

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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AUGUST 31, 2021

Ben Samuels returns to his roots

The first-time candidate and sixth-generation Missourian is hoping to unseat Ann Wagner in the state's 2nd Congressional District

By Matthew Kassel

It is probably safe to assume that Ben Samuels, a 30-year-old Democrat now running to unseat Rep. Ann Wagner (R-MO) in the suburbs of St. Louis, is the only congressional candidate in the country who speaks Yiddish. “I’m proficient enough at Yiddish to make my way around Williamsburg without too much trouble,” Samuels, who studied the language in college, told *Jewish Insider* regarding the New York City neighborhood in a recent interview. “Unfortunately, outside of the Hasidic community, there’s not a lot of Yiddish speakers, so I don’t have the opportunity to use it much.”

He declined, however, to specify his favorite Yiddish word, perhaps mindful of his status as a candidate for federal office. “It’s not one, necessarily,” Samuels deadpanned, “that I’d want to say in an on-the-record interview.” Still, for Samuels, Yiddish seems to be more than a punchline or a means to accentuate a dirty joke. “In a lot of ways,” said Samuels, who descends from German, Polish and Russian Jews who began settling in St. Louis in the 1870s, “the history of Yiddish is similar to the history of a lot of immigrant languages in the United States in how it tells a part of the American

story.”

Lately, Samuels has been mulling that story with urgency as he mounts his first congressional bid driven by what he describes as a growing sense of alarm over the fractured state of American politics, particularly following Republican efforts to overturn the presidential election results that resulted in the violent Capitol riot earlier this year. “I had worked in the public sector and the private sector before coming to this, but I’d never really seriously thought about running before,” Samuels told *JL*. “The attacks on the Capitol on January 6 are really what changed my perspective.”

Samuels was the first Democratic primary candidate of the cycle to announce a bid for Missouri’s historically conservative 2nd Congressional District, though he now has company with Trish Gunby, a state legislator who jumped into the race in early August. “I’m trying to do my part to protect democracy and turn down the temperature and reduce some of the hate and vitriol and divisiveness in politics today,” said Samuels, who launched his campaign early last month.

“The far-right extreme really seems to have taken hold of Ann Wagner and the rest of the Republican Party,” he added. “I don’t

think we have the luxury of sitting by while there are concerted efforts on the part of a lot of certain electeds in the federal government to try to strip people of their voting rights and to try to move away from democracy.”

Wagner, whose campaign did not respond to a request for comment, opposed efforts to block certification of the Electoral College vote in January, despite having previously supported a failed lawsuit, filed by the Texas attorney general, challenging the election results in four swing states. More recently, Samuels is quick to point out, the five-term congresswoman voted against establishing an independent commission to investigate the Capitol riot, as did the vast majority of Republicans in Congress.

Earlier this month, Wagner announced that she would run for re-election after mulling a bid to replace outgoing Sen. Roy Blunt (R-MO) in the Senate. Last cycle, the 58-year-old Republican defended her seat in a competitive general election matchup against Jill Schupp, a Jewish state senator and top-tier Democratic recruit who received significant support from national groups. But while the race had been rated as a toss-up by the nonpartisan *Cook Political Report*, Wagner prevailed by more than six points with 52% of the vote, dealing a decisive blow

to Democratic hopes of flipping the district.

With upcoming redistricting in Missouri controlled by GOP legislators, Wagner's seat could become even more prohibitive to Democrats running in next year's midterm elections, according to Betsy Sinclair, a professor of political science at Washington University in St. Louis. "We should expect the 1st Congressional District boundaries to grow," she said of the seat occupied by Rep. Cori Bush (D-MO), whose district may be redrawn to include more of St. Louis County because of declining population rates in the city — likely pushing Wagner's territory into redder counties as a result. If that scenario plays out, "the 2nd district could become less Democratic," Sinclair told JI.

Still, Samuels seems undeterred by the prospect of a redrawn map, arguing that he is uniquely poised to mount a credible challenge, despite some major obstacles. "I'm coming at this race as someone who's worked both for and with Republicans and Democrats," said Samuels, who believes his background in business and government will appeal to voters on both sides of the aisle.

"I've been an independent for a good chunk of my life, but I think in the era that we're in right now, I've found that a lot of the Republican Party was moving towards right-wing extremism in a way that scared me," Samuels, a moderate who says he aligns with centrist House coalition like the New Democrats and the Blue Dogs, told JI. "So I'm a proud Democrat now, but also come at this as someone who understands how to work with people across the aisle and a pragmatic approach that will be focused on getting things done."

Joshua Karp, a Democratic strategist in Maryland who supports Samuels but is not working on his campaign, echoed that view. "A candidate like Ben, regardless of what happens with redistricting, is going to be incredibly formidable next year," he told JI in a phone interview. "You look at the stereotypical Republican attacks, they don't work on someone like Ben Samuels," Karp added. "He's a real wonk who has made good on a personal commitment to work in public service and to be of service himself, and oftentimes that's meant being bipartisan."

Born in Connecticut, Samuels split his

childhood between California and Missouri. He specialized in Near Eastern languages and civilizations as an undergraduate at Harvard University, where he served as president of *The Harvard Crimson* and penned a first-person essay about his decision to forgo covering a football game because it was scheduled on Yom Kippur. "I had my Sandy Koufax moment," he wrote in 2011, "abstaining not just for religious reasons, but also on principle."

Out of college, Samuels worked at a tech startup that was later acquired by MasterCard, got a master's degree at Harvard Business School and then took a job in former Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel's office. His most recent role was director of special projects for Charlie Baker, the Republican governor of Massachusetts.

Samuels says he moved back to St. Louis at the beginning of the pandemic, motivated by a desire to reconnect with his roots. But despite professing a deep connection with the district, his recent return to St. Louis is likely to become something of a sticking point as the primary heats up.

"Candidly, Rep. Gunby is the only Democrat with a real shot at beating Ann Wagner," Rosetta Okohson, Gunby's campaign manager, told JI. "She's lived in the district for 25-plus years and won two elections against a well-funded Republican candidate and state party. She respects Ben, but he only recently moved to the district and lacks the local footprint and support necessary to win in the general."

Samuels preempted such charges in conversation with JI, claiming that he is a sixth-generation Missourian on his father's side and maintains longstanding ties with the district. "We had a shoe business that was in the family for generations back when that was a big industry here in St. Louis," he said. "My ties here run deep and I'm proud of my family's legacy."

Braxton Payne, a Democratic consultant with Show Me Victories in St. Louis, who is not involved in the race, said Samuels is "still very unknown" in the district — but added that dynamic could work to his advantage. "He will be able to define himself early on as the candidate that he wants to be," Payne told JI, "while Gunby has a record but has proven to know her constituents."

Nevertheless, Gunby's candidacy "will

most likely prove to be tough for Samuels," Payne said. "Gunby is a good fundraiser but works hard on the doors. But in a big congressional seat, that will be more difficult to have that grassroots game versus a small statehouse race."

Gunby's campaign did not respond to an inquiry regarding her fundraising numbers.

Samuels, for his part, has pulled in nearly \$480,000 in less than two months, according to a campaign spokesperson. "This is above and beyond what most first time candidates are able to raise in July and August of the off-year, and shows just how viable Ben's campaign is already," the spokesperson, Nick Paprocki, argued.

"I'm lucky to have a lot of support from people locally and recognize that this is going to be a tough but a winnable race," Samuels told JI. "We're doing everything we can to try to flip the seat and bring some decency and some good common-sense solutions back to a role and back to a seat that sorely need it."

In the interview with JI, Samuels focused largely on kitchen-table issues, repeatedly emphasizing, for instance, that he will bring jobs and businesses "back to St. Louis" if he is elected. "That's something, having worked on economic development in the public sector and having worked in the private sector for a number of years, I think I'm well-suited to do," he said.

"I have a background in climate change and want to make sure that I have the opportunity to address what I think is the most pressing challenge of our time," Samuels added. While he doesn't support the Green New Deal, Samuels advocates for an equally "ambitious" approach "that creates opportunities to grow businesses, creates job opportunities and helps people save money on their monthly bills."

On foreign policy matters, Samuels made clear that he was eager to take an active role in bolstering the U.S.-Israel relationship, maintaining that his voice would be a valuable addition to the conversation amid festering Democratic divisions over the Jewish state.

"In many cases, a lot of younger Jews don't always understand why Israel is important to our collective safety and to Americans and to the Jewish people," said Samuels, who has family in Israel and has

visited twice. “I think a new generation of younger Jewish leadership is in a very good position to try to do something about that and help younger Americans and younger Jews understand the importance of the U.S. relationship with Israel.”

When former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu “was in power,” Samuels added, “he was doing a lot to make Israel a partisan issue, and I don’t think that benefits Israel. I don’t think that benefits the U.S. I don’t think that benefits any of us in terms of our collective safety.”

“I think a new governing coalition in Israel,” Samuels said, “is a real opportunity for us to reset and focus on making sure that support for Israel remains bipartisan in the United States.”

Samuels wouldn’t directly commit to supporting the Iran nuclear deal as the Biden administration seeks a return to the agreement. “What I don’t think is helpful is foreign policy that see-saws back and forth between Democratic and Republican administrations,” he said, “and this gets to the broader point of why it’s important to have consistent bipartisan support for Israel because that allows us to maintain more consistent policy and allows us to make sure that we are doing everything that we can to keep Iran from getting nuclear capabilities.”

“No deal is going to be perfect,” he allowed, “but we need to do everything we can to keep Iran from getting nuclear capabilities and we need to make sure that it’s a consistent approach.”

Samuels’s support for Israel in particular will likely appeal to Jewish community members in the district, who make up a sizable population of around 38,000,

according to a 2014 survey. The rookie candidate says he is attuned to their concerns on a range of issues, not least because of his personal connection to the community. “A couple of years ago, there was a Jewish cemetery that was desecrated here in an act of antisemitism, and I have a number of ancestors who are buried in that,” he said. “So I understand the challenges that a lot of the Jewish community faces today, but I’m also really proud to be part of the Jewish community here in St. Louis.”

“It’s part of who I am,” Samuels elaborated. “It’s part of my family and social network and my value set and everything else. Now, on the Cardinals [baseball team] over the last 20 years, you’ve had David Eckstein and Trevor Rosenthal, neither of whom are Jewish, much to my mother’s dismay, but still part of our upbringing and our community all the same.”

While the race is only in its early stages, Samuels is starting out with a substantial “head start among a pretty sizable group of voters” in the Jewish community, as Karp views the dynamics. “Seeing him at home working on behalf of his own community is very exciting, and I think Ann Wagner has faced tough opponents before, but she’s never faced anyone like Ben Samuels,” Karp told JI. “Ben is the next generation of Jewish talent in America. There’s no doubt about it.”

For his part, Samuels argues that his message is resonating as he embarks on what is expected to be a contentious campaign cycle. “I think people are receptive to the fact that politics has become really divided and isn’t working for people anymore,” he said. “We need people who can go to Washington who are able to rise above the partisan noise

and focus on the sorts of things that actually help people in their day-to-day life.”

Samuels hit on a similar theme earlier this month while delivering a sermon on the Yiddish language — one of his favorite topics — at Temple Emanuel, a Reform synagogue in St. Louis attended by his family. “Back in the early 20th century, when most American Jews would have had at least some familiarity with Yiddish, it’s how other groups communicated with us: businesses, unions, cities and towns, neighbors, other religious and ethnic groups, friends and neighbors alike,” he told congregants at a recent Friday night service. “And that in turn made it easier for us to get involved, to participate — in many cases, for the first time — with the non-Jewish world, to remain Jewish but to become American.”

“As we look at the world around us, it feels like we’ve lost that ability,” Samuels lamented. “We may all speak the same language, but it feels like fewer and fewer of us speak the same language.” Near the end of the talk, however, Samuels landed on an ultimately hopeful message. “We can all do better to communicate with people on their terms,” he said, “to close the gap, to learn from our history to build towards something better tomorrow.”

“I’ll close with a Yiddish expression that I like: *az men muz, ken men*,” Samuels concluded, opting for a phrase that was no doubt less vulgar than the one he refrained from mentioning in conversation with JI. “‘If you have to, you can.’ Let’s all do what we can — I don’t think it’s too much *chutzpah* to ask for that.” ♦

SEPTEMBER 2, 2021

Bringing the Torah to the blockchain

A new project called NFTorah is applying a new technology to an ancient text

By Gabby Deutch

The going rate these days for Noah’s Ark is \$3,700.

No, that’s not the cost of the physical ark Noah used to save Earth’s

animals when God flooded the planet. Nor would that money get you a book about the famed boat or a painting depicting the Flood.

That amount of money — equal to the current value of one coin of the cryptocurrency Ethereum — would get you a non-fungible token (NFT) of the Torah

portion Noah, the section of the Torah where the classic biblical tale appears. The buyer would get a piece of digital artwork that represents the themes of the parsha. The cryptocurrency they used to make the purchase would go toward funding the writing of an actual Sefer Torah.

The parsha NFTs are part of NFTorah, a new project that is using cryptocurrency and digital assets to fund the writing of 18 Torah scrolls.

“We want to try and give a deeper, lasting, eternal value to the technology itself, that it can be used for something truly transcendent,” said Mordechai Lightstone, a Chabad-trained rabbi who co-founded NFTorah and also runs Tech Tribe, an organization for Jews who work in tech. “I want tech people to see that what they’re doing is something that has value to their Jewish selves as well.”

The buying and selling of NFTs exploded earlier this year, particularly after the \$69 million sale of an NFT from the digital artist Beeple went viral in March 2021. “The idea is that scarcity creates value,” NPR explained at the time. NFTs are purchased with cryptocurrencies such as Ethereum and Bitcoin, which saw their value skyrocket during the pandemic.

NFTs are unique digital assets, and the transfer of NFTs is recorded on the blockchain, meaning that there is a digital ledger of all purchases of the assets. This generally allows for an artist to get paid every time their work is sold, and it also allows people to see who the original purchaser was.

So the original buyer of, say, the Parshat Noah NFT could then transfer ownership to her son for his bar mitzvah, and that transfer will be recorded in the blockchain. The project is nonprofit, and the NFT purchases (which are really donations) will be tax-deductible.

The parsha NFTs are available on OpenSea, a massive online NFT market. Right now, only the first eight Torah portions are available for purchase, but the goal is to eventually make all 54 available as NFTs, and to sell them over the course of the year that it takes a sofer, or scribe, to write an entire Torah scroll. A couple have already been sold.

“The impetus of the project was to bring

the benefits of blockchain technology to the very real and tangible... performing [of] this wonderful mitzvah of creating a Sefer Torah,” said Jonathan Caras, the Israeli-based chief technology officer of crypto hedge fund Lionschain Capital and a co-founder of NFTorah.

The idea to fund the writing of a Torah by selling NFTs has its roots in a long-running practice first promoted by Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Lightstone explained.

“In the ‘80s, the Lubavitcher Rebbe launched a campaign that every Jewish man, woman and child should get a letter in a Torah, meaning they would pay a small amount of money — really talking about a dollar, whatever it is — to pay towards the writing of an entire scroll,” said Lightstone. “That entire scroll will be written as if every letter is critical to the Torah. If it’s missing one letter, the Torah’s no good. So by the fact that you paid for that one letter, in essence, your letter is the letter that made the Torah scroll.”

The scribe who will be writing the Torahs funded by NFTorah will be paid in Bitcoin, likely the first time a sofer — a highly skilled profession that requires years of apprenticeship — will be paid in cryptocurrency. A new Torah costs between \$70,000 and \$150,000, according to Caras.

“We like to think of it as the first NFT that touches the digital, physical and spiritual levels of things,” said Lightstone.

But NFTorah goes beyond simply touting the potential spiritual benefits of NFTs and blockchain. The project’s mission is rooted in the notion that the Torah is actually a form of the technology itself.

“Judaism is the original blockchain,” Caras argued. “It’s expressed by handing down the Torah from one generation to the other.”

“The Jewish people have kept the Holy Torah as an unbroken chain for over 3,000 years,” NFTorah’s website says.

The target demographic is made up of members of the Jewish community who identify as religious or traditional and who already own Ethereum, and who want to show that blockchain technology can have a Jewish application. They want to be able to show that “it is just a click away in order to be able to help out a good cause and a big

mitzvah,” Caras explained.

NFTs have not yet been widely adopted, even if they have gotten a flurry of press coverage in recent months and some large investments from art collectors and wealthy tech entrepreneurs. But Lightstone argues that it is, actually, very Jewish to be working on the cutting edge of a new technology.

“Technology isn’t just there as something to stand distinct from, let alone in opposition to Judaism, but rather there exists in the world the ability to use technology’s innovative power to promulgate Judaism even more,” he said.

He pointed to the printing press as an example: “There was a huge number of Jewish books printed at that time because Jews saw this as an amazing means to be able to get what they cared for out there.”

Eventually, NFTorah hopes to sell 18 NFTs for each parsha, to fund 18 Torahs. The first, which will be completed sometime next year, will go to Arugot Farms, a settlement in the West Bank with an organic farm and a retreat center. The second will go to Tech Tribe, Lightstone’s Brooklyn-based organization for Jews in tech, and the third will likely go to a Jewish community in Austin, Texas — a city with a growing startup and tech ecosystem.

The goal is to “create something that will excite the local community,” Lightstone said. “By using this technological way of approaching it, I think it speaks to techies and gets them excited.” ♦

Inside the effort to extract one family from Afghanistan

Arizona State Rep. Alma Hernandez worked for weeks to try to get a family out of Afghanistan

By Matthew Kassel

Two weeks ago at the Arizona State Capitol, Alma Hernandez, a Democratic representative in Tucson, watched Gov. Doug Ducey sign her long-awaited Holocaust education bill into law. For Hernandez, who is Jewish, the legislation was an achievement of profound significance, but in the moment, her mind was elsewhere as chaos unfolded in Afghanistan.

For the past few days, Hernandez had been in close and nearly constant communication with an Afghan family with whom she has long-standing personal ties — working, to no avail, in a desperate, around-the-clock effort to help them escape before an ill-fated U.S. withdrawal that would leave the country under Taliban control not seen since the early 2000s.

“It was very, very hard to focus,” Hernandez said of the recent bill signing ceremony, “especially having conversations with one of the survivors who was there, who was expressing how she felt that this was very similar to the Holocaust and what happened to her family.”

As the last American soldiers emptied out of Afghanistan, the family Hernandez is assisting remained in hiding at a safehouse in the capital city of Kabul, just a mile from the airport, with no apparent possibility of immediate evacuation.

Hernandez, for her part, has been struggling to ward off a growing sense of helplessness. Still, she has not abandoned hope for the family of mine operators from the north-central province of Panjshir Valley, who she has gotten to know well on their annual visits to attend the Tucson Gem Show.

“They’re here so often because of the

work that they do that they’ve just become like family to us, and it’s really sad to see that they’re needing this assistance and help now and there’s not much we can do,” Hernandez said in an interview with *Jewish Insider* on Tuesday evening. “It’s been extremely frustrating.”

Hernandez sighed. “There really haven’t been any instructions or directions on what to do now,” she said. “We’re not giving up on trying to get them to safety, of course, but we are definitely just waiting at this point.”

“What is the plan?” she wondered aloud, sounding increasingly exasperated. “I know the president is saying we will do our best to take out our allies and those Americans who want to get out, but really, what is the plan to do that?”

Her open-ended question underscores a broader sense of confusion over the Biden administration’s exit from Afghanistan, as Democratic and Republican lawmakers have, absent clear guidance from the White House, devised their own rescue strategies to save the stranded.

“We certainly are not the only ones,” said Hernandez, who has publicly documented her humanitarian efforts on social media with the hope of reaching potential allies.

Her experience over 15 largely sleepless days and nights is a testament to the immense emotional wherewithal and tolerance for uncertainty required even of extraction efforts that have yet to succeed. In coordination with Sen. Mark Kelly (D-AZ), a personal friend, Hernandez has exhausted virtually every feasible option in a mad scramble to rescue the 23-member family that she says is now marooned in Afghanistan at great risk to their personal safety.

Within the past couple of weeks,

Hernandez has spoken with a number of organizations on the ground in Afghanistan and even sought assistance from a Hasidic leader in Brooklyn who recently helped evacuate members of Afghanistan’s national women’s soccer team.

But Hernandez has had no such luck, even as she has broadened her search for help in securing visas as well as safe passage out of the country. “I did get in touch with other groups, who, first they asked for a certain amount, and then later, they wanted a lot more,” she told *JL*. “I wasn’t in a position to wire-transfer someone \$75,000.”

“There’s no guarantee with anything,” she lamented. “I have a group that I spoke to yesterday, late last night, who said if you can get them to Mazar-i-Sharif we can put them on a list to fly them out. The only issue with that is it’s almost a 10-hour commute, so if you can imagine putting 11 adults and 12 children on a bus, where there’s so much uncertainty and so much danger, I just can’t make that call and that decision for the family. It’s something they have to do, and I don’t think they feel safe enough doing that right now.”

Hernandez made clear that the bus trip was just one of countless seemingly promising opportunities that have ultimately proved elusive in recent weeks.

“The amount of times I had to call and say, ‘Hey, just letting you guys know, get your bags, be ready’ — there was always a three-hour window for some reason, so if they don’t pick you up within the next three hours, they’re not showing up,” she said. “Can you imagine having to tell the family don’t go to sleep, please stay awake, you don’t want to miss this call, and then the call never coming? I mean, this happened so many times I lost track.”

A glimmer of hope, Hernandez said, came recently, when two family members were able to board flights out of Afghanistan and have since arrived in the U.S.

"The rest of the family was actually turned away," she added.

The remaining family members — including a sizable assemblage of siblings and their children as well as a family matriarch — has found only momentary refuge in a friend's house following what Hernandez describes as a violent run-in with the Taliban in which one brother, who worked as a military contractor for several years, was stabbed, though not fatally.

"The Taliban went into the home that they were in, so they moved, and they did tell them that they would be back," Hernandez said. "They can't be in the same spot for long. They're not safe."

According to Hernandez, the family is a prime target for the Taliban thanks in part to their military connections as well their association with Panjshir Valley, where armed resistance fighters are now engaged in a protracted battle to protect the only province in Afghanistan that has not yet fallen to the extremist group.

The family's business dealings in the U.S., Hernandez added, have also made

them vulnerable to the Taliban's wrath. "That you do business in the U.S. and that your business has done well," she said, "I think that creates anxiety for all of them."

For the most part, Hernandez has been in contact with a man she describes simply as Abdul, whom she knows well from his sojourns to Tucson. She declined to reveal his last name out of concern for protecting his safety. Abdul and his brothers, Hernandez said, were supposed to be in Tucson for the Gem Show beginning this week, but their flights were cancelled as the Taliban took over.

"They're just really great people. They're Muslim, and they were here sometimes during Ramadan, and they would do their thing," she said of the family. "They are very much aware that I'm Jewish and that we all go to services and such, and they're very much aware of my Zionism as well," added Hernandez, who is an ardent pro-Israel advocate. "It's never been an issue because we're all just very close friends."

Recently, Hernandez said, Abdul texted her with a message she found particularly moving. "I know that the Jewish community will do everything they can to help us," he told her.

"I think we have so much more in

common than people think," Hernandez said. "These are people who truly are very close to their families. They're just very nice, loving and giving people, and unfortunately they're caught in this situation that we can't fix right now."

On many occasions over the past two weeks or so, "I've lost hope and they've lost hope, and we're all trying to just stay sane and hopeful," Hernandez told JI. "But it's really hard to keep faith and hope when you feel that every door is being closed on you."

That feeling has only been exacerbated as the American troop withdrawal has come to an end and the Taliban has seized control of the airport in Kabul. "Right now, at this point, we're just basically waiting, just waiting to see what happens, what the next steps will be," Hernandez said. "No one knows, really."

"Honestly, they're all just very scared," she said of Abdul and his family members. "I feel terrible."

"I don't know what to respond to them when they're like, well, what do we do, we applied, we did this, we've done everything correctly, what's going to happen next?" Hernandez said. "And my answer is, literally, I don't know." ♦

SEPTEMBER 1, 2021

A rising tide of cultural tolerance in the UAE as it approaches its 50th year

The UAE is investing billions into its creative industries ahead of Expo 2020

By Rebecca Anne Proctor

Moroccan artist and jewelry designer Chama Mechtaly, whose roots have both Jewish and Muslim branches, is creating her cross-cultural work in, of all places, the Dubai Design District in the heart of the United Arab Emirates. Her fine jewelry pieces shed light on Morocco's unique Jewish history and connection with Andalusia, where during the Middle

Ages Jews, Christians and Muslims lived in religious harmony.

"Jewelry as an ambassador to peace," was how Mechtaly put it in a recent interview with *Jewish Insider*.

Thoufeek Zakriya, a young Indian Muslim hotelier originally from the southern state of Kochi who was fascinated by his home city's historic Jewish community, is incorporating Jewish references into his

Islamic calligraphy. The Dubai-based artist will likely be included in a calligraphy exhibition Mechtaly is helping to organize over the next year that will — presumably for the first time — bring together Israeli and Emirati artists.

"Until recently, I was not sure if it was OK for me to create my art here in Hebrew or participate in Jewish functions, let alone travel to Israel from Dubai," Zakriya told

Jl. “Now I am able to openly create my calligraphy in Arabic and Hebrew.”

In June, “We Remember,” an exhibition about the victims of the Holocaust, opened at Dubai’s Crossroads of Civilizations Museum. A section of the exhibition was dedicated to Muslims who rescued Jews during World War II.

All of this nascent cultural flowering between Israelis and Emiratis, Jews and Muslims, is a result of the historic Abraham Accords, which were signed a year ago and normalized relations between Israel, the UAE and several other Arab nations. Over the last year, a picture has begun to emerge of a cultural exchange that could provide rich benefits for both nations, and be a different kind of normalization model than Israel’s “cold” peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan.

The rapprochement between the UAE and Israel, which has been some years in the making, signaled immediate changes in the Emirates: Hebrew could suddenly be heard in shopping malls and hotels; men wearing yarmulkes were a frequent sight, and kosher food was on the menu at major commercial outlets as thousands of Israelis flocked to do business or simply vacation in the Gulf Arab nation. An Israel-American startup trying to bring date syrup to America and beyond recently inked a deal with the UAE’s largest date manufacturer. And on June 29, the UAE welcomed its first Israeli embassy in Abu Dhabi, the UAE’s capital city.

“We underscore our enthusiasm over what we hope will be the first of many high-level visits,” said the Emirati Culture and Knowledge Development Minister Noura Al Kaabi at the opening of the Israeli embassy in Abu Dhabi. “It is essential that we prepare ourselves and our children toward a new world,” she says, quoting the UAE’s longtime ruler and founding father, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan. Al Kaabi stressed the importance of collaborations between the two nations on artificial intelligence, smart cities, COVID-19, trade and tourism.

A Vision of Tolerance

Events over the last few years in the UAE indicate the warming of ties between Israel and the Gulf nation as the Emirates prepare to mark the 50th anniversary

of their unification and the country’s founding. The UAE declared 2019 the “Year of Tolerance,” with the aim of making itself a global capital for “tolerance, co-existence and cooperation.” In September 2019, Abu Dhabi announced it would be building a mammoth complex that will house a synagogue, a church and a mosque. Called the Abrahamic House, the colossal complex, which was designed by acclaimed architect Sir David Adjaye, will be located on Saadiyat Island near to the Louvre Abu Dhabi. It is slated to open in 2022.

Then came the Abraham Accords, marking a historic milestone for the UAE and the Middle East as a whole.

In June, Abu Dhabi announced that it would pump an additional \$6 billion in cultural and creative industries on top of the \$2.3 billion already committed as part of its post-pandemic stimulus program. “In terms of growth, we know the creative industries are going to be a major contributor to GDP in Abu Dhabi,” Mohammed Al-Mubarak, who heads Abu Dhabi’s Department of Culture and Tourism (DCT), told the *Financial Times*.

Apart from the cultural industry’s lucrative prospects, it is also the most likely arena to foster dialogue regarding ideas of coexistence, diversity, tolerance and religious pluralism. “The UAE is built on the values of acceptance and respect, which DCT Abu Dhabi promotes through its cultural, creative and tourism initiatives, and these values are adopted at all times,” said H.E. Saood Al Hosani, undersecretary of DCT Abu Dhabi. “The forthcoming Abrahamic Family House will stand as a beacon within the Saadiyat Cultural District for harmonious and interconnected faiths followed by over half the world’s population. Whatever the time pre, during or post-normalization — our cultural partnerships have the power to showcase and promote artistic talent and creative thinking for all participating partners.”

In many ways, the cultural implementation of the Accords reflects on the history of the Jews in the Arabian Peninsula, dating back to biblical times.

A New Cultural Renaissance?

As new cultural synergies start to take place between Jews, Israelis and UAE

residents, the collaborations are moving ahead. Israeli collectors are opening galleries in Dubai; performing artists, singers and musicians from Israel are giving shows at the Dubai Opera, collaborating with other Arab and Emirati artists; and at the upcoming (pandemic postponed) Expo 2020 opening in October, Israel will have its own pavilion, while other local artists, even those not of the Jewish faith, are creating artwork about tolerance between Jews and Muslims.

Expo 2020 is an example of the UAE’s strive to bring the world together despite cultural differences as well as put women at the forefront of such great change. In a recent statement, Hind Alowais, vice president of participant management at Expo 2020, emphasized the UAE’s commitment to women’s empowerment. Expo 2020 will feature a Women’s Pavilion in collaboration with Cartier, marking the first time in over 50 years that a world expo has a pavilion dedicated to women.

“You cannot imagine having this Expo without paying tribute to women who have played a significant role in nation-building,” she said during “Women behind Expo,” a webinar organised by the UAE Embassy in Washington, D.C., for Emirati Women’s Day on August 26. Alowais also stressed how the topic of female equality was core to Expo 2020’s mission of bringing together nations, thought leaders, NGOs, and private and public entities.

An example is the Dubai-based Moroccan artist and jewelry designer Mechtaly, who is fostering aesthetic bridges between Jews and Muslims. Through her visual art and jewelry design she seeks to shine a light on Morocco’s unique Jewish history and connection with Andalusia, where for several hundred years during the Middle Ages, Jews, Christians and Muslims lived in religious harmony. Her brand Moors & Saints, headquartered in Dubai Design District, is a fine jewelry start-up offering products inspired by Moorish design and architecture. It’s artwork with coexistence in mind. Her collections reference a spectrum of multi-religious heritage sites, including Alhambra, the Great Mosque, Cathedral of Cordoba, and the Al Qarawiyyin University.

“Our focus is to highlight the shared values and aesthetics between Jews and Muslims through the written word and

recall a golden time when Hebrew and Arabic developed in close proximity in Andalusia and Sephardic Jews emulated the works of Moorish poets of the Arabic language,” Mechtaly told JI. “It’s important to remind people of the potential that Muslim-Jewish synergy can unlock and to use this historic moment to reduce the rifts between both cultures as well as build more trust and interdependence. Securing and sustaining peace and prosperity in the region will depend on whether we build the right cultural foundation for this post-Abrahamic Accords era or not.”

Mechtaly is working in conjunction with the Jerusalem Biennale to bring Israel and UAE-based artists together for the first time through a calligraphy exhibition and residency program in Jerusalem, Dubai and Abu Dhabi over the next year.

Zakriya, the calligraphy artist, grew up in southwest India, wondering about the historic Jewish community in Kochi, a city in India’s coastal state of Kerala. His interest sparked his desire to better understand the history of Kochi. An Indian Muslim who does calligraphy in Hebrew, Arabic and other Semitic languages, Zakriya believes in forging peace and tolerance through art.

“The diplomatic relations between Israel and UAE,” he told JI, “is something great for me on a personal level.”

Another collaboration that has come into fruition post-normalization is the Gulf-Israel Women’s Forum, co-founded by three women: Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem Fleur Hassan-Nahoum, entrepreneur Justine Zwerling and PR strategist Ariella Steinreich. Established as the first association bringing together female leaders from across the Middle East, under the auspices of the UAE-Israel Business Council, the forum currently has over 100 leaders from a variety of professional fields and helps foster personal and professional connections that embrace our shared values.

“What started as a small organic movement has now grown to include women from non-Abraham Accords countries, including Saudi Arabia and Egypt,” said Steinreich.

“People are so excited about the partnership [between the UAE and Israel] that they are just running towards each other, and we see that in every aspect of life,”

Hassan-Nahoum told JI from Jerusalem. “People are just searching for those points of connection. We have seen it in business, in sports and now in cultural activities. And culture leads on this as it is a crucial point of connection.”

In June, “We Remember,” an exhibition about the victims of the Holocaust, opened at Dubai’s Crossroads of Civilizations Museum, an institution located in the historic Shindagha area of Bur Dubai. It marked the first exhibition on the Holocaust in the Gulf. A section of the exhibition was dedicated to Muslims who rescued Jews during WWII. Ahmed Obaid Almansoori, the Emirati founder of the museum, worked with Yael Grafy, originally from Israel and the museum’s new chief operating officer, to convey the horrors of the Holocaust.

Lingering Clouds of Resistance

Despite the positive messaging surrounding the Abraham Accords, some residents in the UAE speak of the challenges facing the cultural scene post-normalization. “Many Arabs here still feel angered at the lack of resolution over the Palestinian issue, particularly after the violence that took place in May,” said a local Emirati working in culture who spoke on the condition of anonymity. “From day one this was a purely Israel-UAE accord and Palestine did not factor in whatsoever. It was purely pragmatic, purely strategic and the Palestine element was ignored.”

After the Accords’ signing, a group of UAE-based art professionals decided to come together to create a cultural foundation based in Dubai to unify various cultural practitioners throughout the Gulf around ideas concerning culture in the Arab world post-normalization, and the question of Palestinian rights.

“Our aim was to bring Palestine into the equation again because it was sidelined in the Accords and we thought if we could explore the challenges through cultural initiatives we could find a way forward,” the Emirati added. “But we couldn’t make it happen. On the UAE side we found that individuals wanted nothing to do with ideas about normalization. Cultural practitioners, staunchly, even those who sympathized with our mission, refused to take part.”

The art and culture scene in the UAE has what Emirati cultural entrepreneur Gaith Abdalla calls “humanitarian ideas.” For this reason, he believes it will be challenging for Israeli arts practitioners to engage with the UAE scene unless they do it cross-culturally, with Arabs and Israelis and, he stresses, with Palestinians.

“In order to engage with the scene here you need to share its same humanitarian values,” Abdalla told JI. “If you are not an individual that believes in the humanitarian rights of the Palestinians then it will be hard for you to interact with the arts and cultural community here.”

Backlash has made some members of the UAE cultural scene hesitant to speak about the issue.

Still, Israeli gallerists such as Charly Darwich are looking ahead and excited to open in Dubai at the end of the year. Alongside the Israeli artists he will exhibit, he also hopes to stage shows bringing together Arab and Israeli artists.

“If I were to offer recommendations for an Israeli arts practitioner coming to Dubai, I would tell them to bring Palestinian artists with them, then they’d have more success,” said Abdalla.

“There are many positive stories to tell, but so far what you hear in the media is just about the business and economic deals—the human element is lacking,” added Mechtaly. “Palestinian representation is not really talked about and that is part of the problem and people think that if we don’t talk about what is happening it will go away. It doesn’t work like that. There are a lot of extremely progressive movements in Israel that have been fighting for Palestinian rights. It’s important to convey all of these nuances.” ♦

The 'Boy With No Job' gets a new job

Ben Soffer rolls out Spritz Society, a canned spritz cocktail, with the help of his massive Instagram following

By Gabby Deutch

Yeshiva University's Instagram account has 6,500 followers, more or less equal to the number of students who attend the school. And while most of those students could probably name some of the university's best-known alumni — perhaps the novelist Chaim Potok or any of the renowned rabbis to study at Modern Orthodoxy's flagship institution — most of them would likely not include Ben Soffer on that list.

Yet Soffer, who graduated from the school in 2014, has an Instagram following that dwarfs that of his alma mater: 1.6 million followers. He started @BoyWithNoJob during his senior year at the school, and it has since grown into one of the most popular meme accounts on Instagram.

The account specializes in “relatable humor,” Soffer explained to *Jewish Insider*. “If you were to take any concept from a TV show, like a ‘Seinfeld,’ where you’re watching, and you’re thinking to yourself, ‘Oh, That’s funny. That happened to me this morning.’” That, said Soffer, “is the goal of anything that we try and get out.”

The account has grown up over the years, morphing from an innovative early meme account into a reliable repository of humorous content catering to fellow millennials who are getting settled in their lives and their careers. One recent post shows an image of Britney Spears in the music video for her 1998 hit “...Baby One More Time,” with text overlaid on the image with a line from the song: “My loneliness is killing me.” But “loneliness” is crossed out and covered with “lower back.” *My lower back is killing me.*

Soffer, too, has grown up, or — as influencers hope to do — he has at least grown his personal brand. He’s now leveraging the @BoyWithNoJob following to launch Spritz Society, a new canned wine-

based cocktail. “Because I love spritzes, I would post pictures of them on Instagram, and I would get feedback from my followers that they didn’t know what it was, [asking] ‘It’s so beautiful. Where can I get it?’” he explained.

Following the runaway success of hard seltzers like Truly and White Claw, the ready-to-drink (RTD) cocktail market has had a huge summer. Popular drinks like margaritas, vodka sodas, and gin and tonics are now available in cans, and can be easily purchased in liquor stores, supermarkets and bodegas.

Soffer is betting that despite the dozens of hard seltzers and RTD cocktails already available, his Instagram followers will propel his direct-to-consumer canned spritzes — available in grapefruit, blood orange, pineapple and lemonade flavors — to success. A four-pack costs \$20. (The spritzes can be shipped directly to consumers because they use wine; other canned cocktails that use hard liquors are not able to ship directly.)

“What we think will end up pushing us to the top of this new canned cocktail sector is we are creating and advertising this product online and selling it online. Once we enter wholesale markets, you’ll know that Spritz Society exists,” Soffer said. “You’ve been served an ad about our products, or you’ve seen our products for the last six months in your feed at least once a day.”

It also helps that Spritz Society’s investors include an alcohol delivery service. More than a year ago, Soffer acquired the Instagram handle @spritz when he started developing the company.

The idea for the beverage came from a virtual focus group Soffer convened called, of course, Spritz Society. He had done an Instagram poll asking his followers which flavors of spritzes they liked, and 50,000 responded; he then chose 3,500 of those

people to include in early conversations about his company.

“I picked people that responded to the poll completely at random and asked them their opinions on logos, flavors, ABV percentages, color, and then just a general question about things that were important to them in things that they drink,” said Soffer.

He hopes to build on the excitement of those 3,500 people to grow the brand. But he also has another secret weapon: his wife Claudia Oshry’s Instagram. Her account, which preceded his, is called @GirlWithNoJob. And while Soffer has had a number of full-time jobs over the years in addition to his Instagram, Oshry has made social media her full-time profession, spinning @GirlWithNoJob off into other channels like her daily podcast “The Morning Toast.”

“She’s amazing,” Soffer said. Oshry also has three million followers, nearly twice as many as her husband. “There’s no competition. That’d be a bad thing to compete, because I’m constantly losing.” Soffer recently appeared on his wife’s podcast to promote Spritz Society.

Oshry and Soffer’s accounts usually stick to generic, broadly relatable humor — though a recent episode of “The Morning Toast” featured Oshry singing the Jewish song “Hamalach HaGoel Oti” and her pregnant co-host, her sister Jackie Oshry, describing her “perfect bris.” But together, Oshry and Soffer’s lives are grounded in Judaism.

“I’m certainly a religious person. I had an Orthodox wedding,” Soffer noted.

Oshry attended the Ramaz School, a Modern Orthodox Jewish day school in Manhattan, while Soffer attended the Solomon Schechter School of Manhattan and the Abraham Joshua Heschel School. Growing up, Soffer spent his summers at

Camp Ramah in the Berkshires.

"Judaism is incredibly important to me. If you follow me on my personal socials, you'll know that I'm a huge advocate of Israel," he added.

He has one regret for Spritz Society: that

the product is not certified kosher. "That is something that I would love to change. But for now, it's not kosher," Soffer said. "It is vegan, which at least for me, my personal Judaism, is good enough. I'm fine with drinking wine products outside of a religious

setting as long as they're vegan."

So Soffer won't be able to get Spritz Society to a synagogue kiddush. But "I'm constantly thinking about Hashem," said Soffer, "and thanking him for helping me with this business." ♦

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Dara Horn on a world that only teaches about 'dead Jews'

Horn's new essay collection 'People Love Dead Jews' looks at pervasive, modern-day antisemitism

By Gabby Deutch

If you keep walking past the Jewish cheder, the Jewish-owned hotel and the Jewish-owned ice cream shop, you'll reach the Old Synagogue, with a bimah and images of the Twin Tablets and stands to hold prayer books. .

You're not in New York, or Jerusalem. This is Harbin, China, a city south of Siberia that is known for its annual ice festival. The small Russian Jewish community that once occupied the area is long gone; its inhabitants were plundered and then expelled, or killed. Writer Dara Horn was in Harbin to see its attempt at reconstructing Jewish buildings that had been destroyed by any of the Chinese, Russian or Japanese governments that had once controlled the area. The synagogue was now a concert hall.

Horn sat down in one of the pews in this synagogue that felt "no different from every single urban early-20th-century synagogue I've ever entered" and reached "for a prayer book that wasn't there." That night's show was a string quartet.

"I felt that creeping 'Jewish heritage' unease, the unarticulated sense that despite all the supposed goodwill, something was clearly off," Horn writes.

She describes this scene in *People Love Dead Jews: Reports From a Haunted Present*, her new essay collection that comes out on September 7. It's her first nonfiction book, following five works of fiction that very much feature living Jews with interesting lives and story lines. The cheeky

title is meant to be provocative, but it gets at Horn's concern with how non-Jews around the world usually learn about Jews — not by interacting with them or learning about Jewish life, but by learning about "dead Jews," through topics like the Holocaust or the Spanish Inquisition or Harbin's story.

"I had mistaken the enormous public interest in past Jewish suffering for a sign of respect for living Jews," Horn writes. "I was very wrong."

Horn's essays, several of which were previously published in other publications, address the dissonance between people's fascination with dead Jews and rising levels of antisemitism in the U.S. (The FBI released figures yesterday showing that 58% of reported religiously motivated hate crimes in 2020 targeted Jews.) "Think about your social studies textbook when you're in sixth grade or something. There's something about the Israelites in the ancient history section. And then there's a chapter about the Holocaust. That's the only thing they say about Jews," Horn told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview.

One essay grapples with the near-universal reverence of Anne Frank while an employee at the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam was told not to wear a yarmulke to work. Another makes sense of "Jewish heritage" sites worldwide and the perhaps slightly antisemitic reasons non-Jews maintain them. All try to get at uncomfortable truths about modern

antisemitism.

After the Holocaust, Horn argued, the recent memory of the murder of six million Jews kept antisemitism in check. "The last few generations of non-Jews were sort of chagrined by the Holocaust, and that made antisemitism socially unacceptable," said Horn, who is 44. "For the people who are in my generation and my parents' generation, the times we grew up in were not normal. Now normal is returning."

In conversation with *JI*, Horn talked about what Jewish liturgy has to say about dead Jews, how universalizing Jewish stories can erase the Jewish experience and why Tevye's story still matters.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Gabby Deutch: You write in the book that you used to ask people at your talks if they could name three concentration camps, and then you would ask if they could also name three Yiddish authors. Many people could do the first but not the second. It seems like the book is mainly about people who aren't Jewish, but I imagine that many American Jews would also find themselves in that position of knowing the detailed history of the Holocaust while knowing very few details, in comparison, about Jewish culture and literature. How do you think the obsession, as you will, with dead Jews manifests within the Jewish community in America?

Dara Horn: In the Jewish community, for the most part — this is not true in Haredi circles — we're not using a Jewish language. [Steven] Spielberg's making "Schindler's List" for everybody who wants to see a movie. The loss of the Jewish language does mean that those conversations are all happening in public. If you think about something like the [U.S.] Holocaust [Memorial] Museum in Washington, that was built for a non-Jewish public, but obviously, a lot of Jewish people go there. I think that it means something different to a Jewish and a non-Jewish audience. Every culture has some way of memorializing the past. With the Jewish culture, it's this very ritualized process where the destruction of these communities is folded into this longer history of a spiral of loss and recovery, and it becomes a story about resilience. That's the story that we build out of these disasters. That practice continues. Do I think that there's too much attention paid in the Jewish community to educate people about Holocaust? I think the reason that was done was because of our relationships with non-Jewish communities. I think that part of the reason that you have this huge museum in Washington with all this documentation and everything is because of this fear of Holocaust denial. I did tell someone at [my kids'] Hebrew school, I think we should replace this detailed course on the history of the Holocaust with a detailed course about the history of the State of Israel. That's what they need to know as 21st-century Jews.

GD: *In the book, you often use the word 'we,' thereby including yourself. For example, in the chapter on Anne Frank, you write about the way that 'we' feel when we read her diary. Who do you view as the audience of this book? And how did you make that choice to write 'we' and not 'they'?*

DH: I'm a Jewish writer, but I'm also an English-language writer. I am participating in this broader non-Jewish culture. When I read Anne Frank's diary — but also if I go to the museum — as an English speaker, I am participating in that culture. I think this is a broader cultural problem in English-speaking countries. If I write a piece for a Jewish publication, I'm writing in English,

but anybody can read it; not only Jews are going to read that. For example, the Anne Frank piece was a piece that I wrote for *Smithsonian Magazine* initially. It was difficult, because what happened was they asked me to write a piece about Anne Frank. I remember feeling a sense of dread because I was like, 'I really don't want to write about Anne Frank.' Then I remembered this story, which I recounted in the book, about this news piece I had read about this young Orthodox guy who worked [at the Anne Frank House] who they wouldn't let wear his yarmulke to work. I tend to lean toward those uncomfortable moments. So that piece for *Smithsonian*, a general-interest magazine, seemed to get a lot of attention. I spoke on NPR in Texas. It was a call-in show. It was very clearly non-Jewish listeners who were calling in and talking about it. Part of it is an education problem in the way people learn about Jews. Think about your social studies textbook when you're in sixth grade or something. There's something about the Israelites in the ancient history section. And then there's a chapter about the Holocaust. That's the only thing they say about Jews. This is the only thing that most people know.

GD: *You argue in the book that Jewish heritage sites, like cemeteries or old synagogues in places that now have none or very few Jews, often have the goal of not just remembering and preserving that culture but also getting Jewish investment and Jewish tourists. These sites are often preserved with little or no mention of the usually violent reasons why Jews no longer live in that area. When you think about the upkeep of these places — places like Harbin — is it a bad thing to put money and effort into preserving these sites?*

DH: Benjamin de Tudela traveled around the known world in the 1100s visiting Jewish communities. Now, you travel the world and you visit people's graves. These people were murdered or forced to flee in most cases. So what do you do with these sites? Is there a good way to do this as opposed to an exploitative way to do this? I think that there are better and worse ways to do this. In the Chinese example, there was no interest in talking about, 'Who are Jews? What does this even mean?' It's also happening in a country where religion is illegal, and you're

in a country with all kinds of repressive laws, so even if you wanted to do this the right way, there are limitations. Dan Ben-Canaan, the one Jew of Harbin, is doing his best to tell this story, but at the same time, you go to that museum and there's not a word about, 'What is Judaism? Who are Jews? What does it even mean, culturally, to be Jewish?' To me the most glaring thing is there's nothing about why this community isn't here anymore. That's the problem. If this society is not owning what happened in this place, you can't be honest about your history.

It's similar to what we're doing in this country now with the way we think about Confederate monuments. There are ways to think about history in a way that owns the evils of the past. Restoring a historical site and then not mentioning, 'Oh, by the way, we forced all these people to leave' would not be a great way to do this. I am not going to write a set of laws about the good and bad ways to do this. But it was so glaring in that example. They said the quiet part out loud, when the mayor of Harbin said that this is a great opportunity to get investments from all the rich Jews of the world.

GD: *In the book, you contrast the way that Jews think about time — 'a spiral of a spiral, a tangled old telephone cord in which the future was the present, which was essentially the past' — with the notion of the American dream, that things are always progressing and improving. Have you thought about what the political takeaways from this book might be on broader issues related to how we remember American history?*

DH: I think that people go there in their minds no matter what. When I did that NPR interview, all the call-ins were about exactly that: They asked, 'How do we think about Confederate history, for example, or Native American history?' This is my sixth book, my first nonfiction book. One thing I discovered is, you write one book. And then everybody is reading a different book than the book you wrote. If someone reads this book and is like, 'Wow, this is telling me about the way I want to think about Native American history,' I think that's fantastic.

That said, I do think that there is this need to universalize Jewish history, which

becomes a way of erasing it. One of the examples I have in the book is this piece I wrote about [the Auschwitz exhibit at New York's Museum of Jewish Heritage]. I was writing that piece for a mainstream publication, for *The Atlantic*. I talked about how the rabbi of my synagogue was at a meeting with other clergy in the town with the police, and how all these local churches — it was about security — were like, 'Maybe we should put a lock on the door.' And the rabbi of my synagogue is sitting there in stunned silence. My editor at *The Atlantic* was like, 'Shouldn't you talk here about how there are a lot of non-Jewish houses of worship that require security?' I actually put into the piece: 'Yes, this rabbi and I both know that there are other houses of worship from other religions that also require security. And yes, this rabbi and I are both aware that other groups have been persecuted. And the degrading need to recite these middle school obvious facts is part of the problem because what you're saying is dead Jews only matter if they're about something more.'

It's very similar to the argument that Jews are like the canary in the coal mine. When Jews are attacked, it's a sign of the collapse of the society. There's that quote from that German minister: 'First they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew.' Jews are the canary in the coal mine, this harbinger, that when Jews were attacked, it's the beginning of the decline of your society. What you're basically saying is, we should care when Jews are murdered or maimed because that serves as a warning that later, actual people might be attacked. It's like you're being asked to erase your own dignity in order to plead to be counted as part of a society. In your attempt to get respect from society, you are diminishing yourself.

GD: *You write about this attempt to get respect from society in an essay about Ellis Island, and the difference in the way Jews remember it versus what really happened. Despite loads of evidence showing that, actually, immigration officers did not change Jews' names at Ellis Island — that Jews changed their own names later, in a bid to better fit into American society — many American Jews hold onto that Ellis Island fiction. People are shocked to learn it isn't true.*

DH: When I would give talks about that, people would mob me. They would be yelling at me. People really, really get mad when you tell them that. The moment when it gets uncomfortable is to me the signal that there's an important story here. Why are educated American Jews — and these are people who pride themselves on their skepticism and critical thinking — why are they taking this la la land fairytale story that's demonstrably untrue, and then trying to figure out some way to make it true, saying, 'Well, maybe my great-great-grandfather was the exception?' Why are people so attached to the story? It is doing something important emotionally for people.

GD: *You write that after the Tree of Life massacre in Pittsburgh, when you told your children what happened, they didn't need an explanation of why this would happen to Jews, because they understood that such violence has happened to the Jews in the past, that it's in our liturgy and the Torah. What does it mean for Jewish kids to grow up with this deeper understanding? Do you think it's any different now from when you were growing up?*

DH: There's all kinds of explanations for why there is this sudden rise in antisemitism in the United States in the past however many years. There are all these self-serving explanations you could give for this depending on what side of the political spectrum you're on. But I say in the book, to me the most convincing answer is the most boring, which makes it also the most disturbing — which is, basically, the last few generations of non-Jews were sort of chagrined by the Holocaust, and that made antisemitism socially unacceptable. But now that visceral response is fading, because the people who really lived with those events [of] that generation are dying. I'm 44. For the people who are in my generation and my parents' generation, the times we grew up in were not normal. Now normal is returning. And we know that because the liturgy is set up for this. Do I find it absolutely terrifying that this is my children's normal? Yes. They find that hard to believe. Their experience is more typical of Jewish history. People say, 'Oh, there's this rise in antisemitic violence in the past few years.' Haredi Jews will tell

you it never went away. It's really just about how visible you are.

GD: *For people, both Jewish and not — and maybe the answer would be different for both groups — but for those who are looking to learn more about Jews and Judaism that isn't just reading about the Holocaust and dead Jews, are there books that you teach, or books you read, that you offer as a primer for getting more into what Judaism actually looks like?*

DH: There's a chapter where I talk about Jewish literature, and how there is not this idea that a book has to be tied up in a bow at the end. I talked in the book about the *Tevye the Dairyman* stories. American audiences are familiar with them because of "Fiddler on the Roof," but "Fiddler on the Roof" doesn't include a lot of stuff. One of the daughters commits suicide, Motel drops dead, Golda dies. It's a very, very depressing book. What's astonishing about it is it doesn't have the narrative arc that we expect. I think it's based on Christianity, the idea that there's an arc toward redemption, and at the end the good guys are saved, or there's an epiphany, a moment of grace. These are all Christian terms. That's not what happens in literature in Jewish languages.

Instead, you have something different, which is this idea of resilience. In the *Tevye* stories, for each one of his daughters, it's a calamity. But *Tevye* never changes. He's certainly never saved. He never has an epiphany, he never realizes anything. His power as a character is that he keeps enduring. What makes him so powerful is that he remains through these calamities exactly who he always has been. At the very last line of that book, a line that would never appear on Broadway, the very last line of the *Tevye* stories — the whole structure of the book is monologues of *Tevye* talking to Sholem Aleichem, the book's author — is *Tevye* saying to Sholem Aleichem, 'Go tell all of our Jews everywhere that our old God still lives.' This is a masterclass on resilience.

If you just want a reading list, I would recommend different books to different people based on their interests. Mordecai Kaplan calls Judaism a civilization. It isn't just a religion. It is a civilization, which has arts and many different aspects to it. It would depend on who I was talking to, what I

would recommend in terms of a way in. This is just this amazing, thriving civilization and erasing it in this way, where what we often see — 'Jews are just like everybody else' — well, Jews spent thousands of years not being like everybody else. That was sort of the point of Judaism, to not be like everyone else. We believed in one God when nobody else did. ♦