wounded trans youth and educate allies to ensure that no child is left behind despite their identity. If a Jewish film festival will feature “Bubby & Them,” great. If not, we will keep taking up space until all Jews, gentile, trans and cis allies can show up as their full selves and know they will always be loved, supported, blessed and welcomed.

After witnessing the magic of our Brooklyn screening, Bubby said to me, “You’re going to go places and be a star.” It makes me cry every time I think about it or doubt myself from the daily struggles of transphobia I face. Our beloved Bubby Roz now lives in a nursing home in New Jersey, and her words evoke resilience. I love you, Bubby. You provided me a home and made me feel cherished as my queerlicious self when I needed it the most. We should all follow your example of unconditional love for all non-conforming kids. (Alma)

● SABBATH WEEK / PARSHAT KI TISSA

The Price We Pay for Certainty

Impatient for answers, we embrace false idols — or just can’t handle the truth.

By Yitz Landes

Imagine, for a moment, that you are an Israelite at the foot of Mount Sinai. Over the past few weeks, your life has been turned upside down: you have witnessed mind-boggling miracles, you have been freed from slavery, and you have been brought out into the wilderness, to the bottom of Har Sinai.

Too scared to go up the mountain (Exod. 19:18, 23), you and your fellow Israelites remain camped out below as Moses goes up and down, eventually staying up on top as God teaches him and prepares the Tablets. You know that you are going somewhere that you should consider home — to be sure, a place that you have never seen — and you know that many of your practices must change. You know that God is so awesome that being in their

presence is scary.

And now your leader — whom you are still learning to trust — has disappeared into the clouds. What is an Israelite to do? How is one to cope with the extreme uncertainty and the drastic changes with which they are faced?

In the Mei Hashiloah, the Izbitzer (R. Mordechai Yoseif Leiner, 1801–1854) points out that the story of the Golden Calf appears just after God had taught Moses about the Sabbath. The Israelites, he says, knew that Moses had just learnt these laws, and thus anticipated the complete redemption, “the day that will entirely be the Sabbath” (M. Tamid 7:4), at which time God’s plans and needs will be known with certainty.

Reflecting on the lack of clarity in their own current situation, the Israelites turned to Aaron and created the Golden Calf, “for truly, the creation of the Golden Calf was because they wanted God to show them his order and his ways for all time” (Mei Hashiloah I). The Israelites needed certainty, and they needed it now. And so they turned to Aaron and received the Golden Calf, a leader who will not budge, one who will not disappear into the clouds nor criticize their ways — a reliable thing that will give them what they want, when they want it.

We all know what happens next. God lets Moses know what’s up. Moses gallantly defends the Israelites, but when he comes down the mountain, the sight is so difficult that he breaks the tablets. The Golden Calf is destroyed, and many Israelites are killed in punishment.

While Moses is distraught, he somehow gets himself through the ordeal. He even gets the Israelites (or at least, some of them) through it as well, as he convinces God not to destroy the nation. The tablets are remade, this time by Moses’ hands.

CANDLELIGHTING, READINGS:

Adar I 17, 5782 | Friday, February 18, 2022

- **Light candles at:** 5:16 p.m. (NYC)

Adar I 18, 5782 | Saturday, February 19, 2022

- **Torah reading:** Ki Tissa, Exodus 30:11–34:35
- **Haftarah:** Kings I 18:20–39
- **Shabbat ends:** 6:17 p.m. (NYC)

But when those first tablets were broken, something in Moses broke too. And to get through his despair, he now needs to know that God will remain with the Israelites. He needs God to be seen — ostensibly so that it be known that God’s people have gained favor (Exod. 33:16), but ultimately because Moses himself wants to behold God’s presence (Exod. 33:18). Moses asks to see God — he asks for something tangible that can prove God’s presence, so that he can be certain of God’s favor towards him and the Israelites.

In the end, God acquiesces, but with a catch: God agrees only to show him their back, as God’s face “must not be seen” (Exod. 33:20).

Seeing the back of God teaches Moses that God indeed loves and cares for the People of Israel. According to the Talmud (BT Berakhot 7a), God showed him the knot (qesher) of God’s head tefillin (tefillin shel rosh), a sign that, as interpreted by the Izbitzer, “we” — the People of Israel — “are connected (mequsharin) to God.” But in the context of Moses’s progress in the portion, it is clear that this is something that he needs for himself. The difficult, tragic and even violent events surrounding the receiving of the Torah have tested his own faith in the People of Israel and in their unique relationship with God.

“A major part of the Israelites’ growth is coming to terms with uncertainty, learning that quick confirmation can be nothing more than an idol.”

And there is more: Not only is there a catch — God reveals himself, but only in a minimal, if symbolically laden, fashion — but there is also a price. For when Moses now comes back to the people, they cannot look at him, as “the skin of his face was radiant” (Exod. 34:29). Moses received the clarity he was looking for; God gave him the sign, if indirectly. But the sign left its mark, and now Moses — who has never been a man of words — must speak through a veil.

We all need that certainty. We find comfort in knowing that our beliefs are correct, either because we share them with a crowd or because we have found some other sign that makes us feel vindicated. As we see in this week’s portion, a major part of the Israelites’ growth is coming to terms with uncertainty, learning that quick confirmation can be nothing more than an idol.

And so too does Moses grow in a similar fashion. His need for affirmation in the face of doubt consumes him, and he is transfigured by the sign that God gives him, left not unrecognizable but at a permanent disconnect from others. We all desire that certainty, but so too must we all acknowledge the toll that conviction can take.

Yitz Landes is an adjunct instructor in Ancient Judaism at The Jewish Theological Seminary and a PhD Candidate in Religions of Mediterranean Antiquity at Princeton University.

● MUSINGS

Chutzpah

By David Wolpe

When the Israelites came to the Sea of Reeds, it did not part. Even Moses' entreaties to God could not get the sea to split. The rabbis recount that one man, Nachshon Ben Amminadav, boldly leapt into the sea, and it parted. Like Curtis who flung himself into the breach in the Roman Senate, Nachshon proved that what mattered was the courage to act when others' falter.

There are always good reasons to hesitate. Considerations of prudence, of fairness, of deference hold us back. Psychologists tell us that the greater the number of people who might respond, the less likely any individual is to take responsibility. So why did Nachshon leap into the sea while all of Israel stood at the bank? Because he knew that at decisive moments of history, to hope, dream or even pray is not enough. Deliberation is eclipsed by daring.

Theodor Herzl once told some friends: "I am not better nor more clever than any of you. But I remain undaunted and that is why the leadership belongs to me." Among the children of Israel there were good people, wise people, even faithful people who cried out to God. But Nachshon jumped.

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.

● MUSINGS

'Gazpacho Police' Is Now an Original Klezmer Song

By Julia Gergely

Since Georgia Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene's "gazpacho police" gaffe went viral in an interview earlier this week, jokes, memes, snarky tweets and the like have circulated far and wide across the internet.

And just when we thought the joke had gone cold (get it?), we caught wind of a creative, and very Jewish, interpretation of the Republican's blooper: a klezmer song, "Gazpacho Police," from Brooklyn-based clarinetist and composer Michael Winograd.

"I'm drawn to punny titles and I felt like, whether the Representative knew it or not, she was encroaching on my territory," Winograd, 39, told The New York Jewish Week. "What was I supposed to do? It would be a shonda (shame) to let that go to waste."

Winograd posted his original composition, and accompanying video, on YouTube and social media on Thursday — a day after Twitter exploded with mockery after Taylor Greene was heard comparing the House investigation of the Jan. 6 insurrection to the "gazpacho" (she meant Gestapo). As it happens, in January, Winograd had set a goal for himself to release a mini-EP every Thursday — the self-imposed challenge being that he would compose, produce, record and release a song in a single day.

The whole process for the "Gazpacho Police" klezmer song and video — which includes animations of Taylor Greene — took about five hours, he said.

Winograd is no stranger to quick turnarounds. Back in 2020, during the first few weeks of quarantine, he produced an original composition every day. He said it helped him alleviate the stress and anxiety that so many of us were feeling.

Then, last fall, Winograd received a call from one of the

producers of “And Just Like That,” HBO’s “Sex and the City” reboot. Unbeknownst to him, they had seen Winograd perform at a family member’s bat mitzvah, and wanted to know if he could produce an original composition to use for the “they mitzvah” scene in the season finale, which first aired on Feb. 3. The scene was shooting in less than a week — so the producers needed an original composition within a day.

Clearly, they had gone to the right person. Winograd’s song, “I’ll Take the Soup” (anyone else sensing a theme here?), can be heard in the opening scene of the “they mitzvah,” in which protagonist Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) invites her friends to Paris to scatter her late husband’s ashes.

“It was really nice that their music team and their production team hired somebody to compose something original,” Winograd said. “The people on the crew of ‘And Just Like That,’ the music supervisors and the producers who I worked with are all fantastic.”

A well-respected klezmer composer, Winograd has collaborated with many high-profile modern Jewish musicians, including Frank London and SoCalled. He often travels throughout the country and the world performing and teaching klezmer music workshops. His band, The Honorable Mentshn, will soon be going on tour to promote Winograd’s forthcoming album of all-new klezmer music, “Early Bird Special.”

“When I put out serious records, I try to actually spend a lot of time on publicity,” he said. “It is very ironic that something like this doesn’t take much work, yet when I put out something that I’ve been working on for years, it takes lots of money and time to get similar results.”

Still, Winograd said he’s excited — if not at all surprised — by the online reactions to his video. On Facebook, one commenter wrote, “This is truly the best that could have come out of the whole thing.” Another commenter said he had purchased the URL gaspacho-police.net and suggested a collaboration.

“This was asking for it,” Winograd quipped, offering to give Rep. Taylor Greene a co-writer credit on the track.

“While it’s funny, obviously [‘Gaspacho Police’] is unfortunately about more than just the music,” Winograd said, hinting at the more sinister intentions behind her

ridiculous statements, such as blaming “Jewish space lasers” for California’s wildfires in January 2021. “But still, when someone says something like that, what are you going to do? Not make it into klezmer song?”

UPCOMING EVENTS

February 20 | 1:00 p.m. – 2:30 p.m. \$0-\$25

Jewish Lower East Side Walking Tour

Join the Museum at Eldridge Street for a Jewish Lower East Side Walking Tour and marvel at the stories and architecture of this historic neighborhood.

Get tickets at <https://bit.ly/354SoYe>

February 22 | 12:00 p.m. Free

Get to Know Your Jewish Mustards

Join The Nosh for a conversation with Barry Levenson, curator of the National Mustard Museum in Middleton, Wisconsin. Barry will share the history and contents of this quirky museum, spotlight some of his favorite mustards and inspire you to try more of this most Jewish condiment. He’ll be in conversation with Shannon Sarna, editor of The Nosh.

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

February 22 | 7:00 p.m. \$5

Albert Einstein: Still A Revolutionary

JCC Manhattan hosts a Zoom Q+A with filmmaker Julia Newman, whose film, “Albert Einstein: Still A Revolutionary,” makes the case that the physicist’s example of social and political activism is as important today as are his brilliant, groundbreaking theories.

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

Do you have an event coming up? Submit your events online at www.jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/contact/submit-an-event