

The Jewish Journal

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Jewish Federation
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Celebrating 49 Years!

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Jewish Federation 732-363-0530 www.ocjf.org



**The Jewish Federation of Ocean County
wishes everyone a happy, meaningful and safe Purim.**

Purim occurs on 14 Adar which this year is on Monday night-Tuesday, March 2-3.
See page 8 for more information about Purim.

Local News - see pages 4 and 5

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Where We Need to Fight



By Keith Krivitzky, Managing Director
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Bret Stephens recently gave a speech at the 92nd Street Y in New York City in which he said this, according to the JTA: In a speech that described antisemites as an “axis of the perfidious, the despotic, the hypocritical, the cynical, the deranged and the incurably stupid,” Bret Stephens asserted that supporters of the Anti-Defamation League and other Jewish defense groups should largely abandon their current strategy for combating antisemitism and instead redirect their resources toward strengthening Jewish life itself. Stephens, the conservative New York Times columnist and founder of the Jewish

And that means addressing more than antisemitism ... We need to stand up and call out hate in all its forms.

thought journal Sapir, said antisemitism is largely impervious to appeals to tolerance, reminders of Jewish and Israeli accomplishments, or mandatory Holocaust education.

Instead, he called for large-scale investment in Jewish day schools, cultural institutions, philanthropy, media, publishing and religious leadership, arguing that the infrastructure already exists but lacks sufficient scale and coordination.

“What we call the fight against antisemitism, which consumes tens of millions of dollars every year in Jewish philanthropy and has become an organizing principle across Jewish organizations, is a well-meaning, but mostly wasted effort,” Stephens said, delivering the annual “State of World Jewry” address at the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan. “We should spend the money and focus our energy elsewhere.”

Bret Stephens is an important voice and a sharp commentator on world affairs, the Jewish world, and Israel. And in this cri-

que, he is both right...and wrong.

He is right in two ways.

First – We absolutely need to be investing in Jewish education and identity-building. Our community, especially young people, need to feel pride and feel connected to something meaningful and special, larger than themselves.

(Without going too far down a rabbit hole, this is what traditional Jewish education has often gotten wrong and Chabad gotten right – that building Jewish identity stems from positive connections and feelings, rather than rote learning or bar/bat mitzvah prep, though there is a role for both.)

And we need to invest more in the kinds of experiences that help instill this strong, positive connection – though supporting Jewish camping and day schools and Israel experiences and PJ Library. (Which we do, to a degree.)

Second – The other thing Bret Stephens gets right is that our traditional approaches to countering antisemitism haven’t worked. Holocaust education, as it has been practiced, hasn’t served as inoculation against antisemitism or hate. And our “defense” organization strategy

doesn’t seem to be working. Trying to reach and reform the haters out there isn’t an effective strategy.

But this is what Bret Stephens gets wrong – there is a strategy which works...and it is one that we have been practicing and encouraging in Ocean County. Let’s encourage those who stand up to the haters to do so and create more space and positive reinforcement for others to do so. We want to reduce the oxygen available for those who want to spew hate.

And that means addressing more than antisemitism, though this is a unique and insidious form of hate that can be readily masked. We need to stand up and call out hate in all its forms. This is our message through the anti-hate activities and Student Leadership Conferences we provide in conjunction with Ocean County, and this is the focus of our Heroes Against Hate awards.

We need to make sure that these messages – and both what Bret Stephens gets right and what he got wrong – are appreciated elsewhere beyond Ocean County. So spread the word. And thanks for your ongoing support of our efforts.

Rooted & Renewed: Reflections on Israel, Tu BiSh'vat, and Purim



By Rav Chaim Respes
Temple Beth Or, Brick
www.TempleBethOrBrick.org

This past winter, I was blessed to return to Eretz Yisrael. Walking the ancient stones of Yerushalayim and visiting communities across the land stirred deep reflection. Israel is not merely a place: it is a living tapestry of halachah, history, and the Jewish soul. And as I stood beneath olive trees whose roots reach deep into our collective memory, I began to see an unexpected thread connecting the land itself to Tu BiSh'vat and the upcoming festival of Purim.

Tu BiSh'vat, our Rosh HaShanah La'ilanot – the New Year of the Trees – invites us to reconnect with the cycles of life and

growth. The Mishnah teaches that trees are obligated with bikkurim (first fruits) after a full cycle of years, underscoring how time and nature merge in Jewish law and life (Rosh Hashanah 2:9). Modern halachic authorities such as Rav Moshe Feinstein and Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach have emphasized tza'ar ba'alei chayim (preventing cruelty to animals) and ecological sensitivity as inherent Jewish values, connecting Tu BiSh'vat's agricultural observance with a broader ethic of care. Tu BiSh'vat is more than a date on the calendar – it is a moment to appreciate our interdependence with the land, with the fruits it bears, and with each other.

In Israel, that lesson is vivid. From the orchards of the Galil to the vineyards of the Shfela, the land responds resiliently to rain and sun. I felt the words of Rav Kook, who taught that the physical landscape of Eretz Yisrael reflects and nurtures spiritual renewal. Rav Kook saw Tu BiSh'vat as a metaphor for the blossoming of Jewish identity itself – a reminder that even after long seasons of

May we open our hearts to the hidden growth within us and around us, giving thanks for every small blossom of blessing.

exile, we are called to bloom again.

Yet, just as the almond buds push through winter's chill, so too does the Jewish calendar quickly turn toward Purim – a festival of hidden miracles and public joy. The Megillah tells us that Haman “plotted to destroy” but that Adar “increased joy” (Esther 9:22). Modern commentators like Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l have pointed out that Purim uniquely celebrates human partnership with the Divine: Hashem is nowhere named in the Megillah, yet His presence is found in every twist of fate.

When seen through this lens, Purim and Tu BiSh'vat form a shared spiritual arc.

Tu BiSh'vat roots us in gratitude for life's hidden processes – the quiet growth beneath snow, the unseen work of roots preparing for spring. Purim then invites us to recognize the hidden hand of God in our communal and personal narratives. Just as the almond tree blossoms before leaves appear, so too do the hidden salvations in our lives often precede our awareness of them.

During my recent trip, I had the profound responsibility of chaperoning a group of Jewish teenagers who spent meaningful time with Israeli teens still living in the shadow of October 7. Over the course of several days, they spoke honestly and painfully about how the atrocities of that day continue to shape their sense of safety, identity, and future – more than two years later. And yet, what emerged again and again was not despair, but hope. Our teens listened as their Israeli peers articulated a determination to live fully, to love deeply, and to believe stubbornly in tomorrow. American teens visited Hostage Square, where Israelis of all ages ga-

Continued on page 3

Jewish Community Calendar – March 2026

Compiled by the Jewish Federation of Ocean County based on submissions from the event hosts – Events can be submitted at www.jewishoceancounty.org/calendar. Most of the Jewish Virtual University webinars are emergent with only a few days' notice and are updated on the page www.jewishoceancounty.org/jvu and our facebook page facebook.com/jewishoceancounty.

Monday, March 2 – Taanit Esther (Fast of Esther)

Monday night-Tuesday, March 2-3 – Purim

Tuesday night-Wednesday, March 3-4 – Shushan Purim

Monday, March 2, 12:00 Noon – Across Oceans, Across Cultures: Jewish Refuge in East Asia and the Role of JDC – JDC China, with Professor Fred Lazin, see www.jewishoceancounty.org/jvu for details

Tuesday, March 3, 1:00 PM (and every Tuesday) – Grief After Loss Group led by Rita Sason, Jewish Family and Children's Service, virtual online, 732-363-8010

Thursday, March 5, 12:15 PM (and every Thursday) – Torah with the Times: Timeless Torah, Timely Wisdom; study and discussion of the weekly Torah portion with Rabbi Isaiah Rothstein, see www.jewishoceancounty.org/jvu for details

Thursday, March 5, 1:15 PM (and every Thursday) – Queering the Parsha: A Weekly Study Group toward an LGBTQ+ Perspective on the Weekly Torah Portion, with Rabbi Nikki DeBlosi, Ph.D., a Laasok program cosponsored by Keshet and A Wider Bridge, see www.jewishoceancounty.org/jvu for details

Thursday, March 5, 7:30 PM (and the first Thursday of every month) – Caregivers Group led by Rita Sason, Jewish Family and Children's Service, virtual online, 732-363-8010

March 13-14 – Refugee Shabbat (coordinated through HIAS)

For information, contact the event host or see related publicity in this issue of The Jewish Journal.

Rooted & Renewed

Continued from page 2

thered – parents, grandparents, soldiers, and students – each carrying stories of loss, fear, and unyielding faith. Standing there, our teens heard how hope does not erase pain but grows from it. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks taught that Jewish hope is not optimism that things will turn out well, but the courage to believe that our actions still matter. In those conversations, and in that sacred space, our teenagers witnessed hope taking root in real time – fragile, honest, and resilient, like a tree that continues to grow even after being scorched.

What binds these moments – the blossoming tree, the joyful reading of the Megillah, the shared meal and mishloach manot – is the affirmation that Jewish life is a cycle of resilience. We plant, we

wait, we hope, and we celebrate. As we approach Tu BiSh'vat and prepare for Purim, may we open our hearts to the hidden growth within us and around us, giving thanks for every small blossom of blessing.

Chagim sameach, and may this season renew strength, joy, and a deepened love for our land and our people.

The Jewish Journal is pleased to host a monthly Rabbi Column, rotating among our community's pulpit rabbis. The views and opinions expressed are those of the writer, and do not necessarily reflect those of The Jewish Journal, the Jewish Federation of Ocean County or the author's Congregation.

Give Every Month

Support all the efforts of Jewish Federation of Ocean County and Jewish Family and Children's Service:

- Combatting Hate
- Serving our Holocaust Survivors
- Connecting our Community with News and Programs
- Helping Jews in Need Locally & Globally



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or <https://jewishoceancounty.org/gem>

Holocaust Survivors Alert

If you are a Holocaust Survivor who has never applied for compensation, or was turned down previously, there are new funds and guidelines. For more information, you may call the Claims Conference in NY at 646-536-9100 or go to their website: www.claimscon.org. Click on survivor resources, then click on compensation programs. They have a FAQ (frequently asked questions) section which should be read prior to applying.



Jewish Federation of Ocean County is now on Facebook

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Local News

Congregation B'nai Israel, Toms River, Marks the Return of the Last Hostage

For some 840 days, a chair draped with an Israeli flag sat on the bimah at Congregation B'nai Israel in Toms River. Along the walls of the sanctuary, stretching into the social hall, were posters with the faces and names of some 250 men, women and children. Together, they served as a reminder to all congregants and visitors of the massacre perpetrated by Hamas on October 7, 2023, and the unresolved issue of those taken captive and held under horrifying conditions in Gaza.

But little by little, the number of posters dwindled, until at last only one remained, that of Ran Gvili, a master sergeant in the Israeli Defense Forces. And on Friday evening, January 30, the poster was gone and the flag was removed from the bimah in a special Shabbat service, marking the return on January 26 of the remains of Sergeant Gvili and the start of the period when he could finally be mourned by his family, friends, and fellow Israelis and Jews.

Rabbi William Gershon coordinated and

led the memorial during the Shabbat service, which included prayers, songs and a solemn passing of the folded flag among congregants lined up along the center aisle of the sanctuary.

Rabbi Gershon acknowledged the pain and suffering that came with the attacks and the hundreds of days since, when both the living and dead were in captivity at the hands of Hamas. "Since October 7, the Jewish people, all of us, have been living in something like what we call *aninut*," Rabbi Gershon said. "That's that kind of in-between period from the time when you find out about the death of a loved one, until you become an *aveil*, a mourner. It's a very difficult time, and we feel that pain and the need that we've been holding out as a people for the captives to all be returned. Because without closure, without burial, without resolution, our hearts and our soul are just ripped apart."

He went on to acknowledge the selflessness of Sergeant Gvili, 24, who belonged to an elite police counterterrorism unit.



Gvili was recuperating from a fractured shoulder but had nonetheless rushed into battle on October 7. "Ran was among the first taken and the last to be recovered," Rabbi Gerson said. "And he died protecting his country and saving lives. He didn't have to go. He had a medical release. But he wasn't going to let his friends fight without him being there. And he sacrificed his life on behalf of the Jewish people. He is the very definition of heroism."

Mr. Gvili's father, Itzik Gvili, had acknowledged that heroism as well, according to The New York Times. On the evening of January 26, "Mr. Gvili was recorded standing with his hands outstretched on the Israeli flag covering his son's coffin." According to The Times, he said, "You had every option to stay home, but you told me, 'Dad, I'm not leaving my friends to fight alone.'" The Times said Mr. Gvili went on: "You should see the honor you are being given here. The entire police force, the entire army, the entire nation is with you. I am proud of you, my son."

Rabbi Gershon said the return of Gvili's remains to his family and to Israel meant that "something painful and necessary has become possible: a transition from being in *aninut*, in this kind of twilight zone of mourning, to finally becoming an *aveil*. To going into *aveilut*, a transition in the form of our grief."

He then directed two members of the congregation, Rubin Ackman, CBI's vice president of finance, and Aharon Silverberg, both of whom have ties to Israel and the I.D.F., to come to the bimah and remove the flag. It was then passed between the rows of congregants, back to Ackman and Silverberg, who folded it as congregants sang "Oseh Shalom." The congregants then returned to their seats and together recited a prayer, written by Rabbi Amelia Wolf, "Between Holding and Mourning":

"There is a time when grief is too powerful for words.

When the dead are not yet buried,
When the kidnapped are not yet returned,
When the heart cannot tell what it is carrying.
That time is called *aninut*."

The prayer then goes on to acknowledge that mourners are now in the period of *aveilut*.

"Today, we do not say that pain has ended.

We do not say that justice has come.
We do not say that hearts are healed.
We can know only this:
That we are permitted, at last, to mourn."

Rabbi Gershon concluded by saying, "I pray that all the people of Israel, our brothers and sisters and Jews throughout the world, will go forward now with renewed strength and with hope, even as we mourn," before leading the congregation in the Mourner's Kaddish.

Temple Beth Or welcomes you to join us!

We pray from the depths of our hearts
for true peace in Israel, an end to violence,
and the safe return of all hostages to
their families.

Contact us about our upcoming
services, programs, events
and adult learning opportunities -
in-person and on Zoom.

Call us at 732-458-4700 or email us at templebethorbrick@gmail.com.
Chaim Respes, Rabbi Dr. Sharon Monter, President

**Many congregations are
conducting prayer services and
classes online which may be accessible
from a computer or a telephone.
Contact each congregation
for further information
to access these events.**

Local News

Jewish War Veterans of the USA Update

"A Jewish Voice for Veterans, A Veterans Voice for Jews since 1896"

By Al Adler

As I write this article it is snowing, sleet and icy. My family and I have been outside shoveling several times, but it keeps on snowing.

Last month, my wife Carol, JWV Ladies Auxiliary National President, and I joined members of the JWV Department of Massachusetts at the Veterans Home in Chelsea Massachusetts where we fed our honored veterans Christmas lunch. Carol and I received a lovely note from the Veterans Home in which they said in part: "Thank you for generously volunteering your time to serve lunch at the Massachusetts Veterans Home in Chelsea on December 25, 2025. Your act of service helps foster a strong sense of community and reminds the Veterans who live here how deeply they are valued and respected."

"Veterans Helping Veterans"

On January 10, JWV Ladies Auxiliary National President Carol Adler visited the JWV Department of Florida. She attended the JWV Department of Florida Quarterly Meeting and was the honored guest at the Department of Florida Auxiliary Meeting. The next day Carol and I visited the Jacobson Food Family Pantry where a generous donation was given in honor of her visit. Also in attendance was JWV National Commander Scott Stevens and his wife Bonny. The food pantry is one of the services provided by the Jewish Family Service.

On February 3 and 4, members of the Jewish War Veterans Department of New Jersey and our Ladies Auxiliary will be participating in our Capitol Hill Action Days. During that time we will be visiting our Federal Legislators on Capitol Hill. We will meet with our legislators and their legislative staff and bring to their attention our veterans agenda of concerns and those important issues of interest to our veterans.

Mark Your Calendar:

The Jewish War Veterans Department of New Jersey and our Ladies Auxiliary will be hosting our annual Legislative Breakfast on Sunday, May 3, at 9:00 AM at the Clarion Hotel, Route 37 East, Toms River. This year we will be honoring As-

semblywoman Melinda Kane of the Sixth Legislative District as our Legislator of the Year. Assemblywoman Kane is a member of the Jewish War Veterans Ladies Auxiliary Post 126 and is Auxiliary Chaplain. Assemblywoman Kane was Cherry Hill Township's Councilwoman and Camden County Commissioner. Assemblywoman Kane is a proud Gold Star Mother and has been a strong advocate of veterans rights following the death of her son Marine LCPL Jeremy Kane who was tragically killed in Afghanistan.

Our Organization of the Year is the Bob Woodruff Foundation. The Bob Woodruff Foundation was created after ABC News Correspondent Bob Woodruff was injured in 2006 while reporting on the War in Iraq when a roadside bomb struck his vehicle causing a life-threatening brain injury and a 36 day coma. The Bob Woodruff Foundation supports veterans and their families. The Bob Woodruff Foundation has raised awareness of the challenges veterans and military families are facing and they invest in solutions to help support these veterans as they navigate their lives.

Please plan to attend this special event. For additional information contact Bob Jacobs at 732-691-6139.

God Bless our Troops and Veterans.



Pictured are JWV National Commander Scott Stevens and JWVA National President Carol Adler visiting the Jacobson Food Pantry



Pictured are JWV Department of Florida Dave Patlak, JWV National Commander Scott Stevens, JWVA National President Carol Adler and Auxiliary President Verna Rosenzweig of Florida



Pictured are JWV Department of Florida Commander Dave Patlak and JWVA National President Carol Adler



Pictured is the Jacobson Food Pantry in Florida



Purim Extravaganza Coming Up at Congregation B'nai Israel, Toms River

Photo credits (from last year's Purim event): Teri Abramson and Emilie Kovit

Hats. Costumes. Noisemakers. Dancers. All are welcome on Monday, March 2, when Congregation B'nai Israel again holds its Purim Extravaganza. The festivities begin at 6:00 PM at the synagogue at 1488 Old Freehold Road with a family Megillah reading, led by Rabbi William Gershon, assisted by lay youth and adult participants and accompanied by Cantor Vadim Yucht. Heckling is encouraged. That will be followed by a costume parade and activities for all ages. Hamantaschen and other refreshments will be served. A full Megillah reading will take place the next day, Tuesday, March 3. The events are free and open to all, but non-members are asked to register, for security reasons, by February 25 with the synagogue office at 732-349-1244 or online at <https://www.cbitr.org/>.



FedBeat from JFNA – Jewish Federations of North America

jewishfederations.org

After Arson, Jewish Federations Mobilize for Jackson, Mississippi



From JFNA

The antisemitic arson attack against Beth Israel Congregation in Jackson, Mississippi, shook not just the city's tight-knit local Jewish community but also Jews across North America.

Although Jackson doesn't have its own professionally run Federation, as a "network community" in the Jewish Federations system, it has access to critical resources. Jewish Federations quickly mobilized to raise resources and sent skilled professionals to Jackson to assess the community's immediate needs and provide support. "It was important to show that the Jewish community of Jackson is not alone during this moment of crisis," said Edward Finkel, Managing Director of Network Communities. "They're dealing with something many have never experienced before, and Jewish Federations will be there every step of the way."

One of the most pressing issues was physical security. Prior to the arson, Beth Israel did not have full-time security personnel on the premises. Jewish Federations were able to provide two security guards to protect the site, supported by the Secure Community Network (SCN). Jewish Federations' LiveSecure investments built the infrastructure that helped SCN extend their services to communities like Jackson.

The Federation system also opened a donation page for Jackson, with all funds raised going directly to Beth Israel. In the first week, over \$100,000 was donated through this online portal.

Unfortunately, this wasn't the first antisemitic attack against Jackson's Jewish community. In meetings with synagogue trustees, Federation staff were struck by

Whether they are navigating man-made or natural disasters, Jewish Federations are there anytime and anywhere Jews are in need.
~ Edward Finkel, JFNA Managing Director of Network Communities

first-hand testimonies of the 1967 KKK bombing of Beth Israel Congregation. Nearly 60 years later, the youngest generation of Jewish Jacksonians is living through their own experience with antisemitic violence.

Being a young Jewish person in a city – and state – with a very small Jewish community has its own unique challenges; in the wake of this attack, Jackson's Jewish teens are bearing an especially difficult emotional burden. Federation staff heard about their feelings of isolation and knew they had to help, coordinating with BBYO to invite them to the 2026 International Convention in Philadelphia.

Although damage assessments remain ongoing and the community is in the early stages of grappling with this tragedy, Jewish Federations have played a vital role in convening partners on the ground to ensure that Beth Israel has everything it needs. Harnessing the resources of 141 Federations, most notably to provide for the physical security of Jackson's Jewish community, has helped ease the minds of local Jewish leaders and residents.

"Whether they are navigating man-made or natural disasters, Jewish Federations are there anytime and anywhere Jews are in need," said Finkel. "Our responsibility is to ensure flourishing Jewish life even in communities with smaller Jewish populations."

(Editor's Note: You can donate to Beth Israel Congregation through the Jewish Federation of Ocean County with our local link: www.jewishoceancounty.org/disaster.)

Supporting the Minneapolis and St. Paul Communities in a Time of Challenge



By Gary Torgow, JFNA Chair of the Board of Trustees and Eric Fingerhut, JFNA President and CEO

We write with deep sadness about the unrest and loss of life that has occurred in the cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota.

We have been in close touch with both Federation communities and have offered any support they need as they navigate these difficult and evolving challenges. The Minneapolis Federation and the St. Paul Federation have issued their own statements. We think that the words of those who are most directly affected by these events and who are ultimately responsible for the well-being of their communities are the most powerful testament to what is on the hearts and minds of those who live there. We thank the Federation leaders for their critical work and devotion to our mission of serving the Jewish community in times of strength and times of challenge.

The primary responsibility of Federations will always be the security of the communities we serve. Our Federations in Minneapolis and St. Paul, like all Federations, have created and funded a professional community security program that is operating at full strength during these difficult days. Through the Jewish Federations of North America's Tepper grant program, they have also reached out to other communities of faith to assist in protecting all places of worship. Knowing that the issues happening in Minnesota could happen elsewhere, we are preparing security guidance, together

with the Secure Community Network, that we will share with all Federations shortly.

The Federations impacted by these events are also monitoring closely the health and well-being of the most vulnerable populations in the community. We all hope that any interrupted services will quickly be resumed, and we all stand ready to help address any challenges that arise.

The primary responsibility of Federations will always be the security of the communities we serve.

We will keep you posted of any developments that directly affect our Federation system, and welcome your feedback, comments and suggestions on this important matter.

Even as we write about the sadness in Minneapolis and St. Paul, we also note the sense of relief and closure that the entire Jewish world is experiencing with the return of the final hostage, the great Jewish hero, Ran Gvili. May his memory be a blessing and may his family be comforted among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. May this significant milestone of the return of the final hostage begin a new era of hope, peace and unity for the Jewish people everywhere.

The release of the final hostage coincides with our reading on Shabbat of the release of the Jewish people from slavery and the destruction of their Egyptian tormentors. It is an opportune time to reflect on the timelessness of the Jewish story and the Jewish message. We are truly one people, with one Torah and one mission to bring light into the world. May we all go from strength to strength.

God bless all of you. Am Yisrael Chai!

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FedBeat from JFNA
Jewish Federations of North America
jewishfederations.org

Jewish Federations Statement on the Return of the Last Israeli Hostage



From JFNA
 January 26, 2026

For the first time in 12 years, there are no Israeli hostages being held in Gaza.

Today, Jewish Federations of North America send our love and deepest condolences to the family of Police St. Sgt. Ran Gvili – one of the first hostages

taken by Hamas on October 7, 843 days ago, and the last to be recovered. He died protecting his country and saving lives. His willingness to fight for his community and sacrifice on behalf of the Jewish people are the very definition of heroism.

Jewish Federations also express profound gratitude to the IDF and to all those who persevered in bringing home each of the 251 hostages, as well as to the leadership in both Israel and the United States who were involved in these efforts. Because of their work, there are no longer any Israeli hostages being held in Gaza for the first time since 2014.

The return of Ran Gvili closes one of the most painful chapters in Jewish history in our lifetime – even as we continue to mourn, remember, and honor all those who were lost.



Jewish Federation of Ocean County

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Pre-dawn shabbat Jackson, Mississippi's only synagogue Beth Israel was set on fire. The damage was extensive.

This is the same synagogue that was bombed by the Ku Klux Klan in 1967.

Help us provide critical resources for rebuilding, restoration, and recovery, ensuring that Congregation Beth Israel can continue to serve as a place of worship, gathering, and Jewish life.

Jewish Federations stand united against hate and in solidarity with the Jackson Jewish community.

<https://secure.lglforms.com/form.../s/tbRu1p6M6Azv1pnPK37JDg>



From Israel Emergency to Israel Recover

The challenges facing the Jewish community demand decisive action. Antisemitism rises, Israel rebuilds and recovers, and the future of our communities is at stake. Now is the time for us to choose action, unity, and strength. Your gift fuels our efforts to build a thriving Jewish future for generations to come. Donate now: www.jewishoceancounty.org/IsraelRecover.



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Trails of testimony

Cyclist Completes 47-hour Trek to Write “Never Again” around Auschwitz

Czech cyclist Lukáš Klement rides through snow, winds and freezing temperatures for 1,000 kilometers to create his message ahead of International Holocaust Remembrance Day.



Cyclist Lukáš Klement's 1,000-kilometer (621-mile) bike route in Poland spells the words “Never again” (Zaka Search and Rescue)

By Zev Stub
January 20, 2026
timesofisrael.com

After nearly 47 hours of cycling, Czech cyclist Lukáš Klement has completed his 1,000-kilometer (621-mile) journey to create the world's largest “Never again” sign.

Riding through Poland in harsh winter conditions that included snow, winds and freezing temperatures of -8 degrees Celsius (18° Fahrenheit), Klement rode a cumulative time of 46 hours, 56 minutes and 26 seconds on a route that spelled the phrase on the trail map ahead of International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

“This is a victory of the spirit over the muscles,” Klement said after completing his trek. “The survival of the Jewish people enabled me to survive this journey. The story of Jewish survival is a victory of the spirit – and that is what gave me the motivation.”

Klement began his ride, organized in cooperation with Israel's ZAKA Search and Rescue organization, in front of the infamous Gate of Death at the Auschwitz concentration camp on January 15. The entrance to the camp bears the slogan “Arbeit macht frei,” German for “Work makes one free.”

Klement, who is not Jewish, cooperated on this trip with ZAKA, which provides emergency response, rescue and recov-

ery operations around the world. It was his first time working with the organization, a spokesperson said.

International Holocaust Remembrance Day is held yearly on January 27, the day Auschwitz was liberated by the Red Army in 1945.

The slogan “Never again” was used by liberated prisoners at the Buchenwald concentration camp to denounce fascism and has become a call to internalize the lessons of the Holocaust.



Cyclist Lukáš Klement during his journey in Poland to create the world's largest “Never again” sign, January 2026. (ZAKA)

During the journey, US Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee sent Klement a message of support. “I heard about your project, and I really felt it was important to support your work to help you carry your message forward,” Huckabee wrote in a letter shared on social media. “Bringing life into a place that has become a symbol of death is an initiative of pro-

Four Mitzvot of Purim

By Sarah Rochel Hewitt
Jewish Treats by NJOP

This year, Purim (which is on 14 Adar) will be celebrated on Monday night-Tuesday, March 2-3. Four mitzvot are associated with the holiday.

Keriat Hamegillah – Megillah (Scroll) Reading of the Book of Esther – The Megillah is read twice on Purim, once at night and once during the day. In order to properly fulfill the mitzvah of Megillah, it is necessary to hear every word during the reading. For this reason it is imperative that people not speak during the Megillah reading.

Mishloach Manot/Shalach Manos – Sending Gifts – On Purim day, every Jew should give at least one *Mishloach Manot* gift containing at least two different types of ready-to-eat food items.

Matanot La'eiyonim – Gifts to the Poor – Giving to the poor is a mitzvah all year round. However, the mitzvah to do so on Purim is in addition to the general mitzvah of *tzedakah* (charity). To properly fulfill the mitzvah of *Matanot La'eiyonim* one must give to two poor individuals. Although one may fulfill this mitzvah by giving a minimal amount of money to each person, the sages noted that the highest form of fulfilling this mitzvah is by giving enough money for a meal, or the equivalent in food. This mitzvah may be fulfilled by donating beforehand to an organization that will distribute the money or food on Purim day.

Seudah – Festive Meal – One should partake in a festive meal on Purim day. The minimum to fulfill this mitzvah requires that one ritually wash one's hands (*netillat yadayim*), eat bread and then recite the *Birkat Hamazon*, the Grace after Meals.

The Purim seudah is often associated with drinking. The Talmud says: “A person should drink on Purim up to the point where they cannot tell the difference between ‘Blessed is Mordechai’ and ‘Cursed is Haman.’” (Megillah 7a and also in the *Shulchan Aruch*/Code of Jewish Law). Generally, this is interpreted as drinking more than one usually does or enough to make one sleepy.

While drinking on Purim is often seen as a mitzvah, risking one's life is never permitted. Whether host or guest, it is important to be responsible. Do not drink and drive. Beware of underage drinking. While Purim is a religious holiday, and underage alcohol consumption is allowed for religious occasions, adults are still responsible for minors. Please do not give young people any alcohol beyond the bare minimum of wine, if at all.

(For other “Jewish Treats: Juicy Bits of Judaism, Daily” and many other Jewish resources visit www.jewishtreats.org and www.njop.org.)

[Editor's Note: Purim is preceded by Taanit Esther (Fast of Esther) on 13 Adar (this year on Monday, March 2) and is followed by Shushan Purim on 15 Adar (this year on Tuesday night-Wednesday, March 3-4.)]

found significance. America stands with you.”

Klement also received messages of support from the ambassador of Israel to the Czech Republic, the Embassy of Israel in Warsaw, the Consulate of Israel in New York, as well as communities from around the world, ZAKA noted. Thousands of followers from around the world tracked the ride in real-time using an online digital map, it added.

Klement said before the journey that he saw the ride as a response to rising hatred against the Jewish people around the world. “After the attack in Sydney and just before Holocaust Remembrance Day, this is my answer to the terrorists: a cross-border, cross-cultural project that connects people regardless of race, gender, or religion,” Klement said.



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Securing Our Community

Secure Community Network Update – January/February Report

By Michael G. Masters
National Director & CEO
February 2, 2026

We recently rejoiced in the repatriation of the last remaining hostage, yet peace remains fragile, and the wounds of October 7 are only partially closed. As we begin the new year, we are reminded that the threats we face cross borders and adhere to no timeframe.

For our adversaries, the effort to intimidate is constant. Our vigilance must be equally enduring, as must our message: we will not be frightened into submission. We will continue to stand together and stand up for the Jewish people.

Already this year, our communities have been tested. A tragic arson attack on a synagogue in Jackson, Mississippi, struck a community previously targeted for standing up for Jewish values. From the moment the fire was reported, SCN coordinated closely with local partners and law enforcement, and thanks to swift action, the offender was arrested and charged.

This followed the tragic Hanukkah attack at Bondi Beach, where our priority was ensuring the community could gather, celebrate, and practice safely. Our security professionals stood shoulder to shoulder with local communities, working alongside national partners, including Jewish Federations of North America and Chabad, to protect synagogues, schools, and communal organizations of all sizes.

These incidents, and the challenges our communities face every day, underscore why SCN's work is more important than ever. In 2025, SCN logged 5,942 threat incident and suspicious activity reports, surpassing 2024's previous record high by nearly 10 percent.

In 2025, we strengthened the "Virtual Shield" protecting our community through our new Regional Threat Capability, enhancing our ability to identify and mitigate threats before they manifest. Today, this initiative includes over 40 Federation partners and close coordination with local, state, and federal law enforcement.

Our "Physical Shield" also continues to expand. Through the launch of more than a dozen new programs in 2025, additional communities now have dedicated security professionals providing hands-on training and guidance, ensuring local needs are met while maintaining the highest national standards.

Looking ahead, we will continue to ensure that every institution and community, no matter the size, can live openly and confidently within a strong, connected network.

As the Lubavitcher Rebbe taught, "If you see what needs to be repaired and how to repair it, then you have found a piece of the world that God has left for you to complete." This wisdom inspires our work, reminding us that every step we take to strengthen and protect our communities contributes to a larger, sacred mission.

Stay safe.

The Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA) established the Secure Community Network (SCN) in 2004. The SCN is a nonprofit organization that works to ensure the safety and security of the Jewish community in North America. The SCN's mission is to help individuals and organizations develop a culture of awareness, preparedness, and resilience through training, consultation, and information sharing. The SCN works with over 300 independent communities, 146 federations, and 50 partner organizations, as well as with partners in the public, private, academic, and non-profit sectors.



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Religious Action Center-NJ Statement on Governor Murphy Signing the Safe Communities Act

Issued by Sarah Blaine, Lead Organizer, New Jersey Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (RAC-NJ); Assistant Director of Organizing, RAC
January 20, 2026



“Today’s signing of the Safe Communities Act marks a significant step by ensuring that all New Jerseyans are safer in courthouses, houses of worship, schools, and other sensitive locations. This commonsense legislation, which passed in the New Jersey legislature with bipartisan support, will help ensure that New Jerseyans seeking access to sensitive locations, including synagogues and other houses of worship, can do so regardless of their immigration status. Jewish tradition commands us to protect the stranger and pursue justice. The Safe Communities Act does both.

“At the same time, we are disappointed that Governor Murphy did not sign the Privacy Protection Act and the Immigrant Trust Directive codification bills into law. The Privacy Protection Act would have

limited access to automatic license plate reader data, which would have protected not only New Jersey’s immigrants, but also those entering New Jersey seeking reproductive or gender-affirming care. The Immigrant Trust Directive codification bill would have added key protections for vulnerable populations with valid legal defenses to final orders of deportation, such as DACA recipients or witnesses to or victims of serious crimes, such as human trafficking.

“Given Governor Murphy’s decision to leave two of the three immigrant protection bills – unsigned – on his desk, we urge Governor Sherrill to take immediate steps to ensure that New Jerseyans’ data is protected and that no New Jerseyans are turned over to ICE without first being afforded their full due process rights.

“We appreciate Governor Murphy’s signature on the Safe Communities Act and the tireless work of the New Jersey Alliance for Immigrant Justice and its dozens of partner organizations, who led with clarity and courage. RAC-NJ is proud to have stood alongside them.”

RAC-NJ’s contributions to this successful campaign included:

- Clergy leadership: 70 NJ rabbis and cantors signed an open letter supporting the legislation (published in the New Jersey Globe) and sent to all 120 legislators.
- Constituent pressure: Two state action alerts generating 1,391 emails to the Governor and/or legislators from 458 advocates.
- Phone program: Timed call-in days in November-January which produced over 1,100 calls to targeted legislators, driven by 80+ RAC-NJ volunteers making weekly calls November 2025-January 2026.
- State House advocacy: 48 volunteers registered across multiple State House visits to meet lawmakers and testify during committee hearings and floor votes.
- Direct lobbying: Conducted formal and informal meetings with legislators across both chambers.

PLUS: Extra Message from Sarah Blaine
January 27, 2026

First and foremost, thank you to each of the RAC-NJ Congregational Liaisons who helped to spread the word about the immigrant bill package and the actions we were taking in support of it. Together, we helped make one of those bills, the Safe Communities Act, into law here in New Jersey. However, because the bills’ protections are more effective when they’re implemented as a package, we have urgent work to do to continue reducing harm to all New Jerseyans affected by ICE’s overreach, especially the one in four New Jerseyans who are foreign-born, by sending new versions of the Privacy Protection Act and the Strengthening Trust Between Law Enforcement and Immigrant Communities Acts to Governor Sherrill’s desk as soon as possible. New Jersey is not immune to the overreach happening in Minnesota, Maine, and across the country – from Morristown to Princeton, from Avenel to Atlantic City – people in New Jersey are feeling compelled to “carry their papers” while simply going about their daily lives.

RAC-NJ’s leadership has agreed to con-

Continued on page 18

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Combating Hate

Ocean County schools are encouraged to send students to the annual colloquium. The Jewish Federation of Ocean County sponsors the students from Ocean County by providing the cost of their registration. Schools are also eligible for bussing grants from the Jewish Federation of Ocean County's partner at Ocean County Cultural & Heritage Commission. The annual colloquium is the culmination of the yearlong focus on the theme of Resistance.



Resistance: Mothers' Quest for Justice

Join Chhange for Our 44th Annual Colloquium!



Lucia Diaz Genao is a mother who became an activist and leader in the fight to find the disappeared in Mexico. Lucy will share how her world was turned upside down in 2013 when her 29-year-old son, Luis Guillermo, a popular DJ, was kidnapped. When the Mexican authorities failed to act, Lucy decided she had to do something. That began her tireless search for her son, a quest that is ongoing.



Dr. Matthew Hone is currently conducting investigations focused on Latin America and working as an adjunct professor at Stockton University teaching courses on genocide, state violence in Latin America, and enforced disappearances. He is co-author of the recently published book, *Victim Activists in Mexico: Social and Political Mobilization amid Extreme Violence and Disappearances*.

🕒 Wed., May 20, 2026
9:45 am – 12:30 pm

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Jewish Federation of Ocean County Impact

YOU Made an Impact through the Jewish Federation of Ocean County – Jewish Relief Network Ukraine

Message From JRNU

In the midst of relentless attacks, power outages, and frigid temperatures, fifty Jewish students and young professionals gathered at the Menorah Jewish Community Center in Dnipro for the STARS Winter Seminar. The participants were treated to a unique and uplifting journey into Jewish heritage, tradition, and teachings. The warm and engaging atmosphere was just what the attendees needed after enduring nearly 4 years of stress and strain in their daily lives.

The event was organized and led by the Chief Executive Officer of STARS Ukraine, Rabbi Pinchas Vishedski, who, along with his wife Dina, leads Kyiv's KEDEM community. Chief Rabbi of Dnipro Shmuel Kaminezki and his wife, Chana, along with the dedicated staff of STARS Dnipro conducted special lectures and classes:

"There is one thing that remains steady and constant in Ukraine," shared Rabbi Vishedski, with a smile. "These unique seminars for Jewish students and young professionals continue to bring energy, hope, and meaning to the participants, despite the challenges that unfortunately continue to intensify. Whether in winter or summer, during Passover or other holidays, the seminars are eagerly awaited and deeply appreciated."



It is an honor and privilege to support STARS of Ukraine and other organizations that provide a critical foundation for Jewish life. It is more important than ever to anchor the community and provide encouragement, support, and hope. Along with providing for people's physical and emotional needs, we provide for their spiritual needs as well. Together we save lives and restore hope.

YOU Made an Impact through the Jewish Federation of Ocean County – Yad Ezra V'Shulamit

Purim: Bringing Joy to Widows and Orphans

Message from Aryeh Lurie, Founder of Yad Ezra V'Shulamit

Purim should be a joyful time, especially for children. Yet for many widows, even preparing a festive meal is a struggle. This year, we will provide food vouchers and baskets to 400 widows and more than 1,800 orphaned children, ensuring they can celebrate with dignity in their own homes. No mother should fear an empty table – especially on Purim.

Real Impact: Families in Kiryat Shmona – 400 families in Kiryat Shmona are now receiving weekly food baskets. Only about 40% of residents have returned home, and many came back to shuttered businesses and lost income. For count-



A widowed mother and her children sharing a meal at home in Bat Yam

less families, basic food remains a daily challenge. Your support is helping them survive and begin to rebuild. See how families across Israel are being helped right now.

Here is How You Can Support Our Holocaust Survivors and Seniors

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- The Holocaust Survivors' Special Fund
- The Seniors Lunch Program Special Fund

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- Consider making a monthly gift to support your community.

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Jewish Federation of Ocean County Impact

YOU Made an Impact through the Jewish Federation of Ocean County - Toms River Housing and Homeless Coalition



Keith Krivitzky

federation@ocjf.org

January 28, 2026

Dear Keith,

Please accept our gratitude for your support of the work we are doing here in Toms River and Ocean County. Your 2025 donation of \$250 helps us continue to provide services to those who are experiencing homelessness or are at risk of becoming homeless in our area. We are grateful for the support and partnership of Christ Episcopal Church and gratefully accept your contribution in their honor. Thank you for thinking of us.

Sincerely,

Rev. Susan S. Jones

Coalition President

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Gemma Brennan

Rosemary Goebel

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The Toms River Housing and Homeless Coalition is a 501(c)3 not for profit corporation - EIN#83-3591722

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Half the smart pups had a vocabulary of over 100 toy names

Israeli Researcher Finds that by Eavesdropping, “Genius” Dogs Learn Words like Toddlers

In Shany Dror’s study, super-smart canines had 90% accuracy in fetching toys whose names they learned directly or overheard; findings shed light on how language learning may have evolved.



Shany Dror with her dog Mitos. (Courtesy)

By Diana Bletter
January 17, 2026
timesofisrael.com

In a peer-reviewed study published in the journal *Science*, Israeli researcher Shany Dror, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Veterinary Medicine in Vienna, found that super-smart canines, known as Gifted Word Learner (GWL) dogs, can pick up new words from eavesdropping on their owners’ conversations, similar to 18-month-old human toddlers. “We all know dogs can excel at learning actions like ‘sit’ or ‘down,’” said Dror, 37, speaking to *The Times of Israel* in a teleconference call. “But few studies have been done on dogs’ knowledge of object labels.”

Dror’s research on 41 GWL dogs shows they have unique social cognitive skills, enabling them to interpret humans’ voices, gazes, and gestures, she said, noting that humans first developed an ability to understand complex social interactions, and “only later used this complex understanding to develop language. The fact that this skill exists in a species that does not have language suggests that the skill itself predates language,” Dror said. “The research helps us understand how language learning may have evolved.”

The researchers worked with 10 dogs from around the world, including border collies, a border collie rescue mix, and a Labrador. They first asked the dog owners to introduce two new toys to each dog for one minute while repeating the toy’s name and letting the dog play with it for several days. In the second phase, instead of introducing a new toy to the dog directly, family members passed the toy back and forth, all the while saying its name but without interacting with their dog.

For both experiments, the canines heard the name of each new toy for a total of only eight minutes during a series of

brief exposure sessions. The researchers then tested whether the dog had indeed learned the toys’ names. The toys were placed in a different room. The owner then asked the dog to fetch a certain toy, saying, for example, “Can you bring *Teddy*?” The dog then scampered into the room where there was an assortment of toys to pick out the specific toy. Overall, the pups had 90% accuracy in bringing toys they had learned directly or overheard in speech. “I think the exciting bit is what it tells us about these dogs’ ability to interpret our communication,” said Dror.

The team also conducted another experiment in which the owners showed a toy to their dog and then placed the toy inside a bucket. The owner named the toy only when it was out of the dog’s sight.

This created a temporal separation, Dror said, between seeing the object and hearing its name. “Despite this discontinuity, most of the gifted dogs successfully learned the new labels,” Dror said. “Under the right conditions, some dogs present behaviors strikingly similar to those of young children.”

Even though only humans have language, Dror noted that some of the thinking skills needed for language may exist in other animals too, pointing out language research done with bonobos, a type of great ape, and African grey parrots. If animals can learn an object’s name just by overhearing people talk, Dror said it suggests they have social skills similar to those of human babies, who learn by watching people talk and interact with things.

Horses, bats, and dogs

Dror, who grew up in Kibbutz Kabri in the Western Galilee, said she always loved animals and had her first horse at 12. She served in the Israeli police force’s dog handler unit and qualified to represent Israel in four world-championship competitions for utility dogs with her dog, *Mitos*.

During her undergraduate studies at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot, she helped to train fruit bats to participate in navigation tasks. Later, she studied with Prof. Claudia Fugazza at Budapest’s Eötvös Loránd University in the Department of Ethology, which is the science of animal behavior. While there,



Miso, a seven-year-old male Border Collie from Canada, knows the names of about 200 toys. (Courtesy/Veronica Suen)



Shira, a nine-year-old rescue dog, knows the names of over 300 dog toys. (Courtesy/Tres Hanley)



Shira, a nine-year-old rescue dog, knows the names of over 300 dog toys. (Tres Hanley/ Eotvos Lorand University in Hungary via AP)

have studied, 50 percent have a vocabulary of over 100 toys.

She also said she was surprised to learn that the majority of the dog owners lacked a professional background in dog training. However, most of the dogs were adopted when they were younger than 10 weeks old, and they lived in a single-dog household. Most GWL dogs that have been found are border collies, a breed that Dror said is known for its trainability. However, there are also Yorkshire terriers that have been considered gifted word learners, suggesting that other breeds may also have that skill.

Dror speculates that, in general, dogs may have an evolutionary advantage over other animals because they can listen to and learn from human verbal interactions. “This study provides an interesting and novel demonstration that dogs can learn words for new objects simply by overhearing human conversations,” said Dr. Amalia Pinkusfeld Medeiros Bastos, a lecturer in the School of Psychology & Neuroscience at the University of St. Andrews, who was not involved with the study. She said the research raises “exciting” possibilities for future studies, including testing whether dogs can also acquire non-object words, such as action terms like “sit” or “heel,” only by eavesdropping.

Dror said that she is searching for more GWL dogs and encourages owners who

Continued on page 31



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HELP WANTED

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ENGAGING ADULT COMMUNITIES

The goal here is to find ways to engage the Jewish populations in adult communities/Shalom Clubs with the Jewish Federation and to connect them to other Jewish activities/opportunities.

- Identify contacts and key “network nodes” in these communities to serve as influencers, networkers, and communicators
- Manage and follow through on ongoing communications and sharing opportunities with these networks
- Help identify/explore/shape opportunities that can be offered/delivered to these communities to help strengthen ties with the Federation/Jewish community
 - Films
 - Speakers
 - Topics
 - Sponsorships of programs

PLANNING EVENTS

We organize approximately 3 in-person events a year, to enable our community to come together, connect, and celebrate (hopefully) with each other.

- We are looking for people to help spearhead the framing and organizing of these events
- While this can include logistics and actual set-up, prep...this ideally includes positioning, promotion, and framing of these events
- This also can include volunteering on-site and engaging with guests/others at these events... ideally to help build affinity and connection to the Federation and Jewish community

IDENTIFYING/EVALUATING GRANT OPPORTUNITIES

Identify and vet possible grant opportunities for the Federation.

- Explore opportunities for Israel, overseas grantmaking that fall within the Federation’s priority/focus areas
- Help evaluate effectiveness and impact of grants through these possible partners
- Can also include identifying opportunities locally for the Federation to have an impact...beyond our current partners/grantees – what would enable us to maximize impact?

HEROES AGAINST HATE

The opportunity for this program goes beyond just event promotion and set-up. This can be a platform for expanding reach in the broader community and engaging other groups/individuals in the mechanism of countering hate, spearheaded by the Federation.

- Sticking with the framework for Heroes awards discussed thus far...help identify other groups, organizations, places to look for and nominate Heroes
- Explore ways to expand awareness of the awards and the event
- Expand recruitment of participants and sponsors for the event/program

HELPING PROMOTE FEDERATION ACTIVITIES/EVENTS

We can always do a better job promoting our activities and impact, through media, email/other engagement, and delivery of promotional materials.

- Identification of new places to deliver materials
- Ongoing updates/communications to local papers and adult community newsletters
- Ongoing updates/communications/promotions through local synagogues/Chabads

PJ PARENT AMBASSADOR

We now have over 1700 kids participating in our PJ Library program. We’re looking for some parents who can commit to:

- Identify the needs of families, and develop engagement opportunities that meet their needs
- Develop, plan and organize intimate small-scale engagement opportunities at family friendly destinations or home-based gatherings
- Encourage parents to be involved in planning and organizing programs and gatherings

Contact Avi at kotleram@gmail.com for more information and to get started!

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"This can be the basis for gene therapy for ALS"

In World First, Israeli Scientists use RNA-based Gene Therapy to Stop ALS Deterioration

By adding a microRNA molecule to ALS models, Tel Aviv University, Ben-Gurion University and Weizmann Institute researchers say the damaged nerve cells "even regenerated."



Prof. Eran Perlson of the Gray Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences and the Sagol School of Neuroscience at Tel Aviv University, center, with Dr. Ariel Ionescu, left, and PhD student Tal Pery Gradus (Courtesy/Tel Aviv University)



Michael Podolsky with his cat, a few years before the onset of ALS. Podolsky, 44, was the first named individual with ALS to successfully fight for his right to die in Israel in almost 30 years and the first to donate his organs. He died on September 25, 2025. (Courtesy/Tamar Ashkenazi)



An illustration showing the gene therapy's protective effect on motor neurons, preventing the "fire-like" degeneration characteristic of ALS (Courtesy/Tel Aviv University)

By Diana Bletter
November 17, 2025

In a groundbreaking study, researchers at Tel Aviv University, leading a large-scale international team of scientists, say they have identified an RNA molecule that can stop the nerve cell damage that causes paralysis in patients with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, ALS. Now, they hope to use the discovery to help patients with the fatal illness.

"When we added a specific RNA molecule to human cells and animal models for ALS, the nerve cells stopped degenerating and even regenerated," said Prof. Eran Perlson from the Gray Faculty of Medical & Health Sciences and the Sagol School of Neuroscience at Tel Aviv University, speaking to The Times of Israel.

Their study, recently published in the peer-reviewed journal *Nature Neuroscience*, opens a new avenue for treating the disease. "We wanted to get to the root of the matter of what causes ALS to enable the development of effective drugs for this incurable disease," Perlson said. The team used mice that had been genetically modified to serve as a "biological stand-in" for the disease.

The research was led by Dr. Ariel Ionescu, Dr. Lior Ankol, and lab manager Tal Pery Gradus in collaboration with Dr. Amir Dori, Senior Neurologist and Head of the Neuromuscular Disease Unit at Sheba Medical Center. Additional participants included researchers from the Weizmann Institute of Science, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, and research institutions in France, Turkey, and Italy.

About ALS

ALS, sometimes called Lou Gehrig's disease, is a fatal neurodegenerative condition that affects motor neurons – the nerve cells that control muscle movement. Over time, the disease causes gradual paralysis of all muscles in the body. Patients typically lose their ability to walk, speak, swallow, and breathe, often becoming completely paralyzed while their cognitive skills remain intact. "Most patients die within three to five years of diagnosis, due to paralysis of the diaphragm muscles and respiratory failure," said Perlson. There are currently some 600 ALS patients in Israel, according to Efrat Carmi, CEO for IsrALS, the Israeli Research Association.

In ALS, the neuromuscular junctions, where nerve fibers meet muscle cells and transmit electrical signals from the brain to the muscles, are disrupted. Perlson stated that the molecular mechanisms underlying this damage had remained unknown until now.

The microRNA that causes trouble in ALS patients

The current study continues research from Perlson's lab about microRNAs, the small molecules that regulate the translation of proteins and play an important role in many other cellular processes. In an earlier study, Perlson and his team found that a protein called TDP-43 formed toxic clusters at the tip of the nerve, where it meets the muscle.

In healthy bodies, the TDP-43 helps regulate how proteins are made in cells.



Illustrative image of the neurological process causing Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig's disease (Screen capture: Moovly via YouTube)

But in ALS, it becomes unstable. To find out why this happens, the researchers studied tissues from ALS patients, mice that mimic having the disease, and human stem cell cultures.

Their experiments revealed that muscle cells produce tiny RNA molecules called microRNA-126. The muscle cells then send them in tiny bubbles, called vesicles, across the small gap between nerve and muscle cells. These microRNAs act like messengers that tell the nerve cells when to stop making TDP-43. Without the microRNA, TDP-43 continues to build up and becomes toxic. "We discovered that in ALS, the muscle produces a smaller amount of microRNA-126," said Ionescu. The decrease in this microRNA leads to an increase in the dangerous TDP-43.

The excessive TDP-43 then forms toxic clusters. These clumps attack the mitochondria, the essential molecules inside cells that turn food and oxygen into energy so the cell can work, move, and stay alive. The damage is so great that it gradually destroys motor neurons, "leaving patients' muscles paralyzed," Ionescu

said. However, when the researchers added extra microRNA-126 to tissues from ALS patients and to mice with the disease, the process reversed.

Zevik Melamed, the principal investigator at the Laboratory of Molecular and Translational Neuroscience at Hebrew University of Jerusalem's Faculty of Medicine, said the study "suggests that protecting communication between muscles and nerves might be just as important as targeting neurons directly."

"This is a real shift in how we think about preventing paralysis in ALS," Melamed, who was not involved in the study, told The Times of Israel in a written comment. The study can be the basis for gene therapy for ALS, Perlson said. "The next step is taking it to clinical trials," he said.



Zevik Melamed, Ph.D., Principal Investigator, Laboratory of Molecular and Translational Neuroscience Faculty of Medicine, Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Courtesy)

Safe Communities Act

Continued from page 10

Continue working with New Jersey Alliance for Immigrant Justice in the first quarter of 2026 to send new versions of the Privacy Protection Act and the Strengthening Trust Between Law Enforcement and Immigrant Communities Act to Governor Sherrill's desk. We are beginning to set the stage now by calling the key players to urge them to keep implementing these protections at the top of their agendas in 2026.



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Archaeology Students Excavating Warsaw's Main Jewish Cemetery Are Uncovering a Forgotten World

In a secluded burial ground blanketed with tragedy and neglect, a group of young people are revealing fragments of Poland's Jewish past.



Polish archaeology students at work excavating a Jewish cemetery in Warsaw, September 2024 (Shira Li Bartov)

By Shira Li Bartov
February 27, 2025
jta.org

WARSAW (JTA) — In the center of Poland's capital, a brick wall separates the humming traffic of Okopowa Street from a quiet wilderness filled with graves.

This is Warsaw's main Jewish cemetery and one of the largest in Europe, a sprawling forest of 83 acres and the final resting place of some 200,000 Jews. Since 1806, the cemetery has held generations of cultural luminaries, rabbis and political activists — from the writers S. Anski and I.L. Peretz to Ludwik Zamenhof, who created the international language of Esperanto, to Mark Edelman, the last surviving leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

Some gravestones stand tall and pristine. But deeper into the cemetery, amid a tangle of maple, birch and acacia trees, more and more bend under the weight of time and neglect. Their inscriptions have faded and succumbed to ivy, leaving thousands of nameless stones in the thicket. An estimated 50,000 Jews who lie there have no stones at all — they were killed by hunger, disease or execution under the Nazis and consigned to two deep mass graves.

For decades after World War II, a long silence engulfed Poland's Jewish history and the atrocities committed there. Nine in 10 Polish Jews were killed, many survivors left the country, and those who stayed often concealed their Jewishness under the Soviet Union. With family chains severed and few left to remember the dead, the cemetery became a forest. A place that had no trees before the war

grew about 8,000 of them, while falling leaves transformed into new layers of soil and further buried the dead.

But in the last few years, a new form of life has come to the cemetery. Young people stand in between the gravestones, chattering, laughing and digging with shovels.

It's a strange sight in a Jewish burial ground, where religious law says the dead must remain undisturbed in perpetuity. These newcomers are archaeology students from the University of Warsaw, who convinced Poland's Jewish authorities to let them work on restoring the cemetery's pre-war infrastructure — beneath the soil and debris piled over the untrodden paths to Jewish graves.

It started in 2020, when students discovered that COVID-19 restrictions were shutting down archaeological sites around the world. Panicked over completing the digs required for them to graduate, they asked about working in their own city at the Okopowa Street cemetery. Soon they came head-to-head with the Rabbinical Commission for Cemeteries, which protects Jewish burial sites in Poland.



Witold Wrzosinski is the director of Warsaw's largest Jewish cemetery and a member of the city's small Jewish community. (Shira Li Bartov)

Witold Wrzosinski, the cemetery director and a member of Warsaw's small Jewish community, watched these negotiations. "The rabbis obviously said, 'Go away, you're crazy — stupid idea, digging around in a Jewish cemetery,'" said Wrzosinski. "But they kept insisting."

The students wanted to prove that they could dig without breaking Jewish law. So they studied it, returning to the rabbis over and over to demonstrate that their excavations would not disrupt the original soil. The rabbis were suspicious, said Wrzosinski. How could the students be trusted to differentiate between old and new earth? But eventually, they allowed a survey on a small patch of land in the cemetery, watched closely by Aleksander Schwarz from the Rabbinical Commission.

Schwarz had distinct credibility with Poland's Jewish leaders. A specialist in Jewish cemetery and burial law, he has served the commission for 25 years, mostly overseeing searches of unmarked graves in death camps like Sobibor and Belzec. Polish Chief Rabbi Michael Schudrich sent Schwarz to live for days at these camps, supervising archaeologists as they drew the historic borders of burial sites while ensuring that they met religious rules.

Before the project on Okopowa Street, Schwarz had never taught archaeologists to work in a Jewish cemetery. But he agreed to it. Over the past four years, with funding from Poland's Cultural Heritage Foundation, he has trained senior archaeologists and a rotating group of about 30 students. Everyone has to pass through his lectures and learn to dig under his eye, said Schwarz, who calls himself "a very demanding person."

He tempers the typical archaeologist's appetite to dig deep. Instead, he teaches them to interpret soil, a practice of care and imagination. The historical level of the cemetery lies only 20 to 30 centimeters below the surface. Students are never to disturb a grave — and if they happen on human remains, they must quickly block off the area and leave their discovery untouched. One mistake here could prompt Schwarz to end the project.

"We have trained them not to pick up any bones," he said. "They work a bit like forensic technicians. If they find anything



Gravestones under restoration at Warsaw's largest Jewish cemetery, September 2024 (Shira Li Bartov)

that is very shallow, a bone or a fragment of a bone, then they call me — or I'm already there — and the commission makes a decision about what happens."

The students were spurred by an early victory: They uncovered a cobblestone path from the cemetery's original layer. As far as Wrzosinski knows, no one in Warsaw remembered this path ever existing. Now it is an ordinary part of the place again, near the entrance, gently guiding visitors between the graves.

Gradually, the students were allowed to work in more and more sections of the cemetery. They found fallen, buried tombstones and the names of people buried there. Some of these records did not exist anywhere else, since the Nazis destroyed the pre-war cemetery archive and many Jewish birth, marriage and death certificates.

Some discoveries remain mysterious. Nineteenth-century gravestones that turned out to be half-buried had surprises waiting just below the surface, such as sculptures of squirrels and dragons that looked unfamiliar on Polish Jewish graves, said Wrzosinski. Rabbis are still interpreting whether they had any symbolic significance.

There were also remnants of war, like bullets and shells, bullet holes in gravestones and a pistol from the Warsaw Uprising that was typical of the Polish Underground. One day in July 2020, the students discovered an unexploded German mortar just seven centimeters below the surface. Police evacuated the cemetery and a bomb squad quickly removed it without any damage.

Kacper Konofał, a 23-year-old archaeology student working in the cemetery, is writing his bachelor's thesis about an uncovered collection of glass vessels, likely

Continued on page 30

Five-star hospitality with excellence

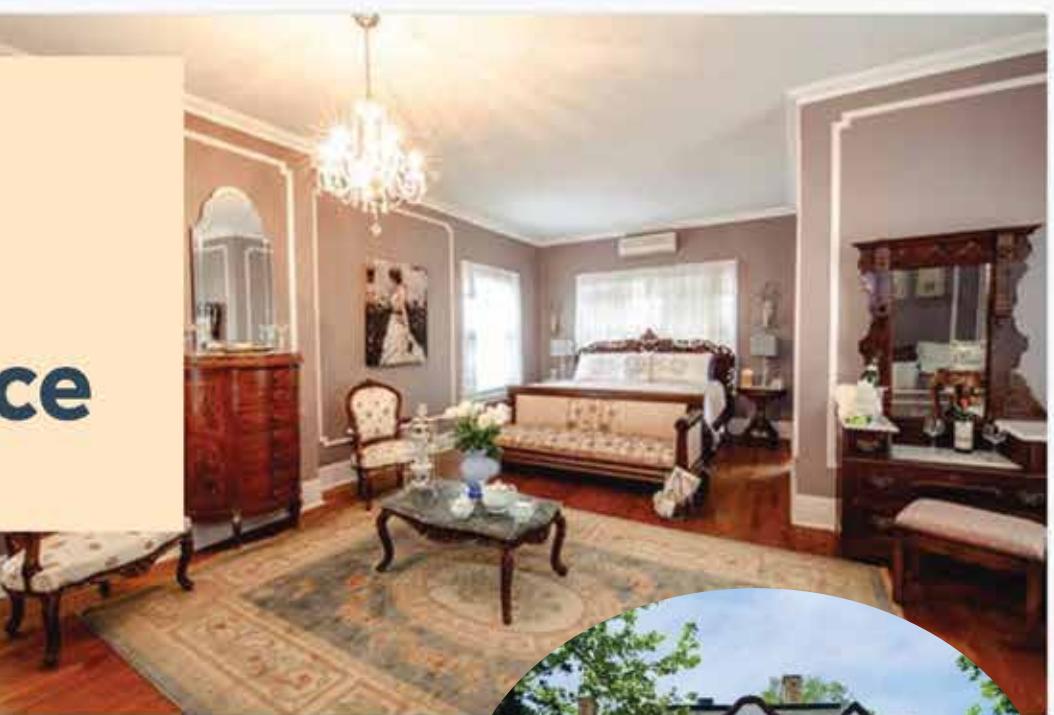


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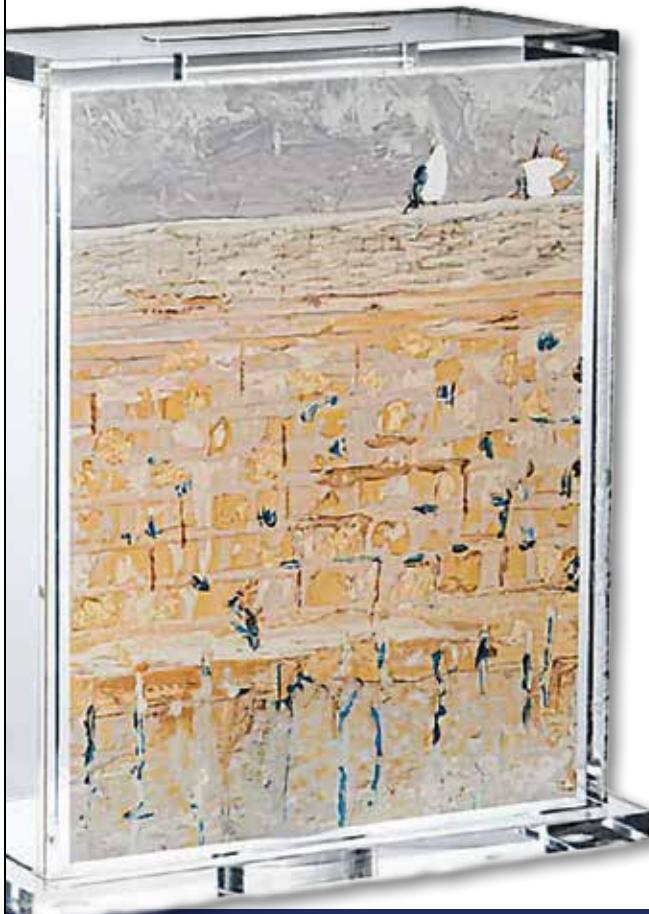
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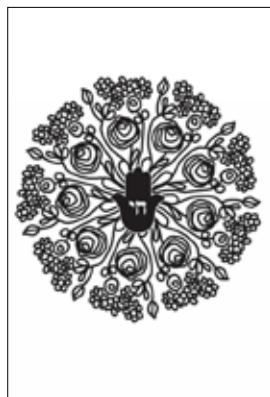


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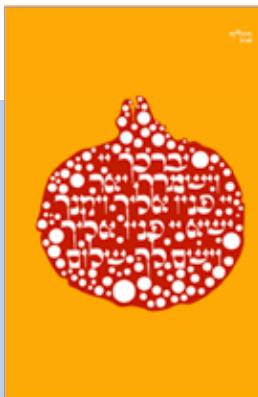
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A portrait of a woman with short blonde hair and glasses, wearing a pink cardigan over a white top. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. The background is dark and out of focus.

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The “Zionism” Gap: What Data Really Shows about Jews, Israel and Zionism Today

New data suggests this is a moment to listen beyond labels like “Zionist,” writes the chief impact officer at Jewish Federations of North America.



The word "Zionism" does not have a shared meaning in the year 2026, argues the chief impact officer of Jewish Federations of North America. (Getty Images)

By Mimi Kravetz

February 4, 2026

jta.org

At a moment when op-eds and headlines raise alarms that American Jews – especially young Jews – are turning away from Israel, the data tell a different story.

Across national studies of American Jews conducted by the Jewish Federations of North America over the past several years, alongside those of many research and organizational partners, one finding has remained remarkably consistent: Jews of all ages continue to feel deeply connected to Israel and to

Israelis. In fact, emotional connection to Israel across all age groups has increased since 2020. In addition, nine out of 10 Jews strongly support Israel's right to exist as a Jewish democratic state, with only a modest drop among young adults ages 18 to 34.

Yet at the same time, just over a third of Jews positively identify as “Zionists,” with a similar number saying they are not sure or don't identify with any of the options. Only a small minority – 14% among adults aged 18-34, and just 7% across the Jewish community – identify as anti-Zionist, and about 8% said they were “non-Zionist.”

What does this mean? At first glance, these findings appear irreconcilable. How can support for Israel as a Jewish democratic state remain so strong while identification with Zionism declines? The answer lies in how Jews today understand what the term “Zionism” means.

When we asked Americans, both Jews and non-Jews, what Zionism means, most correctly identified its core definition: the right of the Jewish people to

have a Jewish state. That definition has been affirmed by virtually every major Jewish organization and is reflected in standard dictionary definitions.

But our data also revealed something important that gets at the heart of why so many are reluctant to use the term today. Only about a third of Jews believe that the definition of Zionism stops at Jewish self-determination. Many believe the term also means supporting the policies, decisions, and actions of the Israeli government, including actions they strongly disagree with. Others believe it entails claiming exclusive Jewish rights to the West Bank and/or Gaza, endorsing inequality between Jews and Palestinians, or embracing specific political ideologies.

The word Zionism has undergone what might be called “definition creep” over time, shaped by a mix of political agendas, public discourse, and broader social forces. It has come to be understood as encompassing ideas that go far beyond its once-standard meaning.

This helps explain why some Jews who feel deeply connected to Israel nevertheless resist or reject the Zionist label. They are not rejecting Israel's existence or the idea of a Jewish state. They are reacting to an understanding of Zionism that includes policies, ideologies, and actions that they oppose, and do not want to be associated with. This distinction matters enormously.

To be sure, the relatively small percentage of Jews who identify as anti-Zionist largely reject Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state. That is something we must grapple with, but it would be a mistake to respond as though any individual who doesn't identify as Zionist opposes the Jewish state.

If we misread the trend about “Zionism” to mean that large numbers of Jews, especially young Jews, are turning against the existence of Israel itself, we will draw the wrong conclusions and take the wrong actions. We risk responding with anger when the moment calls for steady leadership, pulling away when the moment calls for connection, and defensiveness when the moment calls for listening and understanding. We risk isolating a growing segment of our community, especially young adults, when this moment could instead open pathways for learning and belonging.

At the Jewish Federations of North

America, and across most of the organized Jewish community, we continue to proudly call ourselves Zionists, in large part because we adhere to the historic definition. For us, Zionism means supporting the State of Israel and the Israeli people and uniting the Jewish people behind this shared commitment. It is clear from our research that this is what much of the Jewish community continues to believe today.

North American Jews can be proud citizens of the United States and Canada while, at times, criticizing and even opposing their countries' governments and policies. Similarly, we know that the overwhelming majority of American Jews can stand together in support of Israel and Israelis even as they wrestle with serious concerns that matter enormously to them and that Israelis themselves wrestle with as well.

In recent years, we have seen this capacity for unity firsthand. Across differences in politics and ideology, Jews came together to advocate for the release of the hostages, support their families, and stand with Israelis in moments of profound grief and uncertainty. That shared commitment did not require uniformity or the suspension of concerns – only a willingness to act together around what people broadly agreed on: Israel's future and care for its people.

As the ceasefire largely holds in Gaza, and the remains of the last hostage have been returned to his family for burial, we face a historic opportunity to strengthen Jewish unity once again. Taking full advantage of that opportunity requires listening carefully to one another – not only to the words people use, but with curiosity about the values they are trying to express when they use them.

We must be more intentional about initiating these conversations in our community and ensuring that people who want to engage more fully with the Jewish community feel welcome. Hillel the Elder taught us to listen carefully to the other side, and even restate their position, before making the case for our own view. With respect to the language of Zionism in the American Jewish community today, this teaching has never been more important.

Mimi Kravetz is chief impact officer for Jewish Federations of North America. The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of JTA or its parent company, 70 Faces Media.



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JEWISH FAMILY AND *changing lives...*

Second Time Around

By Rita Sason, LCSW, Director
 Jewish Family & Children's Service

Frank Sinatra sang "Love is lovelier the second time around" which may or not be true, but it is definitely different. Research on failed second marriages has shown that two issues are most often cited as the causes of marital breakup, money and children. But Nancy Kalish, Ph.D., Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the California State University, Sacramento, states that participants in those surveys were men and women under 50 who had children under the age of 18.

As it turns out, when men and women marry again later in life the two main problems are still money and children. Adult children may live far away, have their own spouses and children, but they can still interfere with their parent's second marriage. Widowed seniors may have enough difficulty overcoming their own feelings of disloyalty to their deceased spouse, and these feelings may be reinforced with the adult children's emotional reaction.

Dr. Kalish points out in her blog, "Sticky bonds, Lost Loves, Romances, and Families in the 21st Century," adult children may have a variety of conflicting feelings about their parent's new relationship. Adult children may not like the new partner for personality or social reasons. There may be a sense of abandonment that the parent is no longer as available. The new step-parent may take their parent away and they will no longer be available for baby-sitting or holiday celebrations. Grown children may think that their parent is making a mistake by choosing this person.

These attitudes can be hurtful to a parent.

The parent may feel that their adult children are treating them with disrespect, treating them like children, or they may feel hurt that their adult children do not care for their new partner.

It is also possible that adult children will be very supportive, happy that their surviving parent has found a new partner in which to share their life. They may also feel relieved that the burden of "caretaking" has been taken off their shoulders.

The second issue is money. Adult children may interfere because of fears of losing their "inheritance." Or there can be tension because the couple is accustomed to having the man as the breadwinner, but now the wife may have brought a lifetime of savings, retirement funds, profits from the sale of a home or money inherited from a deceased spouse into the marriage.

New relationships bring new compromises. Dr. Kalish describes that there are family rituals and expectations. After living with someone for 40, 50 years the original couple grew together. A surviving spouse will want to bring those feelings into the new relationship. If a man or woman has lived independently for a number of years, they bring that into the relationship as well.

Some wonder why bother? Dr. Kalish points out that some "seniors feel that they are twice blessed, having been loved so well by two wonderful spouses. There are seniors who seek no further love, and that is also right."

As we age, life can be filled with challenges and surprises no matter what choices are made.

Together with the [Conference on Jewish
 Material Claims Against Germany](#)

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By Heather Morgan

Managing Director

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At JDC (Joint Distribution Committee), this question is at the heart of our 111-year mission – lifting lives and strengthening communities in 70 countries. Though the ingredients for cultivating a proud Jewish future differ from place to place, the timeless value of arevut – the Talmudic notion that all Jews are responsible for each other – is always part of the mix.

For the many Jews we serve around the globe, food is a crucial way they put this value into action. From JDC volunteers delivering challah to elderly, isolated Jews in Ukraine to a young leader in India making her grandmother's fish curry, Jews everywhere draw physical, spiritual, and emotional sustenance from dishes passed down generation to generation.

I want to give you a taste of this dynamic Jewish world – as well as some much-needed joy – with this delicious cuisine. I hope you find the recipes as delightful as I do. Let's take inspiration from the rich and diverse culinary traditions that unite Jews everywhere.

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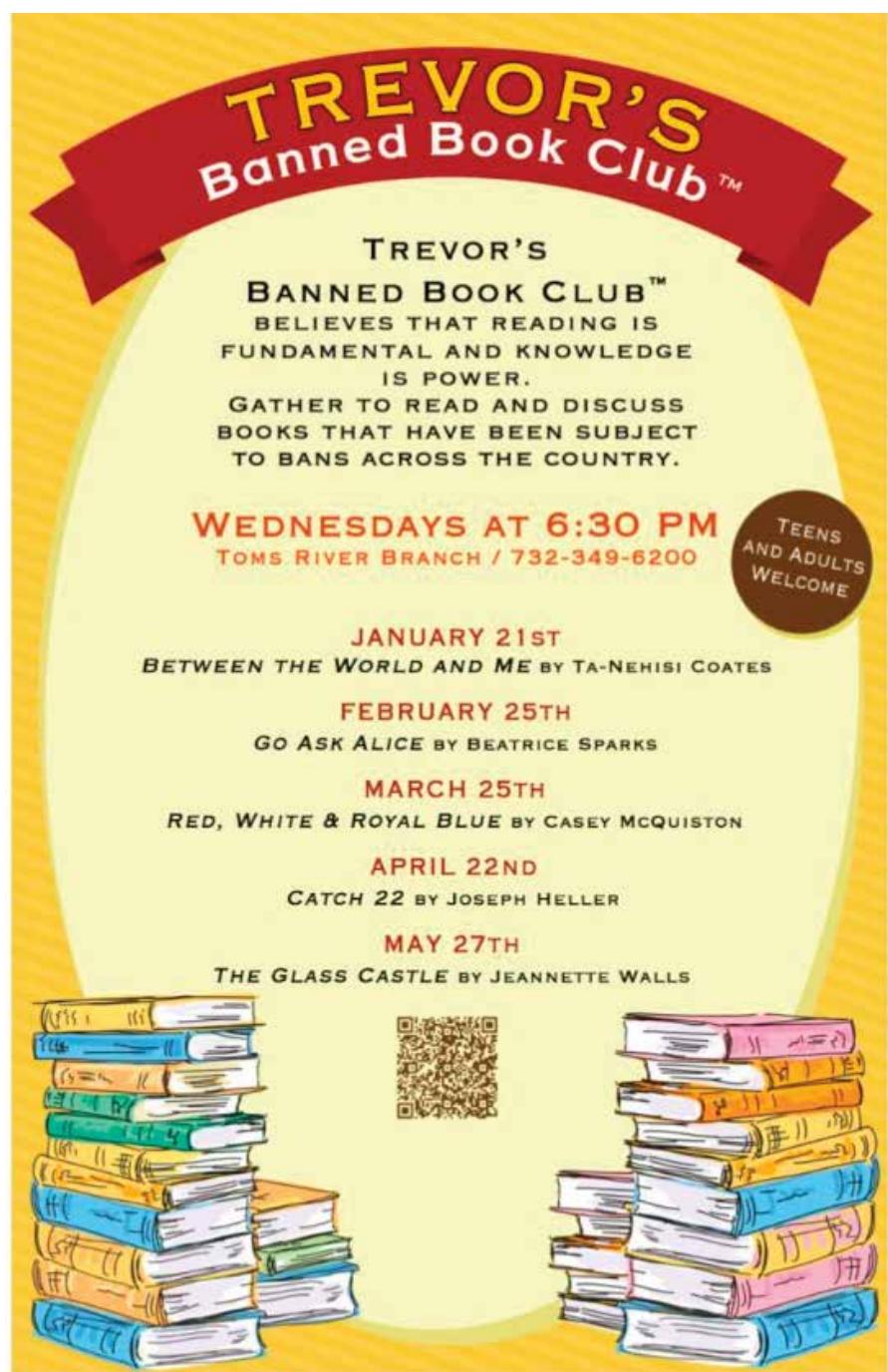
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Archaeology Students

Continued from page 19

used for the ritual washing of bodies. For Konofał, the project has opened access to a world that only lived in vague stories from his childhood. His great-grandmother used to speak about her childhood friend, who was Jewish, and her father, who carried Jews to Sobibor in his cart on German orders. "When I arrived there on the first day, it was something extraordinary – a calm, quiet, almost magical world behind the wall, in the center of a huge city," said Konofał.

Wrzosinski also discovered this world as a student, long before becoming the cemetery's director. Growing up as a secular Jew in Warsaw during the 1980s and '90s, he always knew he had family buried in the cemetery, but he never went there. Without a registry, there was no way to look for graves – and without knowing the Hebrew alphabet, there was no way to read them.

Wrzosinski made his way to studying Hebrew at the University of Warsaw. In 2006, near the end of his degree, he saw a job ad seeking someone to clean and index the cemetery. He began the ongoing endeavor to catalog every gravestone in an online database. So far, Wrzosinski and his colleagues have indexed 82,372 names and inscriptions.

He found pleasure in decoding the language of the stones, where Polish and Jewish life intertwined: Hebrew letters, written in Yiddish to spell Polish surnames. Then, in 2008, he found his great-great-grandfather.

Wrzosinski knew he would eventually see the graves of his ancestors, and he supposed it would be satisfying to know where they were. But the discovery changed him more than he expected.

"When I stepped on that stone and I cleaned it, and I realized that's my ancestor, I felt something stronger, different," said Wrzosinski. "Kind of a sense of belonging to this weird place – just an orphaned stone in a neglected forest, and it's somehow mine. I needed to take a few deep breaths and stop for a moment."



As in many Jewish cemeteries in regions ravaged by the Nazis, most of the cemetery in Warsaw remains in disarray. (Shira Li Bartov)

Now, Wrzosinski has found seven direct relatives to visit in the cemetery. He believes that his great-grandfather lies in one of the mass graves, although he cannot know for certain. Through his database and the efforts of the student archaeologists, he is gratified to watch other visitors experience the same moment of connection that he did.

Even during its long abandonment, the cemetery remained important for many who experienced the loneliness of being Jewish in postwar Poland. Patrycja Dołowy, a writer and artist who formerly headed Warsaw's Jewish Community Center, grew up like Wrzosinski in Warsaw during the 1980s. Being Jewish was mostly an unspoken subject in her family, both publicly and at home.

But she saw the wildly overgrown cemetery as a "secret garden," a refuge for Polish Jews that mirrored the obfuscated memory in their own homes. "Those stones, the matzevot, the names on them were covered by nature, not so visible – a little bit like in our memories, the names of our ancestors, and these gaps in our family histories," said Dołowy.

Dołowy said her community was happy to see the archaeological restoration, of a piece with other efforts to revive Jewish heritage across Poland. She also believes the wildlife that grew over the cemetery is inextricable from its story, even as the trees continue to battle against the graves. "Nature heals what was so difficult, so unimaginable," said Dołowy. "In my opinion, this overgrowth should be an important part of places like cemeteries. But there's always a dilemma, because nature is also destroying the graves."



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"Genius" Dogs

Continued from page 14



This 2023 image provided by Shany Dror shows a Labrador named Augie in Texas. (Don Harvey/Shany Dror via AP)

think their dogs know the names of at least 10 toys to contact her via her website. "We need more genius dogs to continue our research," Dror said.

When asked about how people should pick a dog for a pet, she explained that the most important thing is for "owners to match themselves to their dogs' lifestyle and not try to get the dog to match their lifestyle." While border collies are smart, she said, they are also very energetic and require owners who have the time and energy to care for them properly.

Dror currently has a Schipperke puppy, a small dog breed from Belgium, that she is training. When asked if she thinks this puppy is a GWL dog, Dror said, "I don't know yet, but I hope she is."



Basket, a 7-year-old female border collie, knows the names of over 200 dog toys. (Elle Baumgartel/ Eotvos Lorand University in Hungary via AP)



Dr. Amalia Pinkusfeld Medeiros Bastos, lecturer at the School of Psychology & Neuroscience at the University of St. Andrews. (Courtesy)



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