Jlife

SGPV JEWISH LIFE

January 2026
Tevet — Shevat 5786

A SACRED HOLIDAY
Celebrating Shabbat

BEFORE 'SNL,' THERE WAS SID CAESAR — AND A ROOMFUL OF JEWISH WRITERS

LOOKING AHEAD AT 2026

GOT KIDS?
Look Inside for
kiddish

JEWISH FEDERATION
OF THE GREATER SAN GABRIEL AND POMONA VALLEYS

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SAN GABRIEL VALLEY

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EVERY PERSON HAS A NAME

25-HOUR HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE PROGRAM

Saturday, January 24, 7 p.m.
COMMEMORATION CEREMONY
Saturday, January 24, 8 p.m. -
Sunday, January 25, 8 p.m.
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AT PASADENA CITY HALL &
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JEWISH FEDERATION
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PJ Library

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We are here. We are strong. We are here to stay. And, we are here for YOU.
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Contact melissa@pjtc.net for more information.

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You are cordially invited to join us for the

31ST ANNUAL MEETING

of the Jewish Federation
of the Greater San Gabriel and Pomona Valleys

Sunday, January 11, at 10:00 a.m.
Temple Beth David

Catered Brunch Reception | $35 per person
RSVP by January 7
There will be no solicitation of funds

Keynote Speaker
Danny Feldman
Producing Artistic Director of the Pasadena Playhouse

Honoring
Debby Singer
Jewish Federation's founding PJ Library and PJ Our Way Program Director

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and to RSVP, visit:
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JEWISH FEDERATION
OF THE GREATER SAN GABRIEL AND POMONA VALLEYS

Jlife

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JEWISH LIFE

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BECAUSE OF YOU, WE REMEMBER AND WE RENEW

Each year, our Jewish Federation gathers the community for **Every Person Has a Name**—a 25-hour Holocaust Remembrance program. The impact is profound. Multigenerational families come together to read the names of Holocaust victims, refusing to let them be forgotten.

But something even deeper happens in those hours. Alongside the tears and solemn remembrance, a quiet strength rises in the air. Families reaffirm their pride in being Jewish. Young people, standing beside parents and grandparents, make their own unspoken promise: **Never again.** They commit themselves to a future where hatred will not have the final word.

This is **Tikkun Olam** in action—repairing the world, one voice and one memory at a time. And it is only possible because of **generous community members like you**.

When you give to the Jewish Federation, you do more than sponsor an event. You make it possible for our community to stand strong in the face of antisemitism, to create safe spaces where every Jew feels seen, and help build a legacy of hope for generations to come.

Because of you, we remember. Because of you, we take pride.
Because of you, we ensure a future where light and love overcome hate.

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WWW.JEWISHSGPV.ORG

JEWISH FEDERATION
OF THE GREATER SAN GABRIEL AND POMONA VALLEYS

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LOOKING AHEAD TO WHAT 2026 HAS IN STORE FOR OUR COMMUNITY

One of my favorite commentaries that Rabbi Alan Lachtman, the longtime rabbi at Temple Beth David, used to share during his remarks at Rosh Hashanah services each year was that the year ahead is like a clean white piece of paper. It is void of anything on it, ready for people to make their imprint on the year ahead. This is what I often think about as a new secular year begins.

Our Jewish Federation works hard each day to make our local Jewish community vibrant through the programs and services we provide, while also ensuring that there is a strong Jewish voice ready to speak out on behalf of all of us.

For this month's column, I asked my staff to share what they were looking forward to in 2026.

Karen Galeana (Operations and Communication Manager)

I am looking forward to continuing to strengthen meaningful connections across our community while ensuring our work remains responsive, inclusive, and impactful. I am excited to deepen engagement by creating more opportunities for individuals and families to feel welcome, informed, and inspired to participate in our Jewish Federation's programs and activities. By combining clear, approachable communication with well-run, intentional operations, I look forward to supporting our organization's evolving needs, amplifying our collective voice, and helping our Jewish Federation serve as a trusted hub that brings people together, supports one another, and sustains vibrant Jewish life throughout our community.

Natalie Karic (PJ Library and PJ Our Way Program Director)

In 2026, I am so excited to spread the word about PJ Library's Get Together Grant Program. Sponsored by the Harold Grinspoon Foundation, this fantastic opportunity provides $100 micro-grants to families hosting Jewish-themed gatherings with other Jewish families in their community. Think Shabbat in the park, a group hike and picnic for Tu BiShvat, or volunteering together and going for bagels afterwards. This program is available to all PJ Library subscribers, with basically no strings attached, except for submitting a short report about the hosted gathering! I cannot wait to hear all about the fun activities and gatherings from the PJ families that participate.

Annabella Tornek (Camp Gan Shalom Director and Social Media Coordinator)

2025 was quite a challenging year. With the loss of so much in Altadena, including the Pasadena Jewish Temple, and with the rise of antisemitism, the need for our Jewish Federation is more apparent than ever. In 2026, I am looking forward to continuing to run Camp Gan Shalom and providing a fun, safe, and engaging Jewish Day Camp experience in our community.

Cantor Judy Sofer (Cultural Arts Program Director)

I am looking forward to three specific things in 2026. First, I am excited that we will be publishing our Jewish Cooking Connection Cookbook to share with the community, highlighting the 38 recipes we have featured. Second, are the three productions (two plays and our annual Holocaust staged play reading) that our JFed Players will be performing. And lastly, I am looking forward for Kol HaEmek (our community choir) to continue performing around the community and hopefully picking up a few more singers.

Rebecca Russell (Program and Community Outreach Director)

2026 has so many incredible programs already planned. This year's Ladies of Laughter Comedy Fest: Celebrating Funny Jewish Women is the thing I am most looking forward to. In its expanded version, we'll bring in venues from all over our community, and we'll see even more hilarious ladies inspiring and healing us through comedy. March will not only celebrate Jewish women this year, but also give us all a much-needed communal release of laughter.

And for me, personally, I am looking forward to continuing to engage with people and create meaningful, impactful opportunities for them to connect with our local Jewish community.

Let's make 2026 a year of connection, growth, and shared purpose for our entire local Jewish community. ✡

JASON MOSS IS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE JEWISH FEDERATION OF THE GREATER SAN GABRIEL AND POMONA VALLEYS.

> “Jews cherish life and Israel intends to survive, thrive and light the way.”

BECAUSE JEWS

Expecting Miracles

BY ANDREA SIMANTOV

Hanukkah on Bondi Beach. Manchester Yom Kippur prayer. Paris Holocaust Memorial vandalised. Washington, DC Embassy shooting. Rabbi murdered in United Arab Emirates. Crown Heights stabbing. Synagogue Arson in Athens.

Because October 7, 2023? Uh, no. Because Jews.

Name a country where Jews have contributed and thrived, and I’ll show you marches and swastikas and physical attacks that seemed unimaginable on May 8, 1945, the day that Germany unconditionally surrendered. But even more stunning? Show me a country where Jews have not lived for hundreds of years and I’ll still show you marches and swastikas and calls for globalizing the Intifada.

Because October 7, 2023? Uh, no. Because Jews.

The Chelmesque madness at play is that we, the victims, have been tagged the oppressors! For the first time in my life, I heard that American friends did not place menorahs in their windows for fear of repercussions. Jewish restaurants are under siege and their patrons are terrified—yes, TERRIFIED—of potential ramifications that might accompany an evening out. And don’t anyone dare tell me that I’m exaggerating. Because when a Torah observant college student cannot safely wear a kippah or tzitzit while attending classes at a previously erstwhile respected Ivy-League institution, both that institution and our entire society have lost their way.

Allow me to let you in on a little secret, one that separates the hand-wringers from the arm-wavers: Jews cherish life and Israel intends to survive, thrive and light the way. That “eternal-victimhood” thing has run its course and, despite the West’s furious downward spiral into the hands of hate-mongers, gay bashers, wielders of child-shields, wife killers, public executioners, suicide bombers, female genital mutilators, loathers of civil-discourse and free enterprise, Israel will flourish. It is the reason she was reborn, infused in 1948 with defiance and righteous purpose; a Phoenix risen from the ashes of the twentieth century’s greatest shame.

Israel wants to live while, seemingly, the West wants to die. For what other reason would civilized nations permit —no, EMBRACE—a tsunami of aberrant values that stand in direct opposition to the ones that birthed their flawed-but-democratic societies? Countries that once stood proud against tyranny and oppression have unfurled the red carpet, paying terrified homage to these most ungrateful houseguests who not only defecate in the homes of their naive hosts but, in fact, play their demise. The irony is nearly comedic, were it not for the accompanying tragedy. To dumb it down a tad, the wolf is no longer at the door; he has moved in and is pushing you aside. Tacit blessings were all he needed.

Limping out of the charmingly-named Holiday of Lights, it is imperative to realize that despite pluralistic attempts to morph the holiday into a ‘Jewish Christmas,’ Hanukkah was born of a refusal to assimilate and, ultimately, disappear. What has happened to us that we are uncomfortable with saying “No”? Parents struggle with it, educators may pay a price by employing it and clergy keeps watering down doctrine until it is diluted to feel-good ambiguity.

Standing at the cusp of a new Gregorian year, we have an opportunity to make miracles happen. Not waiting for some magical splitting of the Red Sea or discovering a small flask of pure oil that inexplicably lasts for eight nights. The relationship with G-d is one of partnership, a relationship where miracles are not awaited but forged. Courage, coupled with moral vision are critical for the societal challenges that lie ahead. Wimps need not apply. Our existence depends on such bravery.

Take a page from Israel. Being liked is less rewarding than being alive. ✡

NEW YORK NATIVE **ANDREA SIMANTOV** HAS LIVED IN JERUSALEM SINCE 1995. SHE WRITES FOR SEVERAL PUBLICATIONS, APPEARS REGULARLY ON ISRAEL NATIONAL RADIO AND OWNS AN IMAGE CONSULTING FIRM FOR WOMEN.

DID THE BIBLICAL MATRIARCHS ALL LONG TO BE MOTHERS?

Genesis considers maternal ambivalence.

BY RABBI TALI ADLER, MY JEWISH LEARNING

We tend to tell one story about the biblical matriarchs, a story in which they long for children for years, praying for pregnancies that will make them into mothers. Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel are united in their longing, with their lives divided into two periods: matriarchs-in-waiting and matriarchs fulfilled. (Leah, Rachel's sister and the fourth founding matriarch, by contrast, had no trouble conceiving.)

But the Torah's story of these women might be more complicated.

Sarah and Rachel both take active steps to ensure they have children. Sarah proposes that Abraham take Hagar as a wife, hoping their child will be hers as well. Later, when she finally gives birth to Isaac, Sarah praises G-d for her miracle. Two generations later, Rachel, desperate for a child, confronts her husband, telling him that if she does not have children, she will die. When she gives birth to Joseph, her firstborn son, the name she gives him, which means "to increase," references her desire for more children.

However, Rebecca, the matriarch at the center of this week's Torah portion, Parashat Toldot, never indicates any desire for children.

Unlike the other matriarchs, whose longing for children is mentioned at the beginning of extended narratives, Rebecca's infertility is introduced in the same verse that mentions the solution—not her own prayers, but her husband's: "Isaac pleaded with G-d on behalf of his wife, because she was infertile; and G-d responded to his plea, and his wife Rebecca conceived." (Genesis 25:21).

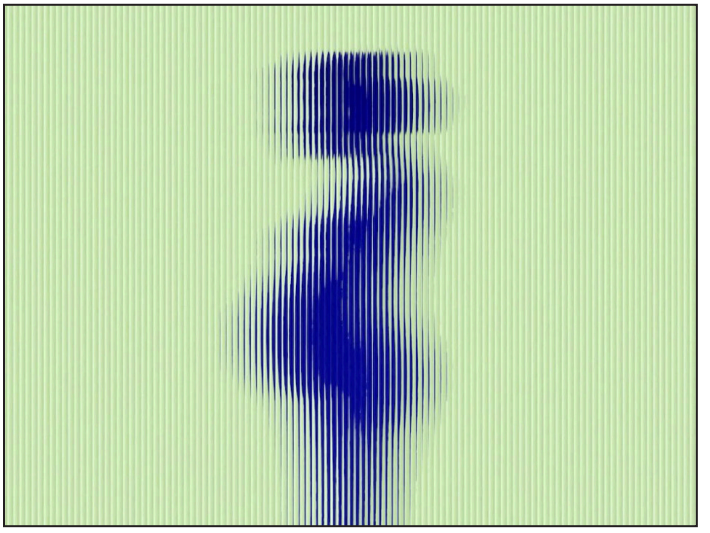
Where was Rebecca as her husband prayed? A *midrash* in Bereshit Rabbah suggests that Rebecca was in the same room as Isaac, praying the same prayers. In this image, they are united in their desire for children and the pain they feel during the long wait.

But Rebecca's silence is conspicuous, forcing us to entertain another possibility: Perhaps only Isaac wants children enough to pray for them. This possibility paints a different picture, one in which Isaac prays fervently in one corner of the room while Rebecca, in another corner, remains silent. Maybe she is ignoring his prayers, or maybe she is hoping that his prayers will be ignored.

The possibility of Rebecca's ambivalence is reinforced in the next verse: "But the children struggled in her womb, and she said, 'If so, why do I exist?'" (Genesis 25:22).

Her question is not philosophical. It is the desperate cry of a woman who feels she cannot go on. Her pregnancy, at this moment, is overwhelming.

Rebecca's reaction contrasts with Rachel's. Whereas



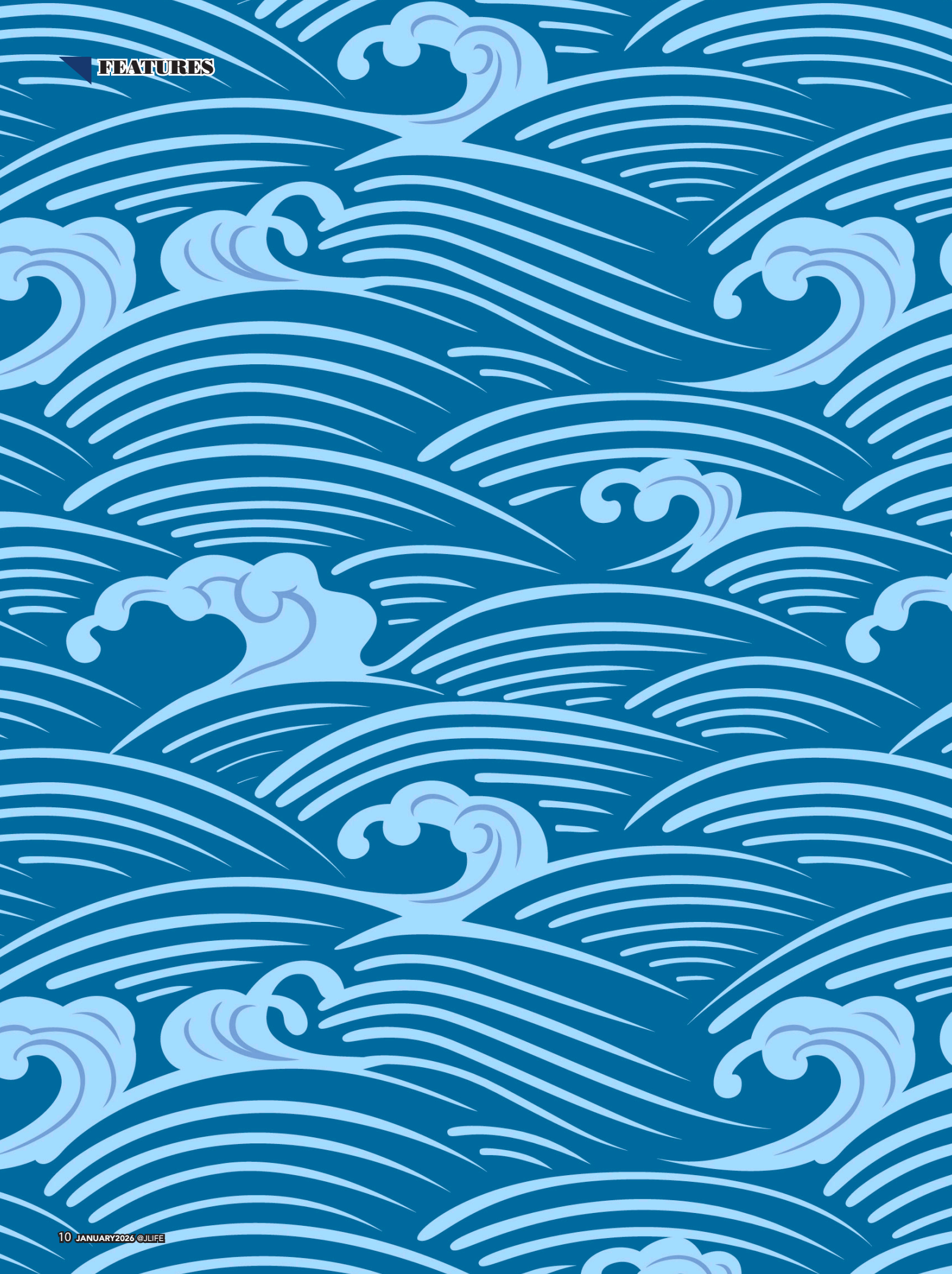
Rachel says she will die if she does not have children, Rebecca, once she begins to experience the pregnancy physically, despairs. It is only when Rebecca receives the word of God assuring her that she has a role as the mother of two great nations that she seems to reconcile herself to motherhood.

There are two ways to understand Rebecca's story. The first, and more tragic, is of a woman who never wanted to be a mother and had that role forced upon her by other people's needs and expectations. But there is a second, more complicated version of Rebecca's story. In this version, Rebecca is not against being a mother, but she is ambivalent. She may remain silent because she is simply unsure of what she wants. This Rebecca, like so many mothers, may have embraced her children in love while mourning the ways that their existence would change her life.

For many people, the journey towards parenthood involves wanting coupled with fear, days of longing for pregnancy, followed by extended periods of hoping for just a little while longer before it comes. Sometimes, even those who have previously identified with Rachel and Sarah become, when faced with pregnancy, Rebeccas. In offering Rebecca's journey, the Torah may be offering an imperative: Do not assume you know how others feel about their journeys to parenthood. Make space for parents to share their fears just as they share their joy.

And for those struggling with their ambivalence in silence, even shame: Know that Rebecca is our matriarch as well. ✡

RABBI TALI ADLER IS A CONTRIBUTING WRITER TO MY JEWISH LEARNING AND JLIFE MAGAZINE.



NON-TRADITIONAL USES FOR A *MIKVEH*

How an ancient ritual has been reimagined for a variety of new purposes.

BY MY JEWISH LEARNING

Courtesy of Mayyim Hayyim

A *mikveh* is a Jewish ritual bath traditionally used for a variety of religious purposes, most significantly for monthly immersions by married women before they sexually reunite with their husbands following their menstrual cycles, a body of law known as *taharat hamishpachah*, or the laws of family purity. But *mikvehs* have also long been used for a number of other purposes, both ritually required and customary. Immersion is mandated for converts to Judaism. Some Jews also immerse new food utensils in a *mikveh* prior to using them, a practice known as *tevilat keilim*. In some communities, primarily hasidic ones, it's common for men to visit a *mikveh* prior to Shabbat.

For these reasons, constructing a *mikveh* is considered to be of paramount importance, with some Jewish law authorities holding that it should take precedence over the building of a synagogue or the acquisition of a Torah scroll. But for much of Jewish history, visiting the *mikveh* was largely the domain of married Orthodox women and hasidic men. Most liberal Jews shunned it, considering the requirement to immerse after menstruation to be patriarchal and sexist. But in recent years, *mikveh* immersion has soared among non-Orthodox Jews who have begun to reclaim the practice, often for non-traditional purposes.

Much of this movement is attributable to Mayyim Hayyim, a self-described "pluralistic" and "open" *mikveh* that started in suburban Boston in 2004 with a mission to "reclaim and reinvent" the *mikveh* for "contemporary spiritual use." Today, Mayyim Hayyim is at the vanguard of what has been called the open *mikvah* movement (https://risingtideopenwaters.org/why-open-mikveh/) a network of community *mikvehs* open to all Jews for a range of purposes, both traditional and not. In 2018, five such *mikvehs* established the Rising Tide Open Waters *Mikveh* Network, which counts more than 40 *mikvehs* among its members.

Most of the contemporary re-embrace of the *mikveh* centers around its use to mark various life transitions, many of them related to grief, healing and the processing of trauma. Some have embraced the *mikveh* ritual as a way to prepare for treatment of a serious illness, or as a way to mark the completion of a successful course of treatment. Some use the *mikveh* to mark important celebratory milestones, like a wedding or bar *mitzvah*. And still others use the *mikveh* to mark tragic losses, like the end of the mourning period for a loved one or the dissolution of a marriage. A more recent trend has been to immerse in the *mikveh* to mark a gender transition or coming out as gay or lesbian.

Many of the new progressive *mikvehs* will welcome any Jewish person who wishes to immerse for any reason, and some of traditional *mikvehs* will permit immersions for certain non-traditional purposes. Many permit appointments to be made directly online and most ask for a small donation.

A directory of progressive *mikvehs* can be found at https://www.mayyimhayyim.org/risingtide/members/ and a large directory of traditional mikvehs can be found at https://www.mikvah.org/directory. ✡

WHAT MAKES A STORY JEWISH?

Diaspora Jews don't have the luxury of writing about whatever they want. Telling Jewish stories is a Jewish imperative.

BY RABBI BENJAMIN RESNICK, MY JEWISH LEARNING

A little over a decade ago, in a book called Jews and Words, the late Israeli writer Amos Oz and his daughter, Fania Oz-Salzberger, described Jewish continuity as follows: "Ours is not a bloodline but a textline. … We are not about stones, clans, or chromosomes. You don't have to be an archeologist, an anthropologist or a geneticist to trace and substantiate the Jewish continuum. You don't have to be an observant Jew. You don't have to be a Jew. Or, for that matter, an anti-Semite. All you have to be is a reader."

It is a striking passage that links Abraham and Sarah, ancient rabbinic sages, the 18th-century businesswoman Gluckel of Hameln, and contemporary Jewish authors. Like many pithy formulations, the opening of Jews and Words is probably overstated or at least overly simple. But storytelling, for Jews, has long been a core devotional activity. Or, as some sages remarked in the Midrash, "If you want to know the One Who Spoke The World Into Being you must learn haggadah!—that is, how to tell a sacred story.

This notable injunction is made all the more powerful because of the uncertain etymology of the word "haggadah" (which is a variant of the more familiar aggadah and not to be confused with the Passover Hagaddah). It could be related to the Hebrew root *nun-gimmel-dalet*, which means "to tell," or to the root *aleph-gimmel-dalet*, which means "knot" or "web" (as in to "weave a yarn" or "spin a tale"). The ambiguity yields the insight (almost certainly intended by the authors of that Midrash) that stories bind you. They hold your family close. The more you twist them, turn them, and tell them, the tighter the web becomes. But what makes a Jewish story anyway? What kind of stories have we been telling? Most pointedly, what kind of stories should we be telling now? These are central preoccupations of mine, both as a novelist and as a Jew.

My own criterion for identifying a story as Jewish is fairly close to that of the late, great Israeli novelist A.B. Yehoshua, who suggested that for a piece of literature to be Jewish, it must check at least one of two boxes: 1) It must be written in a substantively Jewish language, like Hebrew or Yiddish, in which case it can be written by anyone and about any subject whatsoever; or 2) it can be written in any language, but it must be written by a Jew about substantively Jewish

matters (i.e., populated by Jewish characters and addressing questions of Jewish cultural, religious or national concern).

This definition is expansive enough to include the Hebrew poetry of an Arab-Israeli writer, but narrow enough to exclude, for example, the stories of Isaac Asimov, a very Jewish and very prolific science fiction writer who wrote almost nothing about the Jews. And this definition lands with particular force on Jewish writers (like me!) who work in non-Jewish languages. If we care at all about situating our work inside the mighty textline that defines Jewish being (as I do), it significantly narrows the scope of what we should try to do. Novelists (and artists of all kinds) tend to bristle when you try to tell them how they should direct their creative energies. The limits of what I can write about are the limits of my imagination! There is nothing foreign to me! As the American short story writer Raymond Carver once wrote,

"Put it all in, make use."

Important concerns about telling stories that don't reflect the writer's own experiences have tempered some of this hubris. But novelists are also rather desperate for approval. We want readers and many of them, both for crass economic reasons and because of (equally crass, if more mysterious) torsions of the ego. Jewish American writers in the 20th century, therefore, were often afraid of ghettoizing themselves into obscurity. Theirs was a ghastly anxiety born of persecution and exclusion that inspired writers like Philip Roth and Saul Bellow to deny their identity as "Jewish writers," even though the Jews were pretty much all they ever wrote about.

On some level, I can relate. But I would simply say that we, Jewish writers living in the diaspora after Oct. 7, who write in English (or French, Spanish, German or Russian), simply do not have the luxury of writing about whatever we want. We are too fractured, too confused, too assimilated, too threatened, and our story is too important for that. We need to tell it in a way that preserves and celebrates Jewish continuity with the past while extending it towards new, imaginative horizons.

I would also venture—as the writer Cynthia Ozick has in her marvelous 1970 essay "Toward A New Yiddish"—that writing about non-Jewish subjects or with non-Jewish audiences in mind is a fast track to oblivion and irrelevance, both as Jews and as artists. Few remember the "great" works of the ancient Jews of Alexandria, who fancied themselves Greek and wrote accordingly. I doubt Moses was ever concerned about his work being well-received by the Hittites. Neither did the Yiddish writer I.L. Peretz think that his success hinged on a wide readership among the English gentry. That should not be our concern either.

It is, instead, indigenous Jewish storytelling that will secure our legacy, as it did for Moses and Peretz, whose stories were written for us and coaxed from the rich soil of our shared past and our present longings for what we might yet become.

In Yiddish, there is a word, "doikayt" (literally "hereness"), which expresses the notion that Jews should form and strengthen Jewish cultural, artistic and institutional life wherever they reside. So we should. (Historically, the concept of doikayt stood in opposition to the vision of cultural strength and renewal offered by Zionism, and I would emphasize that is not how I, an ardent Zionist, am using it.) But it's on us, too—those responsible for telling this leg of the Jewish story in America—not to drop the baton because of our linguistic shortcomings or because of the challenges we face from without and from within.

Most American Jews lack fluency in a uniquely Jewish language, which makes it harder to maintain cultural continuity and coherence. The challenge for Jewish writers, then, is to translate indigenous Jewish ideas, glorious in their particularism, into, say, the language I am using right now. It's a language of Christendom, which holds, along with Paul, that there is no distinction between Jew and Greek. I don't agree. And, although I will likely never write anything more complicated than an email in Hebrew, I refuse to let American Jews go down with the Alexandrian ones, at least not without a fight.

That means telling our tales. It means taking up the mantle of haggadah, the never-ending, eternally verdant textline of the Jewish people. It lets us know who we've been, who we are and where we're headed. As Jewish writers in America, we should focus our attention there. We should write and write and write. And as the Passover Haggadah teaches: "All who expand on the story are praiseworthy." ✡

RABBI BENJAMIN RESNICK IS A CONTRIBUTING WRITER TO MY JEWISH LEARNING AND JLIFE MAGAZINE.

BEING BOTH JEWISH AND SLAVIC IN AMERICA HASN'T ALWAYS BEEN SIMPLE—BUT SHARING STORIES AND CULTURE IS HELPING ME MAKE SENSE OF WHO I AM

A teen leader of a high school cultural club discovers how food, language, and tradition can connect communities.

BY VICK VOLOVNYK, JEWISH TELEGRAPHIC AGENCY (JTA)

I grew up speaking Russian to my family—at home, on the streets in Brooklyn and Manhattan, and at the Italian grocery store in Tottenville, Staten Island. It was never an issue until the Russia-Ukraine conflict escalated in 2022. That's when the language I knew as my mother tongue became political.

When I spoke Russian, some people threw judgmental looks and choice words my way, assuming my allegiance to Russia. They didn't know my Ukrainian-Jewish background as the child of Odesan immigrants (while Odessa is the Russian spelling, Odesa is officially used in Ukraine). Slavic people judged my choice of Russian; others would assume I must be Russian.

My language became the marker of my identity; otherwise I was seen as a nondescript white person. This prompted me to seriously consider what my mixed ethno-cultural background meant to me. As someone one quarter Jewish, three-fourths Slavic, but fully shaped by Ukraine, who really was I, and how could I express all of it at once?

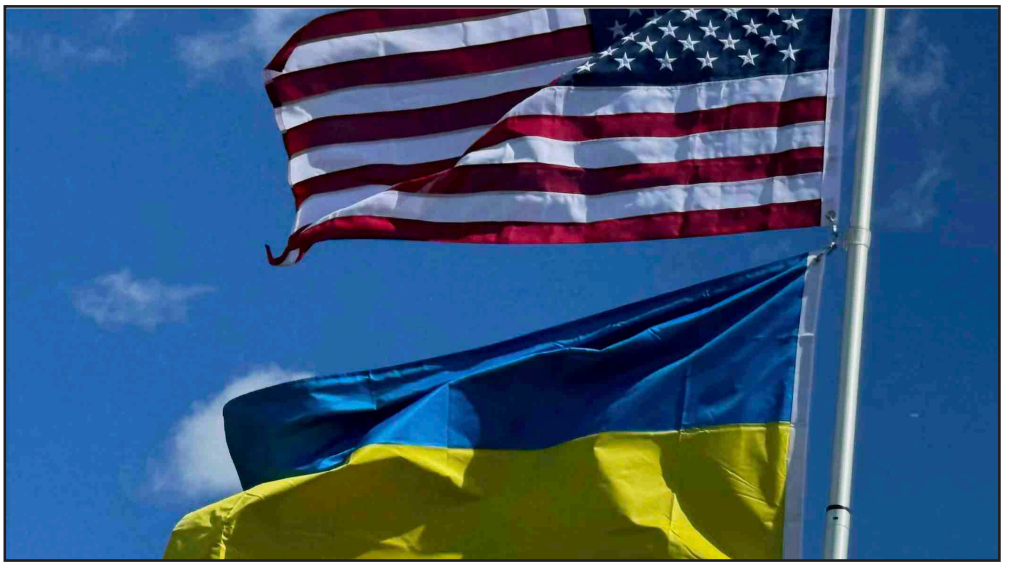
I think back to my parents describing Soviet antisemitism, particularly harsh in the 1980s, when they grew up in Soviet Ukraine. Though they learned both Russian and Ukrainian, able to partially connect to the region's heritage, they lived under systemic discrimination that limited religious cultural expression. They celebrated with a secular "New Year's" tree and exchanged gifts, prohibited from any further religious celebration by the government. My mother's Jewish family could not light Hanukkah candles, and my father's Eastern Orthodox relatives could not celebrate Christmas. Judaism was passed down through family recipes such as mini-matzah ball soup and latkes, mannerisms and stories told in kitchens thick with the smell of borscht.

Similarly, the Soviet Union suppressed Ukrainian identity, and Russia now does the same with Ukrainian speakers inside the territory it controls. Since 2019, Ukraine has emphasized reclaiming its culture, passing a language law mandating Ukrainian in the public sector. There is growing societal emphasis on the use of Ukrainian as a way of reinforcing national identity amid the war launched by Russia in 2022. Before the full-scale invasion, most Ukrainians were bilingual and Russian remained widely used in cities like Odesa and Kharkiv, not as a marker of loyalty to Russia but simply as a legacy of Soviet policy and urban life. My elderly relatives in Odesa tell us they struggle with the linguistic shift, while others feel empowered by the new cultural attitudes. Many Jews in Ukraine are reclaiming an identity as "Ukrainian Jews," blending language, religion and nationality into shared Ukrainian-Jewish solidarity, such as those from Kyiv's Simcha Chabad Jewish community. In March, members celebrated their third Purim since Russia's invasion by connecting the story of Esther to Ukraine's struggle with Russia. This turn towards greater Ukrainian connection has been especially prevalent among younger Slavic Jews, who now speak more Ukrainian and hold all events in the language, shared members of the community.

I was always someone of Slavic descent in America, but now feel that I am both an American and a Slavic Jew. After my parents immigrated to the U.S. in 1992, they aimed to teach me and my younger sister Eve Russian, Ukrainian and English. I grew up mostly indifferent to their educational efforts, achieving accented Russian fluency and even less in Ukrainian, until 2022, when the Russia-Ukraine war led me to realize how language creates voice and belonging. That spring, I set out to create the Slavic Culture Club, a space for students at my Manhattan public school to explore Slavic identity and community.

My school, Hunter College High School, on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, had many cultural groups—Jewish, Black, East and South Asian groups and more—but I never heard of one space dedicated to Slavic heritage. Many Jewish students from Eastern Europe told me that they had no place to connect both sides of their background, and other Slavic classmates told me that they felt Slavic culture was not "anything special" to learn about.

I asked my Polish ninth-grade math teacher about spaces at the school where our cultures could be



celebrated. She said there was a small group of Slavic students who got together occasionally to watch English-subtitled films. With her support, I rechartered the club, expanding its purpose to cultural learning and dialogue.

A fellow member, Georgian-Jewish student Natalie Viderman, 17, said that she often felt "like [her] two sides were in conflict with each other, given that Slavic culture attempted to erase Judaism," referring to the Soviet Union's religious persecution. She said food was one way that Slavic/Eastern European Jews could merge their identities.

To capitalize on this element, I filled the Slavic Culture Club's table with blini, syrniki and compote at the 2022 fall club fair.. Those unfamiliar with the dishes, and those for whom the food called up intense nostalgia, enjoyed the treats. Some joined the club originally for the promise of snacks at every meeting, but then stayed for the conversation. Others came immediately excited to talk about the cultural history of these and other dishes.

Over three years, from two members, we've grown to 20+ meeting biweekly across grades. Through Slavic-Jewish foods, games and the conversations they sparked, the SCC has come to provide more than entertainment. My sister Eve, a freshman, said that the SCC made her think about "passed-down recipes and family traditions, both Jewish and Slavic." She explained how "making a cultural recipe we had had since forever tied us to our ancestors, almost like sharing a conversation without words."

With Russian and Ukrainian soldiers opposed and many Jews divided, we focused on commonalities —food, games, holidays—creating a space apart from global tensions. Members explored cross-cultural experiences without pressure to pick sides.
Viderman said she valued being able to "interact with more cultures" and that she was able to express both of her identities. During club meetings, she learned a lot about others' cultural heritage through the conversations we'd have about Slavic movies, such as the Christmas Eve classic, "Noch' pered rozhdestvom."

Tenth grader Anna Vasylenko, who joined because she simply wanted to "have fun together, play cards and eat snacks," loved getting competitive over Durak, a card game popular across many post-Soviet states, and teaching each other the words used for the game, in different languages: trump suit, козырь, козир.
Others came for the informational discussion; we discussed holidays like Orthodox Christmas, which one member shared made them "feel closer to others in learning about it," even though the holiday wasn't part of their religion.

"I signed up for a safe place to learn something new and yet close to my cultural identity," said tenth grader Viktoriia Pletneva.

Our focus remains cultural connection—no one has to be Slavic to appreciate Slavic history and language. It's inspiring for me to see students teach each other Ukrainian, rediscover recipes, learn about holidays, and laugh through card games. Making associations on the blackboard for the letters of the Cyrillic alphabet, laughing over the house-shaped д, bonds together equally clueless freshmen and seniors.

As the Russo-Ukrainian war divides Slavs by sub-group solidarity, with Slavic Jewish populations internally displaced or pushed to flee Ukraine, creating this space feels vital: fostering diverse voices pushes back against histories of cyclic oppression.

Seeing the impact of open conversation, I began to wonder whether writing could achieve the same—or even more. That curiosity led me to Slavic Voice 4 Ukraine, an international newspaper and advocacy project founded in August 2025 by Leah Mordehai and Nellie Fouksman in San Francisco,. Their mission "to inform and inspire through storytelling, journalism, and art" mirrored what I had been trying to build locally. I joined as the New York regional dDirector, connecting Slavic Culture Club members to a wider network of writers and artists exploring identity under war.

Published pieces on Slavic Voice 4 Ukraine, such as "Mama, I'm All Grown Up" by Caroline Kaytan and "The Rising Smoke of Ukraine" by Juliana Milevsky, capture what it means to love a homeland under fire and to carry inherited pride through war. Others, like "Life Passport" by Daniel Troshin and "From Latvia to My Kitchen: NSLI-Y's Culinary Lessons" by Shira Avidan, explore how Slavic culture endures across the diaspora. My own article, "I am Multi-Cultural,"traces how reclaiming my Slavic-Jewish heritage led me to build the diverse community I needed but didn't have.

When I write for the blog, I don't feel I have to choose between my backgrounds. My Jewishness gives my Slavicness meaning; my Slavicness gives my Judaism memory. In Slavic Voice 4 Ukraine, I see a generation coming together that lights both menorahs and New Year's trees, embracing the fullness of what we've inherited. ✡

VICK VOLOVNYK IS A CONTRIBUTING WRITER TO JTA AND JLIFE MAGAZINE.

BEFORE 'SNL,' THERE WAS SID CAESAR—AND A ROOMFUL OF JEWISH WRITERS

In television's early days, Caesar translated Jewish humor into a language America didn't yet know it understood.

BY ANDREW SILOW-CARROLL, JEWISH TELEGRAPHIC AGENCY (JTA)

Sid Caesar once dominated American television so completely that it was hard to imagine Saturday nights without him. In the early 1950s, his live sketch-comedy program "Your Show of Shows" drew tens of millions of viewers. That show and its other iterations— "The Admiral Broadway Revue," "Caesar's Hour" and "Sid Caesar Invites You"—launched the careers of Mel Brooks, Neil Simon and Woody Allen, and helped invent television comedy as we know it.

Caesar and an ensemble cast that included Carl Reiner and Imogene Coca performed movie and musical parodies, domestic skits featuring warring suburbanites and bits highlighting Caesar's knack for "speaking" foreign languages in convincing gibberish. A parody of the hit show "This Is Your Life" has often been called the funniest sketch in the history of the form. Caesar and Reiner's "Professor" routine—featuring Caesar as a German-accented know-it-all who knows very little—is the often uncredited precursor to Brooks and Reiner's more enduring "2000-Year-Old Man."
And yet, as David Margolick recounts in his new biography, "When Caesar Was King: How Sid Caesar Reinvented American Comedy," Caesar's fame proved surprisingly fleeting. Caesar died in 2014 at 91. But well before then, his name had faded, even as his influence endured.

In a recent public conversation held as part of New York Jewish Week's "Folio" series, Margolick—a longtime journalist and author—reflected on Caesar's rise, his Jewish sensibility, the brutal pressures of early television, and why the man who changed comedy so profoundly all but vanished from popular memory.

The interview was edited for length and clarity.

For people who may not even know the name Sid Caesar, why is he worthy of a biography?

That's the problem Mel Brooks raised when I interviewed him, and it actually became the epigraph of my book. He said to me, "People are going to say, 'Gee, this is really good and really interesting. Just one question, David: Who's Sid Caesar?'"

For people who lived in the 1950s, American television comedy really started with him. There were vaudeville leftovers and radio shows early on, but Sid Caesar was the first true television comic—someone whose skills were suited to television itself. There was an intimacy to his comedy that wouldn't have worked in a big theater but worked on a small screen.

And the influence is enormous. Mel Brooks wrote for him. Larry Gelbart [creator of the TV series "M*A*S*H"] wrote for him. Neil Simon wrote for him. Woody Allen wrote for him. Carl Reiner worked with him and went on to create "The Dick Van Dyke Show" [based on his experience on the Caesar shows]. The tendrils of Sid Caesar's comedy reach into sitcoms, "Saturday Night Live," Broadway and film.

One challenge of the book was to explain how momentous he was—and the other was to explain how someone so influential could fall into such obscurity.

Caesar is often associated with the Catskills, the upstate New York Jewish vacationland that was a proving ground for any number of Jewish comedians. How did his early life shape his comedy?

The Poconos [in Pennsylvania] were actually just as important as the Catskills in Sid's case. The producer who really shaped his programs, Max Liebman, came out of Camp Tamiment in the Poconos, not the Catskills. That mattered.

Sid wasn't a stand-up comic. He started as a musician. People noticed he was funny while horsing around during musical routines. His comedy was more sophisticated than wiseguy stand-up — it was sketch comedy, with music, dance and character work.

And then there's Yonkers [Caesar's hometown just north of New York City]. His family ran a restaurant where the workers sat by ethnicity—Germans at one table, Slavs at another. Sid bused tables and absorbed the sound of all those languages. He said he could listen to a language for 15 minutes and imitate its musicality.

He didn't really speak them. He'd sprinkle in a few words—'like chocolate chips in cookie batter,' he said—but it sounded convincing. Ironically, the languages he avoided were Yiddish and Hebrew, the ones closest to home.

What was happening in television when Caesar arrived in 1949?

Television was empty. It was the electronic corollary of the American frontier. They had hours to fill and no idea how to do it. That's why people remember watching wrestling. Comedy was going to be central, but nobody knew what kind. Caesar's early shows weren't pure comedy—they were variety shows with comedy at the center. Television comedy was still gestating.

And like Hollywood earlier, television became an opening for Jews. The people running the country didn't

quite know what to do with it, and there was a void desperate for talent.

Sid Caesar and Imogen Coca, circa 1955. Photo by Hulton Archive

The shows weren't overtly Jewish—yet they clearly resonated with Jewish audiences. Why?

They were very careful not to be explicit. The word "Jew" was never mentioned. Max Liebman bragged there was no Yiddish on "Your Show of Shows." They wanted to lie low. But Jewish viewers recognized something. The irreverence. The skepticism toward authority. Rooting for underdogs. Making fun of pomposity and power.

As Sid Caesar said to me, "The Jews knew. The Jews knew what we were doing." They were winking—communicating without saying it outright.

Food seems to be a recurring theme. I love a later skit when a famous bullfighter is on his deathbed and he and his entourage are putting in their deli orders.

Food is a leitmotif in Caesar's comedy. There are sketches about wanting food, not getting food, getting less than the other guy, struggling with unfamiliar food. I wrote that his humor was Jewish "in its obsession, born of privation, with foåod in all its forms." And they treated food with respect. No food fights. The food was always real.

I asked [food writer] Mimi Sheraton what distinguishes Jews and Italians around food. She said the Italians care about food every bit as much as Jews do—only without the panic. That captured it perfectly.

"Your Show of Shows" ended in June 1954, after five seasons and at the height of its success. Why?

Sid wanted control. He was making $25,000 a week in 1953—roughly $300,000 a week today—but he was working under Max Liebman. He wanted to emphasize comedy, resented losing time to singers and dancers, and wanted to be the sole star. He was also competitive with [his co-star] Imogene Coca.

The pressure was enormous. Ninety minutes live every week, no margin for error. That stress began to eat him alive.

The legendary writers' room, especially the one for "Caesar's Hour," where all seven writers were Jews, is often romanticized, in films like "My Favorite Year" and Neil Simon's play "Laughter on the 23rd Floor." What was it really like?

It was not a picnic. It was a room of incredible tension. These writers were fighting for their lives. They were working in the shadow of the garment district. Entertainment was an escape from a life pushing a cart on Seventh Avenue. They were desperate to survive. Frank Rich once tried to write a book about them—his version of "The Boys of Summer" [Roger Kahn's book about the great Brooklyn Dodgers teams of the 1950s]. He abandoned it and told me, "Instead of the boys of summer, I found the angry Jews of winter."

What led to Caesar's fall from the center of television and American popular culture?

As television spread into the hinterlands, the audience changed. Sid didn't play well in Peoria. People thought he was elitist, talking down to them. Lawrence Welk [host of a variety show featuring anodyne pop music] crushed him. Caesar did devastating parodies of Welk—brilliant but futile. Television tastes were shifting.

At the same time, the pressure destroyed him. Drinking, pills, exhaustion. You can see it on screen—the faltering diction, the loss of confidence.

Your book shows a star who was often aloof, difficult to work with, and often addled by booze and drugs. What was Caesar like when you met him?

I interviewed him in 2008. He was very frail, confined to home, but mentally sharper than he'd been in years. One thing he told me stuck with me. He talked about success — that moment when he realized he could have anything he wanted: "Even sturgeon at Barney Greengrass, even if it was $5 a pound."

That was success to him: never having to hold back. It came back, once again, to food.

What does comedy today owe Sid Caesar?

Larry Gelbart once said, "You want to know what's missing from comedy today? Jews." There are still Jewish comedy writers, of course. But in Caesar's day, it was seven Jews working together, "working our brains out," as Gelbart put it.

There was an unabashed Jewish essence to that comedy—a shared sensibility—that doesn't quite exist anymore.

Comedy is more variegated now. Something essential was diluted.

And yet, it all started with Sid Caesar. ✡

ANDREW SILOW-CARROLL IS A CONTRIBUTING WRITER TO JTA AND JLIFE MAGAZINE.


CANCELLED

JUDAISM AND CANCEL CULTURE

Jewish tradition prizes a multiplicity of voices, but it also considers some ideas too dangerous to circulate freely.

BY MY JEWISH LEARNING

Barring someone from participating in communal life through social ostracism or, in some cases, excommunication—what we today often call cancellation—has a long history in Jewish life. From biblical times until the present day, these tools of social opprobrium have been used to declare certain ideas or people outside communal norms, though they have generally been deployed rarely and typically with the endorsement of recognized communal authorities. While technically someone could suffer this punishment for a range of misdeeds, including some as innocuous as being disrespectful, it has mostly been used to punish those guilty of heresy.

What Is Cancel Culture?

Cancel culture is the idea that certain actions or ideas are so completely beyond the pale that their purveyors merit exclusion from polite society. The exact parameters of cancellation can vary. Most would agree that efforts to have an offender deplatformed, kicked off of a particular social media site, removed from some position of honor or influence, or even fired from their job qualifies as cancellation. But the term has also been used to refer to attempts to exact a financial price for some perceived cultural transgression, as when advertisers pull their support from a talk show whose host has uttered something inappropriate. Targets of cancel culture can and sometimes do rehabilitate themselves, but as the term itself suggests, cancellation implies an attempt to eliminate offenders and their views from social discourse.

To defenders of this practice, cancellation is a legitimate mechanism for keeping public debate within certain boundaries. But critics see it as a form of totalitarianism, exacting such a heavy price for deviation that many people will feel compelled to toe the line. Though the phenomenon feels like a distinctly modern one—the term itself only entered the mainstream lexicon in the 2010s and is often fueled by outraged reaction on the internet—the practice of deeming certain ideas, actions or even people beyond the pale is well-established in Jewish tradition.

When G-d Canceled Amalek

Arguably the closest correlate to cancel culture in the Torah is G-d's command to eliminate the tribe of Amalek. The injunction is specified in Deuteronomy 25:19, which instructs the Israelites to "blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven." The Hebrew word for blot out—*timcheh*—shares a root with an expression commonly used in some Jewish communities today in connection with Nazis: y'mach sh'mam, which literally means "may their names be erased."

The precise nature of the sin that merited such a unique punishment for Amalek—the tribe is not the only one to have made war on the Israelites, but it is the only one to be designated for complete eradication—is subject to debate. Some authorities have suggested their offense was targeting the vulnerable, attacking a weak Israelite nation recently freed from Egyptian slavery from the rear. Others suggest that because they attacked the Israelites just after the miracles of the Exodus, they demonstrated a brazen lack of fear of G-d. So while it's clear that in at least one instance, the Torah is unambiguous that cancellation is deserved—and indeed, obligatory—it's not clear what precise circumstances demand it.

The section of Deuteronomy containing the three commandments concerning Amalek—to eradicate it, remember what it did, and not to forget it—is publicly recounted in a supplemental Torah reading on the Shabbat prior to Purim, the holiday whose major villain, Haman, is said to be a descendant of Amalek. (When Haman's name is read aloud during the public recitation of the Scroll of Esther, it's traditional to make noise to render it unhearable—in effect, to cancel it.) But later rabbis were clearly discomfited by what appears to be an obligation to commit genocide. The Talmud (Yoma 22b) includes a teaching suggesting that King Saul—who failed to heed G-d's command in the Book of Samuel to wipe out Amalek, including their women, children and animals—argued with G-d, asking why he should not take pity on the guiltless children and animals.

Excommunication

The other biblical concept that bears on cancel culture is herem. Commonly translated as "excommunication," in the Bible it equated to a punishment of death for a handful of serious sins. By talmudic times, herem was essentially a form of severe social ostracism. The most famous herem in history was of the 17th-century Dutch philosopher Benedict Spinoza, who was excommunicated by the Amsterdam Jewish community for unspecified "abominable heresies which he practiced and taught and about his monstrous deeds."

Herem could be imposed for merely rhetorical offenses, as was later done to Spinoza. Maimonides, in his enumeration of the 24 offenses for which excommunication was warranted, included a number of violations that could be grouped under the general heading of disrespect: insulting a learned man, calling a fellow Jew a slave, or insulting a messenger of the rabbinic court. Most of the items on the list, however, relate to ritual violations. None are merely holding or expressing an unpopular opinion.

However, herem was imposed in Maimonides' time for just those sorts of reasons. Scholars in France banned his books on the grounds of heresy, taking general issue with Maimonides' attempt to synthesize Jewish thought and philosophy and for several specific claims, including

that G-d has no physical form. Maimonides in turn placed a ban of excommunication on a fellow leader of the Egyptian Jewish community, Sar Shalom ben Moses, for tax-related offenses.

In modern times, herem has been instituted only rarely and generally for reasons of ideological deviance. In the 18th century, the Vilna Gaon endorsed a decree of excommunication against the nascent hasidic movement, declaring them heretics who engaged in a host of objectionable practices. In 1945, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, founder of the Reconstructionist movement, was formally excommunicated by a group of Orthodox rabbis who also publicly burned a prayer book he had authored, declaring that he "demonstrated total heresy and a complete disbelief in the G-d of Israel and in the principles of the law of the Torah of Israel." In 2006, the chief rabbi of Israel issued a call to excommunicate members of the Neturei Karta hasidic sect, several of whose members had attended a conference in Iran purporting to demonstrate that the Holocaust had not taken place.

In a highly unusual case, a South African rabbinical court excommunicated a businessman for failing to make child support payments, declaring that he could not become a member of a synagogue, be counted in a prayer quorum or be buried in a Jewish cemetery. The man appealed the case to a secular court, which ruled against him in 2014. Excommunication as a means to pressure husbands in divorce proceedings has generally not been done, though less formal public ostracism has been attempted.

The Talmud on Cancellation

In general, the rabbis of the Talmud were clearly comfortable with a diversity of opinion and went to great lengths to ensure that minority opinions are preserved in the text as worthy subjects of study. Indeed, the Talmud is often held up as the paradigmatic example of Judaism's embrace of multiple viewpoints and its refusal to write unpopular opinions out of the tradition. Nonetheless, the rabbis did uphold a form of social cancellation.

A well-known passage on the subject of ostracism from Tractate Moed Katan illustrates some key features of rabbinic thinking on the subject:

The Gemara relates that a certain butcher behaved disrespectfully toward Rav Tuvi bar Mattana. Abaye and Rava were appointed to the case and ostracized him. In the end the butcher went and appeased his disputant, Rav Tuvi. Abaye said: What should we do in this case? Shall he be released from his decree of ostracism? His decree of ostracism has not yet been in effect for the usual 30 days. On the other hand, shall he not be released from ostracism? But the sages wish to enter his shop and purchase meat, and they are presently unable to do so. (Moed Katan 16a)

It's worth noting that the talmudic rabbis condoned ostracism for something as seemingly minor as disrespect. It's also worth noting that the punishment was not imposed by the mob, but by two learned rabbis who sat in judgment and determined ostracism was an appropriate penalty. Finally, the text implies that ostracism is not a permanent state. It has a time limit, after which the offender can re-enter the community.

The Talmud does include one famous instance of permanent cancellation: Elisha ben Abuyah, a once-esteemed scholar who became an apostate and was almost completely excised from the Talmud, referred to only as aher, meaning "other." The details are limited, but it's clear from the talmudic account that Elisha, once a leading scholar and member of the Sanhedrin, abandoned Jewish observance and became a heretic, apparently after an encounter with G-d described in the famous allegory of the four who entered the pardes(orchard). So while the Talmud most certainly respected a diversity of opinion, it certainly did not countenance every opinion.

Conclusion

So does Judaism condone cancellation? Jewish tradition undeniably prizes a multiplicity of voices and disagreement for noble purposes, but it certainly does not endorse the idea that every idea is worthy of consideration. And some ideas (and their purveyors) are considered too dangerous or detrimental to be allowed to circulate freely. Jewish leaders, both ancient and modern, have availed themselves of various tools to ensure that certain boundaries were maintained on behaviors, religious and otherwise, and ideas. The challenge, then as now, is determining where those lines ought to be drawn. ✡

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What Is a Vilde Chaya?

An affectionate Yiddish term for an energetic child.

BY MY JEWISH LEARNING

The Yiddish expression *vilde chaya* (pronounced roughly VIL-duh KHAH-yeh) literally means wild animal, but it is not usually used with regard to lions, tigers or bears. Instead, it refers to a person, often a child, who is behaving in an unruly manner.

Vilde chaya is often used in an affectionate way for little kids who are bouncing off the walls or teens who are pushing a few too many boundaries. When directed at the high-energy person, it can be heard as teasing or playful. When said about them, it usually expresses mild but affectionate exasperation. It's rarely fully condemnatory. It is somewhat equivalent to the English term "menace" or "rascal" when applied to an uninhibited child.

Etymologically, Yiddish is a blend of German and Yiddish. The word vilde is a German word that is cognate with the English word wild and means the same. The word *chaya* is derived from the Hebrew word for animal.

Here are some example sentences:

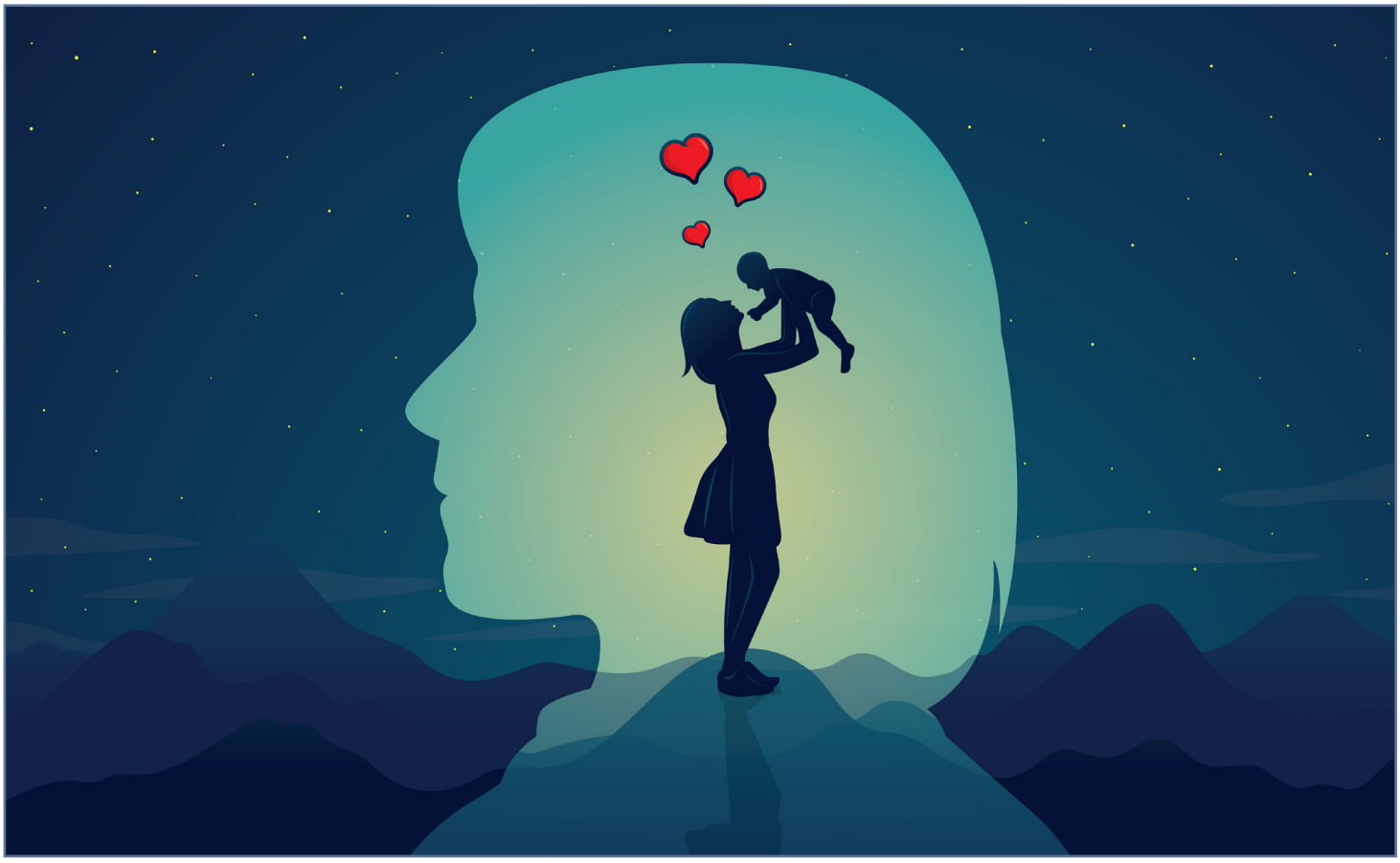
- After three hours cooped up in the car, the kids piled out like a bunch of *vilde chayas*.
- Calm down, sweetheart—you're being such a *vilde chaya* before bedtime.
- Gershom's brilliant, but in class he can be a bit of a *vilde chaya*—always talking, always moving.

Like many Yiddishisms, *vilde chaya* is popular among English-speaking Jews because it captures an emotion: a loving impulse even in the face of understandable exasperation. It reflects the Jewish value of deeply loving the next generation—even when they are causing a bit of *tsuris*. ✡

Parents as Models

For better or worse, children learn how to be in the world from their parents.

BY RABBI DIANNE COHLER-ESSES, MY JEWISH LEARNING



When you live with someone, it's difficult to become a model. People who live together see one another's flaws and weaknesses and all their inconsistencies. Still, even with that reality, parents must be models for their children. For better or worse, children learn how to be in the world from their parents. Parents learn that it's not what we instruct verbally, but what we do ourselves that is the most powerful teacher of all.

In this week's Torah portion, the laws of a Nazarite are enumerated for someone who voluntarily takes on stringent rules for a defined period of time. No wine, no cutting of one's hair, no contact with the dead. Samson was an example of a Nazarite whose goal was to achieve a higher-than-required level of holiness.

The example of the Nazarite discipline can lead us to reflect on what we can take on voluntarily to become a better model to our children, ethically and spiritually. For example, we might think of refraining from speaking ill of our neighbors, friends and family, to commit to a greater level of honesty, or volunteer to do social justice work. It's important to choose a few specific areas and set achievable goals. We don't want to create the illusion that we are perfect. That can only lead to disappointment and disillusionment. It's important to be honest with our children about our weaknesses even as we try to model our strengths. If we aren't open about our vulnerabilities, they are sure to notice!

TALK TO YOUR KIDS about areas of ethical behavior they can improve.

CONNECT TO THEIR LIVES:

- Who do you learn from?
- Who are your heroes and models?
- What do you learn from them? ✡

RABBI DIANNE COHLER-ESSES IS A CONTRIBUTING WRITER TO MY JEWISH LEARNING AND KIDDISH MAGAZINE.

What Does the Hebrew Word Rahamim Mean?

An essential Jewish value.

BY MY JEWISH LEARNING

The Hebrew word rahamim means compassion or mercy. It is an essential quality of G-d and a desirable ethical trait in human beings.

The word rahamim comes from the Hebrew noun rechem, which means womb. This etymology reflects the powerfully nurturing, protective qualities associated with compassion—like a mother's care for her child.

In the Hebrew Bible, rahamim is often linked with G-d's mercy toward humanity. The term appears frequently in prayers drawn from the scriptures, for example, the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy, described in the Book of Exodus (34:6-7) and recited on the High Holidays, emphasize G-d's readiness to forgive and show rahamim to those who repent. The Psalms and prophetic books also speak extensively about rahamim, portraying it as an essential divine quality humans should strive to embody.

In Jewish ethical teaching, rahamim is an essential human responsibility. It demands that people act with kindness and mercy toward others, especially the vulnerable.

Rahamim often comes into conflict with strict justice. When acting from a principle of rahamim, deserved punishment may be unadministered. This tension is, according to Jewish tradition, one that is built into the fabric of the world. The biblical commentator Rashi, commenting on the very first verse of the Torah, writes: "When G-d created the universe He did so under the attribute of justice, but then saw it could not survive. What did He do? He added compassion to justice and created the world." In other words, if humans were judged "fairly," G-d would have to destroy them. So G-d knew, from before the world was created, that rahamim was essential.

Rahamim can be used as a proper name for a boy, though it is unusual. ✡

The Jewish Obligation to Teach Children to Swim

A talmudic requirement.

BY MY JEWISH LEARNING

In Jewish law, parents are required to meet the material and educational needs of their children. Along with this, one of the most charmingly specific requirements for parents is teaching their children to swim:

A father is obligated to do the following for his son: to circumcise him, to redeem him if he is a first born, to teach him Torah, to find him a wife, and to teach him a trade. Others say: teaching him how to swim as well.
Kiddushin 69a

A father's is obliged to provide for his son's spiritual and material needs in the present while also paving the way for the child's future. Circumcision brings the child into the Jewish covenant and fulfills a divine obligation. Torah learning prepares the child to navigate his spiritual life, while teaching the child a trade prepares him to support himself and his future family. Ensuring he finds a wife makes that future family a reality, and opens the door to another generation. But none of this is possible if the child never survives to adulthood.

They may not have lived in a world with backyard pools, but the ancient rabbis did live in a world with rivers, seas and cisterns. Therefore, according to at least some rabbis, teaching a child to swim is an obligation. Approximately 4,000 people die of accidental drowning in the United States every year — one quarter of them children. These deaths are largely preventable. Accidental drowning happened in ancient times as well. Swimming is a skill that saved lives and continues to do so.

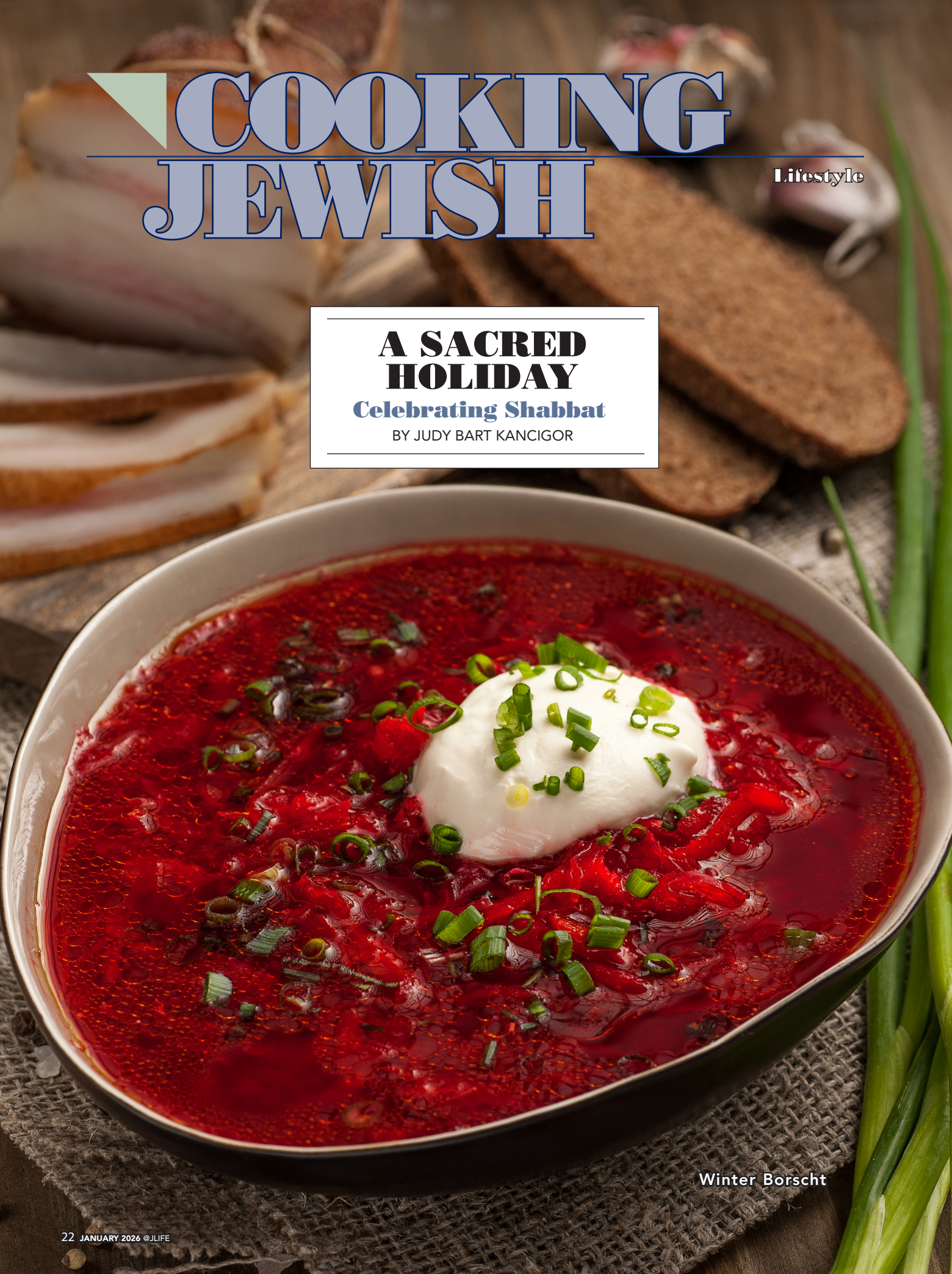
There are other talmudic passages that describe parental obligations in more detail, some of which are omitted in this particular teaching—such as providing food and shelter. But the obligation to teach a child to swim stands out because it is so much more specific, and because the potential payoff is preserving the life of the child which, as we learn elsewhere, is akin to saving an entire world. ✡

COOKING JEWISH

A SACRED HOLIDAY

Celebrating Shabbat

BY JUDY BART KANCIGOR



Winter Borscht

We Jews love to party. Fortunately, we never have to wait long for a holiday, because we get one every week: Shabbat. The only holiday mentioned in the Torah, Shabbat begins on Friday evening, and as sundown ripples across the time zones, observant Jews put aside the cares of the week, gather with family, and welcome the Sabbath queen. The meals are festive, befitting a holiday, and throughout various cultures treasured family recipes, so different from each other, all celebrate the same sacred occasion.

Gail Simmons, a judge on Bravo's Emmy-winning series Top Chef and author of "Talking With my Mouth Full" (Hyperion) and "Bringing it Home" (Hachette), grew up in a traditional Jewish home, "celebrating the major holidays and observing rites of passage…with way too much food and a little prayer," she writes. Shabbat, however, was special. "Friday night was a sacred night for our family," she told me. "We could be busy all week with soccer and dance, but on Friday night my father came home early. All week we had dinner together in the kitchen, but on Friday night we ate in the dining room. My mother and I lit the candles, and my father did the blessings. There were always guests."

Gail's mother ran a cooking school, and the children grew up on leek quiche, Swiss chard and Arctic char. "She's an ambitious cook ahead of her time, seeking great ingredients," Gail said, "but stuffed cabbage and matzo ball soup are very much in her repertoire. She made a mean chopped liver and gets mad at me for putting wine in the brisket."

At 18 Gail worked on a kibbutz in Israel, honing her talent for preparing perfect scrambled eggs, a bit of luck that would help her later. Spoiler alert: "I owe eggs for being on Top Chef," she noted. (Read "Talking With my Mouth Full" for the full story.)

She married a man with a "passion for old Jewish food": *kasha varnishkes*, brisket, short ribs, matzo balls. "His favorites are *kasha* and *knishes*, the beiger the better," she said.

How refreshing that this sophisticated Top Chef judge who weekly debates the merits of a red curry gastrique or yuzu gelée is equally happy to discuss Jewish deli food. "I do high brow and low brow," she admitted.

What will happen to this cuisine, I wondered. "It's a dying cuisine with a great oral tradition. These delis are family businesses, and the younger generation just doesn't have a vested interest in them," she reflected. But there is hope. "Ironically this kind of nose-to-tail cooking has come back in fashion lately," she writes. "Chefs love cooking giblets, liver and brains these days."

We discussed what she calls a "Jewish deli resurgence." "Talented chefs are resurrecting the classics in a new, modern way that is unfussy, trendy," she said. "Chopped chicken liver pâté on toast is on every menu in New York City, even at ABC Kitchen from [Chef] Jean Georges Vongerichten. There's a young Jewish kid who has opened a Montreal style deli in Brooklyn."

Since Schwartz's Montreal Hebrew Delicatessen, "the holy grail of cured beef," is her standard, I couldn't resist asking her to weigh in on the perennial pastrami debate between LA's own Langer's and New York's Katz's. "Oh, I prefer Langer's," she said, "but I'm a 2nd Avenue deli girl."

The 2nd Avenue Deli (no longer located on 2nd Avenue these days due to lease challenges) is a New York institution. Opening in 1954, the restaurant was the dream of Abe Lebewohl, who "chose downtown 2nd Avenue as the site for his restaurant because he treasured the neighborhood's Jewish heritage – especially its connection with the Yiddish Theatre," writes Sharon Lebewohl in "The Second Avenue Deli Cookbook" (Random House). "As Jews dispersed throughout the world, they not only preserved their rich cultural heritage, but also expanded its parameters to include regional foods and recipes of their newly adopted nations. Ironically, the flight from persecution engendered an exotic and colorful Jewish cuisine."

Tragically, Abe Lebewohl was murdered in 1996 while on his way to the bank to make a deposit. To this day the case has never been solved. "The Second Avenue Deli Cookbook" (Villard, $24.95) is filled with remembrances of this beloved Jewish restaurateur as well as some of the restaurant's legendary dishes: chicken soup with matzoh balls, chopped liver, gefilte fish, *kasha varnishkas,* mushroom barley soup, noodle *kugel,* potato *latkes, blintzes,* and more. Hundreds of celebrity patrons flocked to its doors, many of whom contributed to the cookbook with stories as well as recipes.

I've chosen two comforting and warming soups, iconic deli fare,for a winter shabbat, or for whenever the mood hits. ✡

> **"… as sundown ripples across the time zones, observant Jews put aside the cares of the week, gather with family, and welcome the Sabbath queen."**

JLIFE FOOD EDITOR **JUDY BART KANCIGOR** IS THE AUTHOR OF "COOKING JEWISH" (WORKMAN) AND "THE PERFECT PASSOVER COOKBOOK" (AN E-BOOK SHORT FROM WORKMAN), A COLUMNIST AND FEATURE WRITER FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER AND OTHER PUBLICATIONS AND CAN BE FOUND ON THE WEB AT WWW.COOKINGJEWISH.COM.

Winter Borscht


2nd Avenue Deli Matzo Balls

"Though my version of the soup is fairly traditional," writes Simmons, "I do include a couple of unconventional moves, using sweet potato, apple, and celery root. The natural sweetness of these ingredients, along with the beets, balances the acidity and spices and eliminates the need for added sugars like honey. Caraway seeds add an earthy, warm anise note and are a key piece of what makes this recipe so complex and alluring."

Use vegetable broth and sour cream for a dairy meal. For a meat meal, use brisket and beef broth instead.

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for drizzling
1 medium yellow onion, thinly sliced
Kosher salt
4 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
2 tablespoons tomato paste
2 dried bay leaves
1 teaspoon paprika
1 teaspoon caraway seeds
2 medium beets, scrubbed (not peeled) and trimmed, then shredded using a food processor or quartered and thinly sliced crosswise
1 small celery root, peeled and shredded using a food cessor or corded and thinly sliced crosswise
1 large carrot (not peeled), thinly sliced into rounds
1 quart low-sodium beef or vegetable broth
1/2 small red cabbage, cored and shredded (about 4 cups)
1 Granny Smith apple, peeled, cored, and cut into 1/4-inch cubes
1 medium sweet potato (not peeled), cut into 1/4-inch cubes
1/4 cup apple cider vinegar
Chopped fresh dill, for serving
Coarsely ground black pepper
Sour cream, for serving, optional
2 cups shredded brisket, optional

1. In a 6- to 8-quart Dutch oven or wide, heavy saucepan with lid, heat the oil over medium–high heat. Add the onion and 1 teaspoon salt and reduce the heat to medium. Cook, stirring occasionally, until onions begin to soften, about 5 minutes. Add the garlic and cook for 2 minutes more. Stir in the tomato paste, bay leaves, paprika, and caraway seeds to coat, then stir in the beets, celery root, and carrot. Add the broth and 4 cups of water, bring to a boil, then reduce to a simmer and cook 15 minutes.
2. Stir in the cabbage, apple, and sweet potato, return to a simmer, and continue cooking until the cabbage, apple, and sweet potato are just tender, about 5 minutes more. Stir in the vinegar, and cook just to blend the flavors, 3 minutes. Remove and discard the bay leaves. Adjust the seasoning to taste.
3. Serve hot, topped with dill and pepper, and adding sour cream or brisket if desired.
Source: "Bringing it Home" by Gail Simmons

2nd Avenue Deli Matzo Balls

Yield: 12 to 14
Gail Simmons' favorite New York deli makes what they call "the lightest, fluffiest, most Jewish motherly matzo balls imaginable."

"Schmaltz (rendered chicken or goose fat) is the key ingredient of Jewish cooking," writes Lebewohl.

1 tablespoon plus 1/4 teaspoon salt
4 large eggs
1/3 cup schmaltz
1/4 teaspoon pepper
1 tablespoon baking powder
1 1/3 cups matzo meal

MAKE ME! EASY TO FOLLOW RECIPE

1. Fill a large, wide stockpot 3/4 full of water, add 1 tablespoon salt, and bring to a rapid boil.
2. Meanwhile, crack eggs into a large bowl and beat thoroughly. Beat in schmaltz, 1/4 teaspoon salt, pepper, and baking powder. Slowly fold in matzo meal, mixing vigorously until completely blended.
3. Wet your hands and, folding mixture in your palms, shape perfect balls about 1 1/4 inches in diameter (they will double in size when cooked). Gently place matzo balls in boiling water, and reduce heat to a simmer. Cook for 25 minutes. Remove with a slotted spoon and serve with soup.
Source: "The 2nd Avenue Deli Cookbook" by Sharon Lebewohl and Rena Bulkin ✡

MIKVEH UNEARTHED BENEATH WESTERN WALL PLAZA SHOWS EVIDENCE OF TEMPLE'S DESTRUCTION

Archaeologists say excavated bath, filled with ash and debris, offers a window into the city's spiritual life 2,000 years ago.

BY ANDREW SILOW-CARROLL, JEWISH TELEGRAPHIC AGENCY (JTA)

Workers clear debris from the excavation of a Second Temple period ritual bath, or mikveh, in Jerusalem, Dec. 2025. (Emil Eljem, Ari Levi and Yuli Schwartz, Israel Antiquities Authority)

Archaeologists have uncovered a 2,000 year old Jewish ritual bath beneath the Western Wall Plaza in Jerusalem that bears ash and destruction debris from the Roman conquest of the city in 70 C.E., officials said.

The find, announced Monday by the Israel Antiquities Authority and the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, lies just west of where pilgrims once entered the Temple Mount, offering a rare physical link to everyday life in late Second Temple Jerusalem.

The mikveh, hewn into the bedrock, measures approximately 10 feet long, 4 feet, 5 inches wide and 6 feet, 1 inch high, with four steps leading into the bath. It was found sealed beneath a destruction layer dated to the year 70 C.E., filled with ash, pottery shards and stone vessels.

"Jerusalem should be remembered as a Temple city," said Ari Levy, the excavation director for the Israel Antiquities Authority, said in the announcement. "As such, many aspects of daily life were adapted to this reality, and this is reflected especially in the meticulous observance of the laws of ritual impurity and purity by the city's residents and leaders." Levy noted that stone vessels, which do not contract ritual impurity under Jewish law, were common in the area.

Heritage Minister Rabbi Amichai Eliyahu said the discovery "strengthens our understanding of how deeply intertwined religious life and daily life were in Jerusalem during the Temple period" and underlined the importance of continuing archaeological research in the city.

Mordechai (Suli) Eliav, director of the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, described the mikveh and its contents as a vivid historical testament: "The exposure of a Second Temple period ritual bath beneath the Western Wall Plaza, with ashes from the destruction at its base, testifies like a thousand witnesses to the ability of the people of Israel to move from impurity to purity, from destruction to renewal."

Researchers say the mikveh likely served both local residents and the many pilgrims who visited the Temple in the years leading up to the Roman siege. ✡

ANDREW SILOW-CARROLL IS A CONTRIBUTING WRITER TO JTA AND JLIFE MAGAZINE.

COMMUNITY CALENDAR

THURSDAY, JANUARY 8, 15, 22 & 29
6:30 - 9:00 PM
EVERY WEEK ON THURSDAY UNTIL MARCH 26, 2026
Miller Intro to Judaism Program
Pasadena Jewish Temple and Center, PJTC

TUESDAY, JANUARY 6, 13, 20 & 27
12:30 - 1:00 PM
EVERY WEEK UNTIL JANUARY30, 2026
Weekly Tanya Class
Chabad of Arcadia, CoA

TUESDAY, JANUARY 6, 13, 20 & 27
7:00 - 8:30 PM
EVERY WEEK UNTIL FEBRUARY 24, 2026
Introduction to Judaism
Temple Beth Israel of Pomona,
TBI

FRIDAY, JANUARY 2
7:30 - 9:30 PM
Shabbat on Zoom
Temple Beth David of the San Gabriel Valley, TBD

SATURDAY, JANUARY 6, 13, 20 & 27
10:00 AM - NOON
EVERY WEEK
Shabbat services at Temple Ami Shalom, TAS

FRIDAY, JANUARY 9
7:30 - 9:30 PM
Shabbat Friday - New Beginnings
Temple Beth David of the San Gabriel Valley, TBD

SUNDAY, JANUARY 11
10:00 AM - NOON
Jewish Federation's 31st Annual Meeting
Temple Beth David of the San Gabriel Valley
Contact
Jewish Federation office
federation@jewishsgpv.org
Cost
$ 35.00

FRIDAY, JANUARY 16
7:00 - 9:00 PM
Special L'Dor Vador
Temple Beth David of the San Gabriel Valley

FRIDAY, JANUARY 23
7:30 - 9:30 PM
Shabbat Services featuring Edward Kwiatkowski
Temple Beth David of the San Gabriel Valley, TBD

SATURDAY, JANUARY 24 & SUNDAY, JANUARY 25
7:00 - 8:00 PM
Every Person Has a Name
Pasadena City Hall
100 Garfield Ave
Pasadena, CA 91101
Contact
Jason Moss
jmoss@jewishsgpv.org

SUNDAY, JANUARY 25
NOON - 3:00 PM
Chabad Spa for the Soul
Chabad of the Inland Empire, CIE

FRIDAY, JANUARY 30
7:30 - 9:30 PM
Shabbat Shira with Rabbi Ira
Temple Beth David of the San Gabriel Valley, TBD

Beth Shalom of Whittier (BSW)
www.bethshalomofwhittier.net

B'nai Simcha Community Preschool
www.bnaisimcha.org

Chabad Jewish Center of South Pasadena
www.jewishsouthpasadena.com

Chabad of Arcadia (CoA)
www.jewisharcadia.com

Chabad of Pasadena (CoP)
www.chabadpasadena.com

Chabad of the Inland Empire (CIE)
www.chabadinlandempire.com

Congregation Hugat Haverim (CHH)
www.hugathaverim.com

Congregation Emanu El (CEE)
https://emanuelsb.org/

Jewish Federation of the Greater San Gabriel and Pomona Valleys (JFGSGPV)
www.jewishsgpv.org

Pasadena Jewish Academy (PJA)
www.pasadenajewishacademy.com

Pasadena Jewish Temple & Center (PJTC)
www.pjtc.net

Temple Ami Shalom (TAS)
https://templeamishalom.org/

Temple Beth Israel of Pomona (TBI)
www.tbipomona.org

Temple Beth David of the San Gabriel Valley (TBD)
www.templebethdavidsgv.org

Temple Beth Israel of Highland Park and Eagle Rock (TBILA)
www.tbila.org

Temple B'nai Emet (TBE)
https://templebnaiemet.org

Temple Sinai of Glendale (TSG)
http://temple-sinai.net

Temple Sholom of Ontario (TSO)
www.templesholomofontario.org

Tree of Life Preschool (formerly TBI Preschool) (ToL)
https://tbipomona.org ✡

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NEWS & JEWS

Top conservative influencers Candace Owens and Tucker Carlson have sharply increased anti-Israel rhetoric on their platforms. (JEFF KOWALSKY / Olivier Touron / AFP)

Conservative influencers Tucker Carlson and Candace Owens sharply increased anti-Israel rhetoric in 2025, study finds

Jerusalem think tank sees right-wing opposition to Israel increasingly couched in classic antisemitic tropes.

By Grace Gilson

Top conservative influencers Tucker Carlson and Candace Owens have significantly ramped-up anti-Israel rhetoric on their platforms over the past year, according to a new study by the Jewish People Policy Institute.

The study by the Jerusalem-based think tank, published Monday, comes as alarm over growing antisemitism from the right has reached a fever pitch in recent months, with several top Jewish conservatives calling for the party to draw a line against the rising influence of antisemitic voices.

"Antisemitism on the American far right is now overt and out in the open," said Shuki Friedman, the director-general of JPPI, in a statement. "The data should serve as a flashing warning light for Israel and its leadership regarding the kind of support it can expect from the right, today and in the future. Only a determined effort to counter this extremism can help preserve this vital base of support in the United States."

The new study analyzed roughly 3,000 YouTube videos from Carlson and Owens and used ChatGPT to identify antisemitic content and classify their mentions of Israel as either positive, negative or neutral.

For Carlson, who set off a firestorm within the party after he hosted a friendly interview with antisemitic and white nationalist livestreamer Nick Fuentes in October, Israel first became a predominant topic on his YouTube channel, which has 5.1 million followers, in April.

Over the last six months, the share of Carlson's content about Israel that was labeled as "negative" by JPPI rose to 70%, up from roughly half the previous six months.

For Owens, 96% of her mentions of Israel were already classified as negative by JPPI at the start of the year, but the volume of her mentions of Israel and Jews sharply increased over the course of the year.

Increasing anti-Israel sentiment on the far right has been attributed to several factors, including the isolationist "America First" ideology and opposition to "forever wars" prominent in the MAGA movement, parts of which view U.S. aid to Israel is an excessive use of taxpayer money.

At the same time, some right-wing influencers have been critical of Israel in ways that JPPI and other groups have said are indistinguishable from classic antisemitic tropes.

"Across multiple videos, [Carlson and Owens] employ sharp rhetoric, including comparisons between Israel and Hamas, use of the term 'genocide,' accusations of deliberately killing children, and the circulation of conspiracy narratives alleging Israeli influence over the United States," the study read.

While Carlson was named "Antisemite of the Year" by the activist group StopAntisemitism last week, the JPPI analysis did not identify "consistent or explicit antisemitic statements" in his content. Rather, the group said that Carlson has repeatedly offered an "uncritical platform to well-known antisemites," including Fuentes.

But the study found that Owens, who earned the accolade last year, has increasingly made antisemitism a hallmark of her YouTube account, which has 5.7 million subscribers. Over the past six months, three-quarters of Owens' videos that made mention of Jews were classified as antisemitic by JPPI's algorithm, compared to 45% of videos from the first six months of the year. ✡

"A Jew who doesn't believe in miracles is not a realist."

– David Ben Gurion

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