

Weekend Reads

6.9.23



Forward

Opinion

Why did two LA lawyers tank their careers with antisemitic emails?

By Rob Eshman

The good news about the two high-powered Los Angeles lawyers fired for sending antisemitic messages is they insulted everyone else, too.

John Barber and Jeff Ranen, who in May led more than 120 fellow lawyers out the door of the large international firm Lewis Brisbois to start a rival firm, sent emails and texts attacking gays, women, Asians, Blacks and Jews.

“I forgot to write that we will not hire Jews,” Ranen wrote to Barber in a 2012 email. In other emails, they used the phrase “Jew him down,” and asked why insulting Jews is off limits. Ranen referred to Black protesters as “savages.” Both commonly used the N-word and anti-LGBTQ+ slurs. They called women “sugar tits” and suggested the best way to deal with a female attorney’s overtime request was to “kill her by anal penetration.”

These messages were later discovered and released by Lewis Brisbois as part of an investigation following an employee complaint. As anybody who has read that gobbledegook at the bottom of a lawyer’s email knows, all communications sent via company email are property of the company.

In other words, while the Jewish stuff is hurtful and shocking, Barber and Ranen, on top of being strangely dismissive of employment law, were equal opportunity bigots.

But the question remains: Why? Why would two men at the pinnacle of their profession risk it all to display such wanton and reckless hate?

Because, I believe, Barber and Ranen — who have since resigned — were closeted.

I don’t mean that in the traditional sense, where they are hiding an identity they didn’t want others to discover. I mean that Barber, 55, and Ranen, 45, seem to have deep-down resented sharing power with people who aren’t like them.

Some people are threatened when society’s opportunities open to people who were traditionally kept out or looked down upon. They see the pie as finite, and think they deserve seven slices. So Barber and Ranen formed a little two-person country club, where they could toss off humorless quips and continue to feel powerful and superior.

They may not have cared that company emails aren’t private, but they at least knew that what once was said openly in locker rooms they could now only say in their

private digital version. In public, they told the Los Angeles Business Journal that their new firm, launched in May, would lead with “empathy, collaboration and compassion.” In private, according to the leaked emails, Barber joked Ranen was a “Jew cunt” for bringing bagels to the office.

They billed their venture as the biggest legal startup in U.S. history and showcased diversity, with colleagues including William Sung, past president of the Asian American Pacific Bar Association and Melissa Daugherty, a Jewish American expert on the Americans for Disabilities Act who headed up a seminar on diversity hiring in law.

But even as they hired the best lawyers of all creeds and colors, in private Barber and Ranen’s language seethed with misogyny, antisemitism and resentment. Their constant insults carried a subtext: You can join us, but you’ll never belong.

This attitude echoes throughout our culture. The backlash over Pride month, which for decades has celebrated the LGBTQ+ community and brought it into mainstream culture, has only intensified. Same with the vicious antagonism toward the trans community.

White men like Barber and Ranen may not love seeing queer folk celebrated in West Hollywood, but it’s easy enough for bigots to avoid such enclaves. Now that Target is stocking rainbow onesies, Jews are welcomed as members of every Southern California country club and Blacks are demanding that the statue of Stonewall Jackson in the heart of Virginia be taken down — well, the mainstreaming of minorities can make resentment grow.

It’s “the revolt of the ‘Normies,’” Steven Hayward wrote in the New York Post of the reawakened anti-LGBTQ+ movement, siding with the opponents of what he calls “attempts to mainstream gender fluidity.”

Hayward, a scholar at UC Berkeley’s Institute of Governmental Affairs, claims that he’s all for tolerance, but “the Democratic Party has gone all-in on self-expression.” In other words, feel free to express yourself, as long as we can set the boundaries of your self.

This resentment and revolt is not limited to obnoxious emails among high-priced lawyers or Target protests. Similar feelings are fueling bans on school library books. The rising opposition to what seemed like an inevitable march toward greater acceptance and diversity of ethnicities and identities has targeted books that some parents say bring the wrong values into the mainstream. You know, like books about Anne Frank. And the Bible.

Barber and Ranen, who convinced an ethnically diverse herd of lawyers to join them at their new firm, would never take the side of the trans-bashers or the book-banners, at least not in public. But in private they too feel their “normie-hood” is under attack. They want to join the revolt, but the fact that their livelihood depends on the brains and talents of the very people they disparage makes that impossible.

So, they lashed out in what they arrogantly thought was a protected space, so blindly, and so angrily and so injudiciously, that they were inevitably caught.

Cue the apology.

Forward

“We are ashamed of the words we wrote,” the two attorneys said in a statement, “and we are deeply sorry.” The emails, they said, were “not reflections, in any way, of the contents of our hearts or of our true values,” but one could easily make the opposite case: The things we do and say in private, with the masks off, more accurately reflect what we really feel and believe. Which is it?

Meanwhile, the fate of the firm they founded is unclear. Its website, which was taken down as of Wednesday morning, included this pitch to potential clients: “What truly separates us from the pack is that, at Barber Ranen, identifying and embracing The Why has been a career-long obsession.”

If Barber and Ranen would like to rebuild their reputations and repair their relationships, obsessing over The Why would be a good place to start. Why did they really write those emails? And why are they so threatened by a world which welcomes more and more people who are not just like them?

Smoke-filled skies evoke the Christian apocalypse — but what does Judaism say about the End Times?

By Mira Fox

New York City is looking apocalyptic. Smoke from Canadian wildfires has shrouded the East Coast in a yellowish haze so thick that at various points on Wednesday, the city skyline was almost entirely obscured. The sun was barely visible as a red dot. And it has everyone thinking about the End Times.

Though most people today are referring to a world-ending climate catastrophe when they talk about the apocalypse — which is fair enough — the idea was initially a religious one. The word apocalypse itself comes from Greek, where it was more accurately translated as “revelation,” and Oxford Languages, Google’s dictionary tool, defines the term as “the complete final destruction of the world, as described in the biblical book of Revelation.”

The New Testament book of Revelation has given Western society most of the images we have of the end of the world — the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse; the mark of the beast; Satan’s reign; and, finally, the second coming of Christ, after which life on earth will be over, and people will either reside in heaven or hell. It’s a violent book, filled with war and violence and terror, and its symbols and ideas have colored most popular imaginings of the End Times.

But these elements are all Christian. So what does the Jewish imagination have to say about the end of the world?

In Judaism, there’s no single, comprehensive vision of the end of the world. Instead, many of the prophetic books offer threats of punishment — usually in the form of exile and war — for the Jews after turning away from God.

The Book of Daniel features numerous dream-prophecies about a “time of trouble,” often featuring other, evil empires taking over Jerusalem and turning away from God. Ezekiel tells of the Jews being forced into exile and, among many other violent visions, a war against Gog of Magog, during which God rains down terrors: earthquakes, hail, carrion birds eating the dead, and “sulfurous fire” — which is pretty much what New York City air smells like this week.

Today, most scholars understand the Jewish prophetic books to be speaking to their current conditions — exile from God’s promised land, war and the crushing rule of foreign empires generally looms large. And in the many centuries since the books of Ezekiel and Daniel, Jewish sages have continued to interpret the prophecies to their

lived reality of diaspora. For them, these apocalyptic visions are not some distant future threat, but our current reality. (Feels relatable when you look outside this week!)

If the Jewish apocalyptic vision is already happening, and has been for centuries, however, what's the actual end of days supposed to be like? Thankfully, nothing like the dark yellow skies we've been seeing this week. Instead, after the descriptions of punishments and horror, the prophecies promise a Messianic Age, a time of peace, purification and plenty under the reign of God. (Daniel and Ezekiel both even feature vignettes of raising the dead to enjoy the new prosperity.) The Jewish understanding of the end of days is far more focused on a time of joy and life than a time of death and destruction.

But perhaps it's a thin comfort that the smoldering air is not a sign of God ending the world. After all, climate change proves that we're pretty good at causing our own apocalypse. That means we have to keep living through this dim, smoky landscape — and we have to fix it ourselves.

The church preacher who gave sermons in Yiddish

By Rukhl Schaechter

The notion of church congregants listening to a sermon in Yiddish may sound like something out of a comedy routine. But in 1882, a Jewish man by the name of Joseph Rabinowitz founded a Christian-Jewish sect in the Jewish community of Kishinev, Bessarabia, where he did indeed preach his original gospel in Yiddish.

Born in 1837 in the Bessarabian town of Resina, Rabinowitz's pious Hasidic upbringing gave no hint of his future fascination with Christianity. His mother died when he was a young child so he and his father moved into the home of his maternal grandparents, members of the Hasidic court of the Roshkever Rebbe.

Recognizing young Joseph's keen interest in learning, his grandfather devoted himself to teaching him Torah. At age six, Joseph was able to recite Shir hashirim ("The Song of Songs" by King Solomon) by heart.

"I remember well how in my eighth year I repeated the whole tractate Succoth ... and how the Tzaddik warned my grandfather not to let me become too precocious," Rabinowitz wrote in his autobiography. The Tzaddik, which means the righteous one, referred to his grandfather's rebbe, Yakov Shimshon of Shepetovke.

By 1848, Joseph's grandfather had become too sickly to teach him so the child was brought to live under the care of his widowed paternal grandmother, Rebecca. She was called the rabinerin (the woman rabbi), presumably because she could read the Hebrew prayers, unlike other women who were often illiterate.

While they lived under her roof, Joseph's father paid rabbis to teach his son Talmud. At some point during his teen years Joseph began learning kabbalah and the mystical writings of the Hasidic rebbe Pinchas Koritzer.

Discovering secular literature

In the 1850s, an edict was issued by the czar compelling all Jewish children to learn to speak and read Russian, and all teachers to read Moses Mendelsohn's German translation of the Bible to their pupils. As a result, Rabinowitz — like many of his peers — got swept up by the new ideas of the Haskalah (the Jewish Enlightenment) promoting secular education and Jewish nationalism, and took to reading secular Hebrew literature.

"A new spirit began to stir in me, and new ideas as to the real meaning of the Law and the Prophets served to infuse doubts in my

mind as to the absolute sacro-sanctity of my Hasidic instructors,” Rabinowitz wrote.

Sometime after 1855, a young man named Jechiel Zvi Herschensohn (who would later marry Rabinowitz’s sister) gave him a Hebrew translation of the New Testament, called the *bris khadoshe* in Yiddish, suggesting that perhaps Jesus was the Messiah. Knowing that Herschensohn was well-versed in the Talmud, Rabinowitz read it and hinted in his autobiography that this was a turning point in his thinking.

In 1856, Rabinowitz married a girl from the Bessarabian shtetl of Orgeyev named Golda Goldenburg and moved into his father-in-law’s house as was the custom among Jewish newlyweds. Using part of his wife’s *nadn* (dowry), he opened a small shop but a year later the store burned down in a huge fire that destroyed most of the town.

Urging Jews to become farmers

Several years later he started a business in tea and sugar and in 1871 he moved to Kishinev. At the same time he was becoming increasingly concerned about the poverty and antisemitism Jews were facing daily. “I heard an inner voice saying to me: ‘Leave trade and traffic; it will bring thee no blessing. Be an advisor and an advocate of thy oppressed people, and I will be with thee!’ I obeyed what I felt was a divine call.”

He began working as a Jewish community leader and writing for secular Hebrew newspapers. In 1878, he penned an article, urging his fellow rabbis to sponsor agricultural training for the Jews in order to improve their lot. Together with his sons David and Nathan, Rabinowitz even cultivated his own garden, hoping to serve

as “a practical example” for the Jewish people.

After the bloody pogroms in the Russian Empire in the 1880s, Rabinowitz became disillusioned with a future for Jews in Europe altogether and traveled to Palestine, hoping to start a farming collective there. But the dismal conditions in Jerusalem at that time convinced him that his plan was futile and he returned to Kishinev.

In 1888, George Schodde, a missionary, wrote that while Rabinowitz was in Jerusalem, he began to see Christianity as “the solution” to the Jewish problem. “While smarting under his repeated disappointment and perceiving that Palestine had offered no hope, he finally came to the conclusion that what Israel needed was not material improvements but a moral regeneration, and that this moral regeneration must be the work of that spirit of Jesus,” Schodde wrote.

A synthesis of Judaism and Christianity

Whether Rabinowitz actually had this revelation in Jerusalem or not, he did return to Kishinev with the idea of creating a kind of synthesis of Judaism and Christianity which he believed could help the Jews integrate better into society. Under the influence of a missionary named Faltin, Rabinowitz founded a sect called Israelites of the New Testament.

On Christmas Day, 1884, he opened a prayer house called Bethlehem, where he told his new congregants that they could continue to keep their Jewish names, observe the Sabbath and circumcise their newborn boys, even if the liturgy itself was Christian. His wife, Golde, his brother-in-law and other relatives were among the first to join. Because Yiddish and Hebrew were

familiar to the Jews of Kishinev, Rabinowitz frequently delivered his sermons in Yiddish and led the prayers in Hebrew.

“He used Yiddish because he wanted to reach the poor Jews of Kishinev,” said Steven J. Zipperstein, professor in Jewish culture and history at Stanford University. “All of them knew Yiddish.”

Bethlehem’s Sabbath services immediately attracted large crowds, mostly curiosity-seekers, Jews eager to witness the remarkable sight of a Jew preaching about Jesus in Yiddish, Zipperstein said.

The incongruity of using Yiddish and Hebrew in a church wasn’t lost on C. M. Mead, a Christian missionary, who attended the services. “I take delight in the favor of God upon the distribution of sermons in the language of Russia, in Hebrew, in German and in the Jargon.” Historically, the Yiddish language was often referred to as Jargon (pronounced zhar-GON) — a pejorative term meaning a hodgepodge of languages.

Another missionary called Rabinowitz “a preacher of the gospel in the spirit of Jewish nationality” whose sermons were published in Hebrew, Russian, “and in the jargon called Yiddish, which reached ten thousand copies.”

He refused to give up his Jewish name

The Jewish community of Kishinev was outraged at the establishment of this supposed “church-synagogue” and told czarist government officials about it. Eventually, the government ordered the church shut down. “The Russian authorities were nervous about the rapid rise of Protestant Christianity,” explained Iemima Ploscariu, an expert on 19th century

messianic Jewish leaders. “They saw it as heretical to Russian Orthodoxy.”

This didn’t diminish Rabinowitz’s fervor, though, and sources indicate that he continued holding services privately in his home. In 1885 he converted to Protestantism and published his own prayer book in Hebrew and English.

Interestingly, Rabinowitz never let go of his Jewish identity. Although most Jewish converts to Christianity were expected to adopt a Christian name, Rabinowitz refused to do so. He died of malaria in May 1899.

So what do we make of this complex man? It’s clear that at least part of Rabinowitz’s motivation in creating a culturally Jewish church was his desperate desire to usher in a more promising future for the Jews. While other Jews fought for political equality, he believed that by creating a sect uniting Judaism and Christianity, the Jews would be warmly welcomed by their non-Jewish neighbors.

But he insisted on doing it his way. Right before getting baptized in Berlin in 1885, Rabinowitz told the Christian authorities who were supervising the conversion that he still wanted to be able to tell his followers that they could continue to keep the Sabbath and practice circumcision. Reluctantly, they agreed.

“It was clear that he didn’t want to separate himself from the Jewish community,” Ploscariu said. “He loved his Jewish heritage and wanted to see it valued as it should be — both by converted Jews and Christians.”

It was a pioneering trans library — until the Nazis burned it

By Irene Katz Connelly

Just a few months after Adolf Hitler became Germany's chancellor, pro-Nazi university students celebrated the nascent Third Reich by organizing public book burnings in 34 German towns and cities. These ceremonial destructions of "un-German" texts, often accompanied by parades, concerts and speeches, were carefully documented by Nazi officials and are now symbolic of the country's descent into fascism. Some of the core images associated with the Holocaust show piles of books smoldering in the streets of Berlin, and the new regime's antipathy for Jewish authors like Heinrich Heine and Max Brod is now well-known. But another category of literature that perished in the book burnings — troves of research on sexuality — goes largely unnoticed today.

One of the institutions ransacked by the Nazi student groups that organized the book burnings was the Institute for Sexual Research (Institut für Sexualwissenschaft). Founded by the pioneering sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, the institute was the first medical center devoted to the study of gender and sexuality. At the institute, trans patients received gender-affirming care, activists campaigned for the rights of queer Germans and doctors conducted research on gender-affirming procedures — much of which was lost forever in the book burnings.

Today, the United States is experiencing a moral panic about transgender rights, with attempts in many states to ban gender-affirming care and public expressions of queerness. Meanwhile, book bans are proliferating across American school districts, with activist parents agitating to remove books about marginalized groups and the United States' long history of racism. Suzanne Nossel, the CEO of the free expression organization PEN America, described the book bans as a "relentless crusade to constrict children's freedom to read."

Comparisons between Weimar Germany and the current American political climate are often simplistic. But historic campaigns against transgender people and efforts to limit access to literature can inform us about the implications of such attacks today. Here's an introduction to the Institute for Sexual Research, its radical vision and its tragic demise.

Who was Magnus Hirschfeld?

Born in 1868, Hirschfeld was a gay Jewish doctor, sexologist and activist. At a time when the medical establishment pathologized homosexuality, treating it as evidence of mental illness or moral degeneracy, Hirschfeld argued that queer

people were acting “according to their own nature” and should be respected as such. He coined the phrase “sexual intermediaries” as an umbrella term to describe any person whose gender or sexual identities did not conform to cisgender, heterosexual norms, identifying Socrates, Michelangelo and Shakespeare as famous historical examples. Even more radical in the context of his own era, Hirschfeld also recognized that some people have no fixed identity.

In 1897, Hirschfeld founded the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee, one of the first gay rights organizations. The group adopted the motto “Through science to justice,” reflecting Hirschfeld’s belief that if Germans could be persuaded that homosexuality was a biological trait, they would relinquish their prejudices. He lobbied against “Paragraph 175,” the section of Germany’s legal code that criminalized homosexuality.

Hirschfeld’s concerns were not limited to the rights of gay men. He also gave sex advice to heterosexual couples and argued for wider access to birth control. On lecture tours in America, his wide-ranging expertise earned him the nickname “the Einstein of sex.” He even played a fictional sexologist in the 1919 film *Different From the Others*, about a gay violinist who dies by suicide. The cameo was a testament to his reputation in Berlin’s gay community.

In order to put his ideas into practice, Hirschfeld founded the Institute for Sexual Research in 1919.

What did the Institute for Sexual Research do?

Housed in a gracious Berlin mansion, the Institute for Sexual Research offered medical care and education on issues like venereal disease, pregnancy and fertility. Hirschfeld, who lived in an apartment above the institute, performed the first male-to-female gender-affirming surgeries in 1930.

Hirschfeld also worked to protect his patients from the indignities of life in a hostile society. When some trans women could not find work after surgery, he employed them at the institute. And although his efforts to decriminalize homosexuality were unsuccessful, he procured “transvestite” identity cards for his patients, a stop-gap measure that helped them live openly as women without being arrested.

Besides serving patients, the institute housed offices for feminist activists and a printing press for progressive sexual health journals. The institute regularly hosted lectures and film screenings. Hirschfeld and his colleagues also developed an enormous library of rare texts and notes on gender-affirming surgery.

Why was all this happening in Berlin?

While the most famous and successful gay rights movements occurred in the late 20th century, historians have argued that the first attempts to gain public recognition for queer people took place almost a hundred years earlier in Germany. In 1867, a year before Hirschfeld’s birth, a lawyer contended before a German legal body that the government was punishing queer people for desires that “nature, mysteriously governing and creating, had implanted in them.” In 1869, an Austrian thinker coined the term

“homosexuality” (in German, Homosexualität).

In the early 20th century, Berlin’s queer bar scene was famous enough to earn mentions in tourist guides. The city provided a safe haven for gay people from less hospitable countries. The British writer Christopher Isherwood, who lived in the city from 1929 to 1933 and whose work inspired the musical Cabaret, summarized the city’s vibe succinctly: “Berlin meant boys.” So while Hirschfeld was thinking far ahead of his time, he also worked within one of Europe’s most empowered queer communities.

How did the book burning happen?

In 1933, after Hitler was elected chancellor, the government began to purge cultural institutions of “degenerate” art and the artists who produced it. Third Reich propagandist Joseph Goebbels drew on pro-Nazi student organizations for help in this project. In April, the Nazi German Student Association proposed an “Action Against the Un-German Spirit” that would culminate in a series of book burnings.

Students broke into and occupied the Institute for Sexual Research on May 6. Four days later, they burned its entire library, along with thousands of other “un-German” books. University students accompanied the burnings with torchlight processions.

Hirschfeld, who was working in Paris when the institute was ransacked, learned of the library’s destruction through a newsreel and never returned to Germany. He stayed in Paris until the threat of a Nazi occupation caused him to flee to Nice. En route, he died of a stroke on his 67th birthday.

Why is the name of ‘the most vicious antisemite in the English-speaking world’ still so prominent at Cornell?

By Benjamin Ivry

Aug. 13 will mark the bicentenary of UK educator Goldwin Smith, described by one historian as “perhaps the most vicious antisemite in the English-speaking world.” Cornell University’s Goldwin Smith Hall, housing its College of Arts & Sciences, was named in his honor.

At the end of 2020, the Cornell University Board of Trustees accepted a recommendation by a special task force to rename the honorary Goldwin Smith Professorships, currently held by 14 faculty members in the College of Arts and Sciences.

A university statement admitted that Smith “authored many bigoted essays that put forth antisemitic, anti-feminist, anti-suffrage and anti-coeducation views.”

Indeed, Smith called Jews “parasites” who absorb the “wealth of the community without adding to it” and attributed the “repulsion” they provoked in others to their “preoccupation with money-making,” which made them “enemies of civilization.”

Yet the university stopped short of removing his name from Goldwin Smith Hall which, according to the university statement, would

be “too simple an action.” Instead, they asked a task force to recommend further action.

Goldwin Smith was a wealthy journalist and academic who never produced any original research or historical publications of lasting value. He donated money and books to Cornell, winning affection and prestige, but taught there for only three years. He left in a snit after the university decided to admit female students.

Smith was ardently opposed to women being given the right to vote, or being educated anywhere but in all-female institutions. After leaving Cornell, Smith moved to Canada where some of his family lived, and there spent decades writing vehement Jew-hating articles.

Typical of Smith’s discourse during Russian pogroms was his lengthy justification of good-hearted Russian peasants who murdered, pillaged and raped in Jewish communities. Smith simultaneously down-pedaled the gravity of the carnage, claiming on no reliable evidence that reports were exaggerated.

Smith depicted Jews as a worthless primitive tribe that had better disappear as quickly as possible, either by total assimilation or forced deportation. At length and in detail, Smith trashed the Talmud and Kabbalah as mostly bilge.

Some Canadian politicians took his arguments seriously, and this may have helped advance the Canadian policy of refusing entry to European Jewish refugees, even to a vast depopulated country, condemning them to be murdered by Nazis to fulfill the Canadian government view that in terms of Jews, “none is too many.”

In 1992, historian Gerald Tulchinsky opined that Smith’s “fulminations amounted to nothing less than an outright assault on the right of people to live as Jews in civil society.” As Tulchinsky noted, Smith “challenged the legitimacy of Judaism and the right of the Jewish people to survive as a distinct cultural group in the modern world. This was antisemitism of the most fundamental and dangerous kind.”

Somehow Tulchinsky’s views did not reach Ithaca, New York. In 2009, Canadian religious studies professor Alan Mendelson argued that Smith was “perhaps the most vicious antisemite in the English-speaking world.” Some Cornell graduates finally began to argue that a name change was overdue for Goldwin Smith Hall.

That year, in a review of Mendelson’s research for the Cornell Alumni Magazine, political theorist Isaac Kramnick and Americanist Glenn Altschuler demurred that Smith was “certainly not ‘the most vicious antisemite in the English-speaking world.’” Yet the Cornell professors conceded that he

was “far worse than the ‘genteel’ Jew-haters in turn-of-the-century America and Canada.”

Kramnick and Altschuler reminded readers that the hall had been named in Smith’s honor over a century before, so strong evidence would be needed to justify renaming it. Only in 2020, after race-related consciousness raising occurred on American campuses, did two previously honored Goldwin Smith professors ask to have their names dissociated from the misogynistic antisemite (he hated French Canadians too).

There was precedent at Cornell for snubbing Smith. According to his memoirs, in 1909 at age 86, Smith had hoped to return to campus to lecture, but an expected invitation never materialized; perhaps faculty members had actually read his articles in international periodicals.

Historical opposition to Smith was long visible. In 1881, The New York Times replied to Smith’s attacks on Jewish victims of European pogroms: “It was bad enough to have been persecuted by Kings and abused by German statesmen, but to be pronounced unfit to live, and to have their venerable scriptures danced upon by Mr. Smith, must be the last drop in their cup of humiliation.”

There were refutations in The North American Review, which originally published Smith’s screeds. One in 1891 was from a pseudonymous Isaac Besht Bendavid, who adopted as a middle name the acronym for Baal Shem Tov, the mystic considered to have founded Hasidic Judaism.

Another from the same year was by Hermann Adler HaKohen, chief rabbi of the

British Empire, who likened Smith's opinions to an "ignis fatuus" (will o' the wisp).

A Presbyterian clergyman, George Monro Grant, complained in 1894 about a Smith book applauding pogroms: "The fault is thrown wholly upon the Jews and not upon those who treat them with brutal violence."

Of these retorts to Smith, perhaps the most effective were satirical, like the Pall Mall Gazette which in 1897 referred to Smith as a "bilious philosopher" who believed "how wrong everyone is, and what a very superior person Dr. Goldwin Smith must be."

Even wittier was light verse from 1891, cited by Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, a founder of American Reform Judaism. Rabbi Wise termed Smith a "modern Haman" and "theatrical man of absurd prejudices against the Hebrew race," concluding that "to argue with him would be a waste of time; none can convince him of his fallacies."

Instead, Rabbi Wise cited a "poetical genius" who had concocted a reply in doggerel: "To solve the Jewish question,/ And make the Hebrew pause,/ Smith offers the suggestion,/ 'Suppress his Book of Laws.'"

Humor aside, serious uncomfortable questions might be asked about why Andrew White, Cornell's co-founder, also hired Edward Freeman, another UK historian seen as Smith's main rival in Jew-hating.

Freeman and Smith detested British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli; the former referred to the political leader as "the dirty Jew." Smith was motivated by revenge after Disraeli's 1871 novel *Lothair* spoofed him as a "social parasite." Smith returned the insult

by repeatedly classifying Jews as parasitical, claiming he drew the term from botany.

More lethal implications arose in 2019 when a swastika was found scrawled on Goldwin Smith Hall. The graffitist's gesture was oddly apposite, as Smith's writings had been praised in Nazi Germany in 1942 as "An Anti-Jewish Voice in Victorian England."

Cornell researchers delving into the topic will likely defend Smith for opposing slavery in America. Smith even paradoxically contributed to the building fund of Toronto's Holy Blossom Temple in 1897 and attended the opening of the Reform synagogue, possibly to more easily refute accusations of anti-Semitism.

Such nuances may influence the decision of the Cornell task force. But on Goldwin Smith's bicentenary, to conclude that this Haman's name is worthy to remain on the Arts & Sciences building would surely contravene university ideals.

Rather than fearing decisive "simplicity" (*peshitut*), Cornell authorities might look to Jewish tradition to find contexts where it is essential.

A 13-year-old died by suicide. His mother borrows from a Jewish mourning ritual to save the lives of strangers.

By Hillel Kuttler

HAIFA, Israel — Shortly after her 13-year-old son Shahak's death by suicide, Anat Feldman's family, following a Jewish tradition, began collecting smooth stones to leave at his grave.

Then she began to paint the stones into vividly colorful ladybugs — because Shahak loved The Beatles, and a ladybug is a type of beetle.

At her kitchen table, Feldman has transformed about 100 stones into googly-eyed ladybugs which she, family and friends have left along walking paths and other places where people are likely to pick them up, in Israel and abroad.

On each of the ladybugs' underbellies, she has painted a sun with an "S" at the center, for "Shahak." Its five rays represent each member of the family: the son she lost, his two older brothers and her and her husband Doron.

She also marks the bugs with an Instagram address — @happy.bugs. There, she posts pictures of Shahak, symbols of his passions and messages she writes using a Hebrew font Shahak created from his own handwriting. She hopes these postings raise suicide awareness.

"I wouldn't say it gives meaning to his death, but if we can keep one family from the horror we experienced, that would be important," she said.

Shahak died on Oct. 11, 2021, not long after his bar mitzvah. He was, as Anat put it, 13 years, three months and 13 days old.

Approximately 100 Israelis under age 24 commit suicide annually, and they've been getting younger, said Shiri Daniels, national director of counseling at Eran, an Israeli organization whose acronym stands for Emotional First Aid.

"We're seeing the ages decreasing: 11, 12, 13, 14," Daniels said. "The situation is concerning."

'We didn't see it'

Shahak dreamed of working as a film director. He also loved photography, Star Wars and music, and had taught himself to play drums and guitar. He never made it to his first lesson with the drum teacher he and his parents had met with on a Friday. The following Monday, Shahak visited his maternal grandparents for lunch, then walked to his paternal grandmother's

high-rise apartment building and jumped to his death.

He and a girlfriend had recently broken up, and a mutual friend told him that reconciling would not be possible. His parents said they think that contributed to Shahak's decision to take his life.

"He was unhappy. But to go from that to suicide — no, we didn't see it," said Feldman, a pharmacist like her husband.

She wants the Instagram account to reach people in crisis and those who love them, before it is too late.

She asked in recent posts: "Do you recognize suicide's warning signs?" and "What do you do when you come across a suicide note on-line?"

And she wrote: "Myth: If we speak about suicide, we'll put thoughts into the person's head, and the danger of suicide will increase."

The ladybugs have landed throughout Israel, from the Golan Heights to Eilat, and thousands of miles away, in Canada, Greece, the Netherlands, India, Denmark and Thailand.

Last week, two ladybugs helped Feldman's friend, Merav Arotchas, teach her classes of seventh- and eighth-graders about speaking up when they feel overwhelmed. On a field trip to a Jerusalem-area forest, the teacher had them leave the ladybugs for others to find, and told them that when they struggle, "there's always an adult to approach to ask for help. Someone will always listen."

A woman in Hadera wrote to Feldman in mid-April that the ladybug's bright colors

made her happy, but also shared her agony: "I know the impossible pain up-close, and have experienced it myself many times. What helps me endure is the belief that things will change, and nothing is forever."

The playlist

The Feldmans keep Shahak's memory alive through the ladybugs, and also through the music he loved.

In a bedroom meant for Shahak which he never lived in — he died a week before the family moved to their new home — his parents met with a reporter as Shahak's playlist of Beatles songs sang out from his mother's phone. She plays it often — doing housework or sitting at his desk.

It was hard not to hear echoes of their loss in every song: "In My Life," "Hey Jude," "Golden Slumbers," "A Hard Day's Night," "Yesterday," "All My Loving," "Come Together" and "Help!"

The Feldmans said they don't know if Shahak had a favorite Beatle or Beatles song. His father likes "Let It Be" best. It projects hope, he said.

"In any person's life, and especially in our day-to-day lives," he explained, "optimism is what we're looking for — a ray of optimism in the dark cloud."

Editor's note: This story mentions suicide. If you or someone you know is in crisis or needs support, call or text the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline in the U.S. at 988.

Why did top federation leaders sponsor a conference promoting Israeli settlements?

By Arno Rosenfeld

Two leading mainstream American Jewish groups sponsored a conference Sunday promoting Israeli settlements in the West Bank, contrary to their public positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In a video recorded for the Arutz Sheva Jerusalem Conference in New York City, Eric Fingerhut, president of the Jewish Federations of North America, told attendees that he was “proud” that his organization, which represents more than 140 local federations, was able to sponsor “this important conference.”

“It is critical that we be in deep conversation, relationship and dialogue with each other about all those important issues that we have in common — how we can strengthen each other — and also about issues that occasionally challenge us or divide us,” Fingerhut told attendees at the Arutz Sheva Jerusalem Conference.

Most of the other sponsors were Israeli government ministries or right-wing organizations, although UJA-Federation of New York, the country’s largest local federation, also sponsored the event.

Speakers at the conference included many settlement leaders, and panelists discussed how to promote Jewish sovereignty over East Jerusalem and promote economic development in Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

Malcolm Hoenlein, vice chair of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, also spoke at the conference. The umbrella organization represents most mainstream Jewish groups in the U.S., including liberal stalwarts like the Reform movement.

As a general rule, the Jewish Federations of North America does not fund projects in East Jerusalem or the West Bank because it has historically accepted Israel’s internally recognized borders, which do not include the territory seized in 1967. However, the federation system amended its policy in 2002 so that it could provide humanitarian aid to Israeli victims of terrorism regardless of where they live. That exception has enabled local federations to funnel millions of dollars to settlements over the years, and several years ago the JFNA also changed its rules to allow trips it organizes to Israel to

include Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

A federation spokesperson Sunday suggested some distance between the American groups and the Jerusalem Conference, which was held in New York City and organized by Arutz Sheva, an Israeli media outlet closely affiliated with the right-wing Religious Zionist movement, and featured a host of prominent settlement leaders.

He said that the federations network did not provide any funding or services to the conference, did not ask to be listed as a sponsor and had not seen a copy of the program before agreeing to participate.

Conference protesters

But Fingerhut's address to the conference did not go unnoticed by some American Jews who worry about the Israeli government's rightward turn. "This particular conference was specifically about how to destroy democracy and expand occupation in Israel," said Rabbi Jill Jacobs, chief executive of T'ruah, which represents more than 2,000 liberal rabbis, who joined a protest outside the event. "It was very shocking to see that JFNA and UJA are choosing the side of the fascists."

In a rare rebuke of the Israeli government, Fingerhut led a March delegation to Israel to raise concerns about its proposed judicial overhaul, which many consider anti-democratic, although the organization rarely comments on settlements or Palestinian human rights.

A representative for UJA-Federation of New York, the leading Jewish foundation in New York City, which distributed \$176 million in

grants last year, said that it sponsored the conference in order to help "bridge divides and promote dialogue — all with the goal of promoting the vision of a democratic and Jewish Israel."

The federation system has been plagued by political tensions in recent years. The wealthy donors that the foundations rely on tend to be more conservative than most American Jews, whom the federations claim to represent, on both Israel and domestic political issues. This pressure has sometimes led to paralysis when it comes to weighing in on issues like abortion, and caused the Jewish Federations of North America to spin off the Jewish Council for Public Affairs earlier this year, following the JCPA's support for the Black Lives Matter movement.

Hundreds of demonstrators organized by Unxceptable, the Israeli expatriate group opposed to the country's planned judicial overhaul, gathered outside the Hilton in Manhattan where the Arutz Sheva conference took place Sunday afternoon.

Protesters objected to a keynote panel featuring Simcha Rothman, an Israeli member of Knesset and the architect of proposed changes to the country's judicial system that have sparked months of street protests across Israel.

Hoenlein, with the Conference of Presidents, objected to the demonstrations outside the hotel and those that had taken place earlier Sunday at the Celebrate Israel Parade. "It's a mistake when you bring Israel's domestic political disagreements to the United States," he said. Hoenlein also said it was "not appropriate" for the Biden

administration to have objected to Israel's proposed judicial reforms.

A spokesperson for Hoenlein and the Conference of Presidents, which has said it respects the Israeli street protesters and their "passion for democracy," acknowledged but did not respond to questions about his participation in the conference.

Agenda focused on promoting settlements

Arutz Sheva held its Jerusalem Conference in Israel until last year, when it first hosted the event in New York City. The conference opened with a speech from Meir Porush, the Israeli government minister of Jerusalem and Jewish tradition, who has said that the group of women who hold prayer services at the Western Wall should be "thrown to the dogs" and compared Reform Jews to pigs.

In addition to the federation groups, notable sponsors included several Israeli government ministries, the Orthodox Union, Nefesh B'Nefesh and El Al airlines.

Conferencegoers gathered to learn about promoting Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

"The most important issue is to bring Tel Aviv — to bring the center of Israel to the settlements, to make them really feel that they belong to this area," Na'ama Berg, chief of the Psagot Winery, located in a settlement outside Ramallah, said on a panel about how to expand Jewish industry in the West Bank. "It's hard work and we all do it all day."

Yishai Fleisher, the former spokesperson for Israeli settlers in Hebron, moderated several

panels including the first session, which focused on "sovereignty in East Jerusalem." The panelists began by discussing how to improve education and economic opportunities for Arab residents of the city.

"But what about the jihad? What about jihadism?" Fleisher asked. "Aren't these Arabs — many of whom live in East Jerusalem — going up on the Temple Mount, hearing a lot of stuff that is anti-Israel, how are you going to solve that?"

Uri Yakir, an advisor to the mayor of Jerusalem, said that integrating Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem into Israeli society would help address this. "Basically you want to inculcate different dreams — not just jihadist dreams," Fleisher replied.

It also featured a panel that included Meir Deutsch, director of Regavim, an Israeli nonprofit that seeks to block construction projects by Palestinians and Israeli Arabs.

Yigal Dilmoni, founder of American Friends of Judea and Samaria, delivered a speech toward the end of the conference in which he railed against "fake news" and called on American Jews to support Israeli settlements.

"We continue to build our country. We do it in Tel Aviv, in Jerusalem but also in Hebron, in Beit El, in Shiloh," he said. "Join us, and together we can make Israel great again."

The secret Jewish history of the Belmont Stakes

By Louis Keene

With its mint juleps and fascinator hats, the first leg of the Triple Crown, the Kentucky Derby, embraces the Southern nostalgia many associate with horse racing culture. The last leg — the Belmont Stakes — showcases a different side to the sport.

The Stakes, which will be held on Saturday on Long Island, is sited on land that was farmed in different periods by Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews dating back to the 17th century. And the race was named after a Jewish immigrant, a social climber whose influence on New York transcended the racetrack.

One biography of the man — there are at least two — calls August Belmont “a rakehell and style-setter who transformed the nature of high society and created the era known as the Gilded Age.” Indeed the more you read about him, the more his namesake race seems like cutting room material. Irving Katz’s 1968 biography, *August Belmont: A Political Biography* — upon whose research this article depended on — doesn’t mention horse racing at all.

‘Jew bankers’

August Belmont was born Aaron Schonburg in 1813 to descendants of Jews who escaped to Germany during the Spanish

Inquisition. In his adolescence, Belmont’s parents secured him an apprenticeship with their relatives through marriage, the Rothschilds, and he rapidly ascended the ranks of their banking empire. In 1837, he earned an important assignment: sailing to Cuba by way of New York to check on Rothschild accounts there.

But upon arriving in New York, Belmont discovered that the Cuba accounts had collapsed. Rather than await direction from his employer, he opted to stay there to establish a satellite banking operation on Wall Street. The bank turned a fortune, and within three years, he was the third-wealthiest man in New York. Still in his mid-twenties, he broke off from the Rothschilds and launched a career in politics.

It did not take long for the enterprising Belmont to become a Democratic party kingmaker — or to suffer the antisemitic slander of his political opponents. He served as ambassador to the Netherlands and consul general of the Austrian empire in New York City. He brokered international trade deals and proposed a plan to annex Cuba to President James Buchanan. When he settled down, it was to chair the Democratic National Committee.

All the while, Belmont fought off newspaper accusations of “dual allegiance” to the Rothschilds and using “Jew gold” to undercut American democracy. After he became party chairman, The New York Times wrote, “Yes, the great Democratic party has fallen so low that it has to seek a leader in the agent of foreign Jew bankers.”

Trendsetter

The ethnic hatred didn’t scare him away from New York’s fanciest social affairs, nor exclude him from membership in the high profile Union Club. According to biographer David Black in *The King of Fifth Avenue*, Belmont was the first New Yorker to have a private ballroom, the first to have a private gallery for his art collection, and was responsible for introducing gourmet cooking and French wines to New York. Belmont’s influence spread through high society like a thoroughbred closing down on pole position in the final stretch.

As he achieved social and political power, Belmont was continually dogged by accusations about his character, including persistent rumors that he cheated on his wife with a married woman. This charge drew him into a duel over a lady’s “honor” in 1841, and a gunshot wound sustained in that duel caused him to walk with a limp the rest of his life. The ostentatious, philandering character of Julius Beaufort in Edith Wharton’s 1920 novel *The Age of Innocence* is said to be based on Belmont.

Ever the social influencer, August Belmont’s most enduring legacy would come through his connection with Leonard Jerome, a stock market speculator who (with his pal’s help) poured his wealth into building a racetrack in the Bronx. The inaugural

Belmont Stakes were held at Jerome Park Racetrack in 1867 for a grand prize of \$1,850. The race moved to Belmont Park, which was built by August Belmont, Jr., and opened in 1905. (Today, the Belmont Stakes purse is \$1.5 million.)

The 1.5-mile Belmont Stakes has been won by a Jewish jockey only once — Walter Blum in 1967. But when American Pharoah became the most recent Triple Crown winner in 2015, the horse’s owner was another Jewish immigrant — Ahmed Zayat, an Egyptian American businessman with his own reputation for flamboyance and controversy.



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