

» HAPPY PURIM!

# Jewish Observer of Central New York

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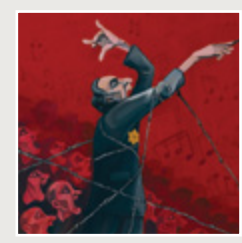
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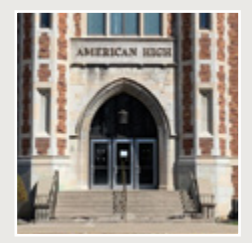
# PURIM 5786



**LOOK:**  
PURIM AND THE  
BLOOD MOON  
( 4 )



**INSIDE:**  
DEFIANT  
REQUIEM  
( 10 )



**DON'T MISS:**  
AMERICAN  
HIGH  
( 16 )

## From the Editor



Barbara Davis

**The story of Esther raises many questions, not the least of which is “How could a nice Jewish girl marry a Persian king?”**

The question gets to the heart of one of the most complex aspects of the Purim story and the answer reveals a lot about how Jewish tradition grapples with difficult situations. Here is what we are taught: *Megillat Esther* describes how young women were collected from across the Persian Empire to replace Queen Vashti, and Esther was among those taken to the king’s harem. The text says “Esther was taken to the king’s palace.” Note the passive voice. According to one Talmudic opinion, Esther was actually already married to her cousin Mordechai, making her marriage to the Persian king not just intermarriage but also adultery. This created serious problems from a Jewish law perspective, since not only was intermarriage with non-Jews prohibited, but adultery was one of the three sins that one should die rather than commit.

Jewish scholars emphasized that Esther’s marriage to the king was not her choice—she was coerced into it, and had she refused, she would likely have been killed, as King Ahasuerus had already done to his wife Vashti. The rabbis viewed Esther as someone compelled to marry against her will, and because of her passivity, her relationship with Ahasuerus was not considered willing participation in forbidden relations. This meant she wasn’t held religiously accountable for what happened under duress.

The situation changed dramatically when Esther later approached the king voluntarily to save the Jewish people. When she said, “I will go to the king, contrary to the law, and if I’m lost, I’m lost,” the rabbis understood this as acknowledgement of her willingness to transgress, since going before the king involved physical intimacy. The 18th-century Rabbi Yechezkel Landau explained that while normally one cannot commit a sin even to save a life, there’s an exception when transgressing to save an entire nation.

Which brings us, more or less, to today. What happens when a nice Jewish girl decides to marry a nice but not Jewish boy? Or when a nice Jewish boy decides to marry a nice but not Jewish girl? It’s not likely that they will have the opportunity to save an entire nation to make their choice halachically acceptable.

The topic of interfaith marriage is an incendiary one in the Jewish community. There are views on the subject that are completely diametric to one another and there are statistics that show that interfaith marriage is a fact of Jewish life that is only growing in scope. So the *JO*, which tries to incorporate edgy but relevant themes in its issues, addresses the topic in this issue, as it ties in so well with our Holiday of the Month.

Judaism does not have a single body that dictates final answers on all controversial topics relying instead on established texts and reasoned debate. So the *JO* seeks only to inform the conversation in Central New York. We felt it appropriate because there is also a Syracuse connection to this issue. Rabbi Ari Yehuda Saks, a third-generation Conservative rabbi and recent scholar in residence at Temple Adath Yeshurun, resigned in August from the Rabbinical Assembly, the international association of Conservative rabbis, to preempt disciplinary action for officiating at interfaith weddings. We also include a review of a book by another recent scholar in residence, Dr. Keren McGinity, who spoke about interfaith marriage at Congregation Beth Sholom-Cheva Shas.

This issue also contains a review of a book by Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, a history-making leader, the first Asian American rabbi and the first female senior rabbi at NYC’s Central Synagogue. Her new memoir *Heart of a Stranger* chronicles her journey from Korean-Buddhist/Jewish-American roots, navigating racism and sexism to find her voice, to teach how feeling like an “outsider” builds empathy and connection to a larger whole. We also include an article about books for children and teens about Jewish interfaith families which we hope will be useful both for their target audiences and for those who love them.

Another theme of this issue is the coincidence of Purim with a total lunar eclipse this year. “Blood moons have a dark and ominous history,” cautioned the *New York Post*. For centuries, people have feared “blood moons” due to ancient superstitions linking the striking red color to impending doom, war, death, or divine wrath, stemming from myths about celestial beings devouring the moon and biblical texts like *The Book of Revelation* and *The Book of Joel*, which prophesy it as an “end times” sign.

As we celebrate Purim this year under the shadow of a lunar eclipse, we are reminded that both the holiday and the phenomenon invite us to look beneath surface appearances. Just as the blood moon challenges us to see beyond a phenomenon to a natural wonder, so too does the Purim story challenge us to see beyond simple narratives. *Megillat Esther*, with all its moral complexity, teaches us that Jewish tradition has always grappled with difficult questions rather than avoiding them. In addressing interfaith marriage and other challenging contemporary issues, we follow that tradition of honest inquiry. The *JO* hopes this issue sparks meaningful conversations in homes, synagogues, and communities across Central New York, because it is through dialogue—not dogma—that we navigate the tensions between tradition and the realities of modern Jewish life. As Esther herself demonstrated, sometimes the most courageous act is to engage with complexity while staying true to our deepest values.

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## MESSAGE FROM MARK SEGEL

### Federation President & CEO



**As I step into our Federation and Foundation office each morning, there is a specific kind of energy that greets me. It isn't just the hum of computers or the steady ring of telephones; it is the palpable vibration of a team in motion.**

Often, our community sees the “what” of the Jewish Federation of Central New York—the vibrant events, the successful campaigns, and the vital allocations to our partner agencies. But today, I want to pull back the curtain on the “how.” I want to talk about the relentless, day-to-day dedication of the professional staff who turn our collective vision into reality.

### The Pulse of the Federation

Our mission is to preserve and enrich Jewish life, but that mission doesn't fulfill itself. It is fueled by a small, lean team of professionals who wear an exhausting number of hats. On any given Tuesday, you might find a staff member pivoting from a complex budgeting meeting to coordinating a logistics plan for an upcoming community-wide celebration, only to pause and assist a community member in crisis.

There is no such thing as “quiet time” in our office. Our staff members are the architects of our community's infrastructure. They are:

- **Navigators:** Helping families find the right educational or social services.
- **Strategists:** Working late into the evening to ensure our fundraising efforts reach the goals necessary to support our local and global beneficiaries.
- **Bridge-Builders:** Maintaining the critical relationships with local government, law enforcement, and interfaith partners that keep our community safe and connected.

### Beyond the Job Description

What strikes me most is the “extra mile” that has become our team's standard operating procedure. Our staff doesn't just clock in and out; they carry the weight of the community's needs home with them. When a crisis hits—whether it's a security concern or a sudden spike in need for social services—this team doesn't ask whose job it is. They simply show up.

They are the engine room of the Jewish Federation and Foundation. And like any high-performance engine running at maximum capacity, we must ensure it is well-maintained, fueled, and built for the long haul.

### Investing in Our Greatest Asset

We often talk about “investing in the future of Jewish life.” Usually, we think of that in terms of endowments or physical buildings. However, I believe the most strategic investment we can make is in our human capital.

The challenges facing the Jewish world today are evolving rapidly. From the rise of antisemitism to the changing landscape of Jewish engagement, we need a staff that is not only hardworking but also highly trained, competitively compensated, and supported by modern resources.

It should also be noted that, just in the last few months, we've filled the positions of two 25-year plus team members who have retired in addition to the relatively recent additions of our Executive Administrator, Emma Sheedy, and me to the team. Another new hire and some reorganization was in the works at the time this column was written. I see these as challenging, but very positive changes!

By investing in our staff—through professional development, competitive retention, and the tools they need to succeed—we aren't just “paying overhead.” We are ensuring that the Federation and Foundation remain agile and effective for the next generation. A supported staff is a creative staff; a secure staff is a visionary staff.

### Looking Ahead

Our community is only as strong as the hands that hold it together. When you support the Jewish Federation of Central New York and the Jewish Community Foundation of Central New York, you are supporting a group of individuals who have made it their life's work to ensure that “Jewish” is a verb—an active, living, breathing reality in CNY.

I am immensely proud of the work being done by our organizations. I see the fatigue, yes, but I also see the fire in their eyes. They believe in this community. They believe in you. And I believe that by standing behind them, we are guaranteeing a future that is not just sustainable, but thriving.

I'll be profiling individual members of our team over the months ahead. Thank you for being our partners in this sacred work.

## “See Something, Say Something” in our Jewish Communities

*by Bill Bronner, Director of Community Security*

**In our Central New York communities, the message “See Something, Say Something” resonates deeply as an essential part of ensuring safety, unity, and vigilance. Rooted in a shared commitment to protect one another, this simple phrase encourages individuals to remain aware of their surroundings and report suspicious activity to the proper authorities. It reflects the understanding that community safety is not solely the responsibility of law enforcement, but a collective effort grounded in mutual care and trust.**

For many families in our neighborhoods, community centers, synagogues and schools are not just places of worship and learning; they are the heart of everyday life. Ensuring these spaces remain safe is a priority for religious leaders, families, and local partners. “See Something, Say Something” reinforces a culture of attentiveness. Unusual or concerning behavior—whether it's an unfamiliar person loitering near a school, a vehicle parked for an extended period without clear purpose, or overheard comments that raise alarm—can and should be reported without hesitation. Throughout my 30+ years in law enforcement, I have seen this program work time and time again.

The phrase also underscores the importance of informed, respectful action. Community members are encouraged to be alert while avoiding assumptions based on appearance or background. Training sessions and informational events, often hosted by community security groups in collaboration with local police, provide guidance on what kinds of observations merit reporting and how to do so effectively. These efforts help to empower residents, students, and leaders with practical skills for recognizing red flags and acting responsibly. It promotes not fear, but preparedness.

### How to Report:

**In an immediate emergency or if a crime is in progress, call 9-1-1. For non-emergency suspicious activity, report your observations to your local law enforcement agency, the NYS Terrorism tip line at 1-888-SAFE NYS (1-866-723-3697) or me (Bill Bronner), at [bbronner@jewishfederationcny.org](mailto:bbronner@jewishfederationcny.org). You can also use the internet to submit information. One site that can be used is: <https://www.dhses.ny.gov/form/terrorism-tips-online-submission>.**

# Hidden in Plain Sight: On the Tradition of the Purim Mask

by Rabbi Dr. Natan Levy, Campus Rabbi, Syracuse Hillel

## Why do Jews wear masks on Purim?

**First answer:** To become like Esther. Whose real name was Haddasah (Megilla 2:7). Who was told by her Uncle Mordechai, “Tell no one who you are!” She masked her secret-self behind a new name, Esther, from the Hebrew root-word (S-T-R) to hide. Yet, in order to unmask the arch antisemite, Haman, she reveals her Jewish heritage and shouts out in the Emperor’s palace, “Give me my life as my entreaty, my people as my plea,” (Meg. 7:3). So we hide our faces in memory of she who had to hide her Judaism.



**Second answer:** We wear masks to blur the lines between the cursed Haman, and the blessed Mordechai. Our constructs become our masquerades which become our constructs yet again, in this hall of mirrors. Masks poke fun at our identity politics; Are we sure we are the good guys? Are we convinced you are the villains? Purim is our annual dose of cognitive dissonance, lubricated by alcohol and a lovely boost of oxytocin and dopamine triggered by acts of sharing with our neighbors and our poor.

**Our third answer begins with a story:** The rabbinical sages had second thoughts about including the Scroll of Esther in the Hebrew Bible because God never appears in the text. What a shanda! The whole megillah without a single mention of God, may his Holy Name be blessed, not even a cameo shout-out. Then the rabbis found a verse from the Torah itself that, they believed, was umbilically attached to the Scroll of Esther. A verse of imprecation from the 31st chapter of Devarim (Deuteronomy). God warns Moses that the Israelites will stray and God will hide his face on that day. The Hebrew root-word for hiding (S-T-R) re-appears. Twice God intones



that he will hide his face from Israel. The Purim story is commentary on these verses of divine masking (called Hester Panim in Hebrew). We wear our masks on Purim to reflect our God who hides within the narrative.

In the Torah, God warns twice that he will hide his face. Now, if someone warns you twice in a row that they will hide themselves from you, what do you think they really want from you? To be found! So too when God tells Moses he will surely hide away. God is beseeching each of us to seek his face through the mask of this world. Hester Panim isn’t a curse, it’s an invitation.



When I wear a mask, my children laugh. They know that under the gray Golem clay, or (see Talmud Megilla 13a where Esther is green of complexion) the green make-up, under all these layers, they will find their Abba. We wear masks to emulate God, hoping others will find us, someone will see us, even when we hide. And we wear masks to shift our framing, turning curses to blessings, blending Hamans into Mordechais. And we wear masks to recall Esther, and her bravery. Who stood up at court and began: “As a Jew...” not to disparage her people, but to unmask tyrants and killers. We wear masks to remember we inhabit a masked world and, like our children, laugh through all these layers, seeking out the Divine.

# Heart Of A Stranger, An Unlikely Rabbi’s Story of Faith, Identity, and Belonging

by Angela Buchdahl

Reviewed by Rabbi Vicki Liebrman

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl is, as her title says, an unlikely person to have become a rabbi. Yet her services at Central Synagogue are nearly viral. She has been featured on national news sources, bestowed blessings at the White House, and was called upon to talk down an active shooter at a synagogue. Her writing this memoir and choosing to pull back the curtain to bravely tell of the hardships, questioning, and inhospitality she endured to fulfill her dream of becoming a rabbi, is a gift.

Many of her experiences from infancy in Korea to childhood in Wisconsin, to teen summer programs in Israel, and Jewish summer camp experiences, are fraught with the many times she was made to feel like an outsider, a stranger. Raised Jewish by her Jewish father and Buddhist mother, she was often lonely, questioned, and scrutinized. It was “destabilizing and soul-crushing ...to be told you are not who you truly believe yourself to be.” Some of her experiences might echo in our own lives: If ever there was a time, you did not feel fully welcomed in a Jewish setting because ... you did not know a custom or a prayer, or you are a woman, LBGQTQ+, or your skin tone differs from others in the room, or you are “mixed-race.”

In a compelling and unique format, Buchdahl ends each chapter with a lesson in musar—ethical teachings from traditional Jewish texts. She shares vignettes from her life, painful and joyful, intimidating and inspiring. She puts them in the perspective of Jewish study and texts. She models for us how Jewish learning can inform our decisions and shape our narrative. She never takes lightly the enormous cost Jews have collectively paid by not welcoming the stranger.

Buchdahl’s challenges fortified her to continue on the path of becoming a rabbi. For her sister Gina, it had the opposite effect. In a heartbreaking story, Buchdahl recalls that Gina was asked to change the Hebrew words for God in the Havdalah service she was leading at the last Shabbat as a Bronfman Fellow. The word change, would, in their opinion, render the prayer invalid and they would say the correct words under their breath and thus validate the prayer. Gina had



not known she was tricked into her own duplicity. Buchdahl quotes Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel: “There are those who are willing to break a din (Jewish law) to save a Yid (Jewish person) and there are those that are willing to break a Yid to save a din. Those [Jews] broke a Jew that night.” From this, we should all take a beat.

In successive chapters, Buchdahl tackles many topics including her unlikely ascent from cantor to senior rabbi of Central Synagogue and her leadership during the pandemic. She addresses the classic question of whether a woman can have a career and a family. She writes about the post-October 7th world with its increased antisemitism. She informs us about the process of handling the controversy of singing the music of an artist (Rabbi Shlomo Carlbach) who had been accused of grievous sins.

Rabbi Buchdahl’s path to the rabbinate felt shaky at times. Her faith grounded her. Jewish music inspired her. She knew since her Bat Mitzvah that she was “tethered to...inheritance...to four thousand years stretching back to Sinai.”

We can make the path smoother if we live “knowing the heart of the stranger and the force of Jewish memory is an ever-present caution against superiority, bigotry or indifference.”

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# Purim 5786 and the Blood Moon



**On March 3, 2026, a total lunar eclipse—known as a “blood moon”—will occur on the Jewish holiday of Purim. This rare convergence of astronomical phenomenon and sacred time has captured the attention of Jewish communities around the world. The alignment is striking: a dramatic celestial event coinciding with a holiday that commemorates one of the most dramatic episodes of Jewish survival.**

*Megillat Esther* tells the story of the Jewish people in ancient Persia during the reign of King Ahasuerus. Under the threat of annihilation orchestrated by Haman, the king’s chief minister, the Jews faced destruction scheduled by lots (*purim*) cast to determine the date of their doom across the empire’s 127 provinces. Salvation came through the bravery of Queen Esther and the insight of her cousin Mordechai. Esther, hiding her Jewish identity upon becoming queen, risked her life to approach the king uninvited and reveal Haman’s plot. Her courageous intervention reversed the decree, led to Haman’s execution on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordechai, and established Purim as an eternal commemoration of deliverance.

Because of this history, Purim is considered the most joyous holiday on the Jewish calendar, marked by costumes, celebration, and even religiously sanctioned inebriation. Yet beyond festivity, Purim carries profound themes. Hidden Providence is central in the Book of Esther, the only biblical text in which God’s name never appears, even as divine guidance permeates the narrative, echoing the experience of Jewish life in exile where God’s presence may be obscured but still active. Reversal of fortune, encapsulated in the phrase *v’nahafoch hu* (“and it was reversed”), underscores how impending tragedy transformed into celebration. And Jewish identity and pride emerge through

Esther’s choice to reveal her Jewishness despite grave risks, offering a timeless model for standing with one’s people.

The appearance of a lunar eclipse on Purim invites reflection through the lens of Jewish tradition. The Talmud’s primary teaching on eclipses in Tractate Sukkah 29a states: “Our Rabbis taught: When the sun is in eclipse, it is a bad omen for the entire world. When the moon is in eclipse, it is a bad omen for Israel, since Israel reckons by the moon and [the nations] by the sun... But when Israel fulfills the will of the Omnipresent, they need have no fear of all these [omens].” While acknowledging eclipses as potentially ominous, the passage concludes with a vital reassurance: righteous behavior nullifies negative implications. As *Jeremiah 10:2* instructs, “Do not be frightened by the signs of the heavens.” The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, expanded this perspective, teaching that eclipses should inspire increased prayer and introspection rather than celebration. He ruled that no blessing be recited over an eclipse; instead such an event requires spiritual rectification.

Blood moons have coincided with other significant Jewish events: a tetrad of blood moons in 1493–1494 followed the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492; another tetrad appeared in 1949–1950 after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948; blood moons also coincided with the

Six-Day War of 1967, when Israel regained control of Jerusalem. These patterns add complexity to contemporary reflections on the 2026 eclipse. The March 3, 2026 blood moon is the third in a sequence of eclipses recently occurring around major Jewish dates: a blood moon on Purim on March 14, 2025 and another on September 7, 2025, two weeks before Rosh Hashanah. This third eclipse will be visible from Asia to parts of North America and will last nearly an hour.

The significance of a blood moon falling on Purim invites further contemplation. The Purim story itself is set in Persia—modern-day Iran—where geopolitical tensions remain a central concern for world Jewry, echoing ancient threats. Themes of deliverance embedded in the holiday resonate powerfully when paired with a dramatic celestial event, serving as reminders of vulnerability, resilience, and divine protection. The timing may also function as a call to action: just as Esther requested communal fasting and prayer before approaching the king, the eclipse on Purim can be seen as an invitation to spiritual introspection and renewed unity. This includes increased prayer, emphasizing Purim’s *mitzvot* of charity and kindness, strengthening communal solidarity, and deepening personal and collective reflection.

The Talmud teaches and the Purim story affirms that when the Jewish people act with righteousness and compassion, omens need not be feared and the blood moon is not a portent of danger but a celestial symbol of the covenant between God and Israel.

## Purim on TikTok

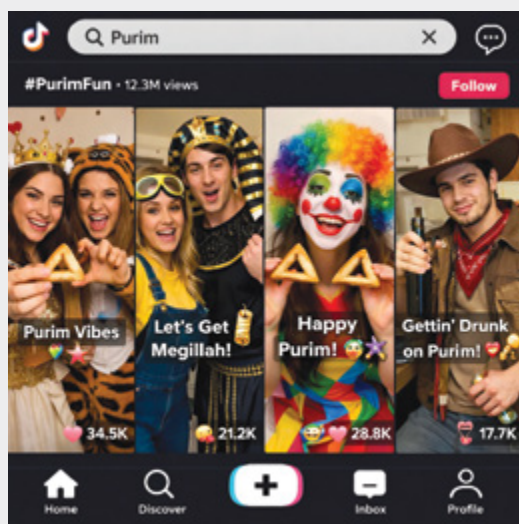
**Purim has found a vibrant digital home on TikTok, where the Jewish holiday is being celebrated, explained, and shared with millions of viewers through creative content that ranges from costume reveals to cultural education. The platform has become a key space for younger generations to engage with Jewish traditions, with over 60% of TikTok users under 18 discovering the holiday through viral videos and community creators.**

The most prominent aspect of Purim on TikTok centers around costumes, with the platform treating the holiday as a showcase of creativity and tradition. Videos tagged with #purim and #purimcostume accumulate millions of views, featuring everything from elaborate family-coordinated outfits to individual costume transitions. Creators walk viewers through Brooklyn neighborhoods like Crown Heights and Williamsburg, documenting the street celebrations where community members dress in vibrant, creative attire. The costume aspect has generated substantial engagement, with users sharing shopping trips to Party City, costume hauls from retailers like Shein, and rating videos that judge the best outfits from cities like Tel Aviv.

Popular TikTok creators have built significant followings by making these celebrations accessible. Street interviews asking “What are you dressed up as?” have become a recurring content format, giving viewers an intimate look at how different Jewish communities celebrate. The visual spectacle of Purim costumes translates particularly well to TikTok’s short-form video format, with creators using transitions, music, and creative editing to showcase their outfits.

Beyond the festive imagery, TikTok has become an educational platform where Jewish creators explain the deeper meaning of Purim traditions. Content creators address common misconceptions, particularly the comparison to Halloween. One follower asks: “Is this like Halloween but for Jewish people?” and Orthodox influencers take time to explain the holiday’s historical significance, rooted in the biblical story of Esther.

Creators explain that costumes represent the theme of hidden miracles



and concealed identities central to the Purim story. Videos detail traditions like eating hamantaschen, giving mishloach manot and reading the Megillah. This educational content serves both Jewish viewers seeking to connect with their heritage and non-Jewish audiences curious about the holiday.

TikTok's Purim content emphasizes the communal joy of the holiday. Videos showcase DJ dance parties in Williamsburg's Hasidic neighborhoods, family celebration reveals, and the close-knit bonds within Jewish communities. One user commented, "Honestly, I love the close-knit bonds in the Jewish community... I'm JEALOUS!" The platform captures the energy of public celebrations, with creators documenting the vibrant street scenes, music, and collective spirit that define Purim in major Jewish population centers. Influential creators like Miriam Ezagui, who has grown her following to over 2 million, use Purim as an opportunity to share Orthodox Jewish life with wider audiences. Their content provides insight into modest dress traditions, family celebrations, and religious observances, making the holiday accessible while maintaining its cultural authenticity.

The visual and participatory nature of Purim makes it particularly well-suited to TikTok's format, where costume reveals, dance parties, and cultural storytelling thrive. As Jewish creators continue to build communities on the platform, Purim content serves as both celebration and education, helping the holiday reach audiences far beyond traditional Jewish communities while maintaining its deep cultural and religious roots.

Following are links to TikTok Purim celebrations in Israel, the UK and Williamsburg, Brooklyn:

**Purim 2024 Celebrations in Israel - Street celebrations and costume parties.**

[https://www.tiktok.com/@captain\\_transitions/video/7349829633552043265](https://www.tiktok.com/@captain_transitions/video/7349829633552043265)

**London (Stamford Hill) showing Orthodox Jewish Purim celebrations in North London.**

<https://www.tiktok.com/@londonnewsandtravel/video/7481707237635935510>

**Purim 2025 in Williamsburg Discovery Page - videos from Williamsburg celebrations including DJ parties, street interviews, and costume content.**

<https://www.tiktok.com/discover/purim-2025-in-williamsburg>

**Purim is a topsy-turvy holiday of ambiguity, contradictions, ambivalence, paradox and vengefulness. It is disorienting, unsettling, troubling, carnivalesque, bacchanalian and disquieting. And thus lends itself to frivolity, replete with masks and costumes.**

Purim commemorates the Jews' deliverance from genocide in ancient Persia but the celebration involves elements that sit uneasily with Jewish ethics—most notably the killing of 75,000 Persians (including the hanging of Haman's ten sons) and the command to "blot out Amalek," which has occasionally been weaponized to justify violence against perceived enemies.

Purim is the one holiday where one is supposed to get so drunk as to be unable to distinguish the story's hero from the villain, dress in costumes, boo and hiss loudly in synagogue, and generally act raucous, in stark contrast to the solemnity of most Jewish observances. This creates discomfort for some who see it as trivializing serious themes of antisemitism and survival.

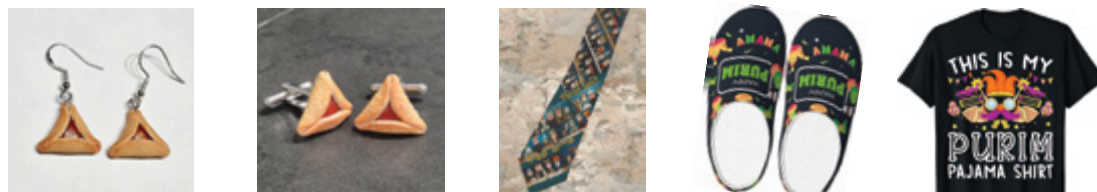
Additionally, Esther's story of a Jewish woman in the Persian king's harem, her concealment of her identity, and the palace intrigue that saves her people raises ongoing questions about assimilation and feminism. Is Esther empowered or objectified? Is she a feminist icon or a beauty pageant contestant? Should Jews hide their identity or flaunt it? Is political scheming admirable or sketchy? Purim is a holiday that asks Jews to party hard while contemplating some genuinely thorny questions, which in a way encapsulates something essential about Jewish tradition: its comfort with complexity.

"What do duct tape and Queen Esther have in common?" asks Kar-Ben Publishing, answering, "Both are strong, flexible and can withstand very challenging circumstances." before introducing its book *Duct Tape Purim* which provides instructions for making fun costumes and accessories from royal bracelets for Vashti to Haman's hat and a horse for Mordechai out of duct tape.

Another Purim riddle asks, "What was Queen Esther's dress made of?" to which the answer is: "Poly-ester." No wonder God is missing from *Megillat Esther*. Purim merch also reaches for the humorous. Shirts to wear for the holiday include the following:



Accessories may include hamantaschen earrings or cufflinks or a Purim tie, slippers or pajamas.



Properly outfitted, one can now attend one of the Central New York Jewish community's Purim celebrations. Top of the list, of course, is the JCC Purim Carnival, with fun, food and merriment for all ages, which has been a highlight of the community's observance for many decades. This year, the community's synagogues have gone all out to create unique contemporary observances of Purim. After weeks of online voting, **Temple Adath**



**Yeshurun** announced that its 2026 Purim celebration to be **GOLDEN: AK-Pop Demon Hunters Spiel**, inspired by one of Netflix's biggest hits, *K-Pop Demon Hunters*. The silly, high-energy spiel is designed to entertain young and old alike and features five songs from the hit soundtrack: "Golden," "What It Sounds Like," "How It's Done," "Soda Pop," and "Your Idol." The TAY Purim Spiel performance will take place on Monday, March 2 at 6:30 pm. **Temple Concord** is planning *Megillah Madness*, a game show and trivia-themed event, to be held on Monday, March 2, from 5:30-8 pm at 450 Kimber Road. **Congregation Beth Sholom-Chevra Shas** will celebrate with a 1920s speakeasy-themed Purim and Shaarei Torah Orthodox Congregation of Syracuse is planning. Fulfilling the mitzvah of *kriat megillah* is sure to be a delight at all of these programs.

# Jewish Denominations and Interfaith Marriage

The four major branches of American Judaism have adopted strikingly different approaches to interfaith marriage, creating a spectrum of policies from absolute prohibition to full embrace. These denominational differences correspond with dramatically divergent intermarriage rates, raising questions about the role of religious policy in shaping marriage patterns and the long-term composition of American Jewish communities.

Orthodox Judaism maintains the strictest position, adhering to traditional Jewish law that prohibits marriage between Jews and non-Jews. Orthodox rabbis do not officiate at interfaith weddings, and such unions are considered religiously invalid. Intermarriage rates among Orthodox Jews stand at just 2%, meaning 98% marry other Jews. This near-universal endogamy is sustained through rabbinical prohibition, strong community cohesion, distinct cultural practices, and robust in-group marriage norms embedded within a broader commitment to halakic observance.

Conservative Judaism occupies a complicated middle ground. The movement officially prohibits its rabbis from officiating at interfaith weddings, a policy reaffirmed in 2024. However,

the same report called on Conservative communities to be more welcoming toward interfaith families, revealing internal tension. While leadership maintains traditional boundaries at the wedding ceremony, the denomination works to embrace interfaith families at every other stage. This balancing act reflects a painful reality: despite the formal ban, 27% of Conservative Jewish marriages are interfaith, and some Conservative rabbis have begun officiating at such weddings in defiance of movement policy.

Reform Judaism allows its rabbis to officiate at interfaith marriages, and 84% of Reform rabbis perform such ceremonies. Most will not co-officiate with clergy from other faiths, and many require couples to commit to maintaining a Jewish household



and raising children as Jewish. This reflects Reform Judaism's philosophy of adapting practice to contemporary realities while maintaining Jewish continuity. The movement views interfaith families as potential contributors rather than threats.

Among Reform Jews, 50% of marriages are interfaith.

Reconstructionist Judaism has adopted the most liberal position, with 88% of Reconstructionist rabbis officiating at interfaith weddings. The movement's

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seminary was the first to allow rabbinical students to have non-Jewish partners. Reconstructionism views interfaith families as opportunities to welcome new people into Jewish life, consistent with its emphasis on Judaism as an evolving civilization.

The correlation between denominational policy and intermarriage rates creates a clear pattern: Orthodox Jews marry within the faith 98% of the time, Conservative Jews 73%, Reform Jews 50%, and non-denominational Jews just 31%. These figures suggest religious restrictions have strong associations with marriage patterns, though causation is complex.

However, denominational breakdowns tell only part of the story. Approximately 30% of American Jews do not identify with any denomination, making them the second-largest group after Reform Jews (35%). Among non-Orthodox Jews as a whole, the intermarriage rate stands at 71%. Among all Jews who married since 2010, the overall rate is 61%, but excluding Orthodox Jews raises it to 72%.

The historical trajectory reveals dramatic transformation. Among Jews who married before 1980, only 18% married non-Jews. For those who married in 2005 or later, 58% have non-Jewish spouses. For non-Orthodox Jews who married since 2010, the rate reaches 72%. Intermarriage has become the majority experience for non-Orthodox American Jews in the 21st century.

The data reveals a powerful intergenerational effect. Among married Jews who themselves had only one Jewish parent, 83% are married to non-Jewish spouses, compared to 37% among those with two Jewish parents. This suggests intermarriage creates conditions for further intermarriage across generations. Among Jewish adults with only one Jewish parent, nearly three-

quarters identify as nondenominational, indicating intermarriage is eroding denominational affiliation itself, creating a self-reinforcing cycle.

Jewish continuity in interfaith families is nuanced. Approximately two-thirds of intermarried couples are raising children with some Jewish identity. Among these families, 28% are raising children with Jewish religious identity, while 29% raise them as secular Jews. Another 12% provide partial Jewish identity, often combined with another tradition. However, in some communities, 42% of interfaith families report raising children “Jewish and something else,” compared to only 28% raising them as “Jewish only.” Among children in intermarried homes, 63% were being raised Jewish, 4% as Christian, 19% in two religions, 9% divided between siblings, and 5% in neither religion.

The contrast with families where both parents are Jewish is dramatic. Nearly all children of two Jewish parents—93%—are being raised with Jewish religious identity, compared to only 28% of children from intermarried families. From Baby Boomers to Millennials, children of in-married parents maintained stable Jewish religious identification rates (88% to 85%), while children of intermarried parents showed 47-49% identifying as Jewish by religion. When both parents are Jewish, identity transmission is highly effective—about nine out of ten children maintain Jewish religious identity into adulthood.

These statistics complicate assumptions that children of intermarriage would be lost to Judaism. They suggest transformation in what Jewish identity means. Many children of interfaith families maintain Jewish connections, but their Judaism may be more fluid, less denominationally defined, and more likely to coexist with other identities. This poses both challenges and opportunities for Jewish institutions

deciding whether to define continuity narrowly or embrace diverse forms of Jewish engagement.

The divergent approaches reflect deeper differences about Jewish identity, community boundaries, and survival strategies in an open society. Orthodox Judaism’s near-total success demonstrates that comprehensive religious and social systems can maintain distinct boundaries. The liberal movements’ higher rates may represent not failure but a different vision—one prioritizing choice, inclusion, and creating Jewish homes even when only one partner was born Jewish.

Demographic projections suggest that over the next 50 years, the share of American Jews who are Orthodox will rise from 12% to 29%, with their portion of the child population increasing from 22% to 51%. This is driven by Orthodox fertility rates of six to seven children per woman, compared to near-replacement rates among non-Orthodox Jews. Among Reform and Conservative Jews, the number of 30- to 69-year-olds is projected to drop by approximately 46%. The result will be a fundamentally bifurcated community: a growing, youthful Orthodox

population with high fertility and strong identity transmission alongside an aging, declining non-Orthodox population facing challenges of intermarriage, lower fertility, and diminishing engagement.

The intergenerational effect—where children of intermarried parents themselves intermarry at rates exceeding 80%—suggests current patterns will accelerate. Each generation of intermarriage produces conditions for more in the next, creating momentum denominational policies alone cannot reverse. Yet the resilience of identity transmission in families where both parents are Jewish, combined with Orthodox demographic growth, suggests reports of Jewish disappearance are premature. American Judaism appears to be evolving into two distinct communities: one defined by strict observance, high fertility, and nearly complete endogamy, and another by religious diversity, cultural connection, and widespread intermarriage. The question is not whether American Judaism will survive, but what forms that survival will take and whether these diverging communities will continue to recognize each other as part of the same people.

# Still Jewish: A History of Women and Intermarriage in America

by Keren R. McGinity

Reviewed by Karen B. Morton

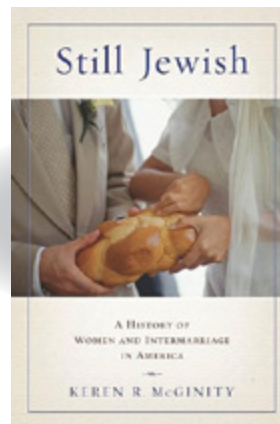
Four decades ago, my then young son's "Hebrew" School teacher began a lesson on Jewish lineage. Carefully constructing his family tree, my son asked the teacher where to place his non-Jewish father on the page. Without hesitation, she instructed him to "just leave him out." Hearing this from my son made me question my children's place in "Hebrew" School. We had not "left [his father] out" but learned from this experience that even in the very world to which I believed we'd "belonged," I would be the one to teach my children that their father mattered. As a young single parent, I could not have imagined that my response would reflect a national trend to raise as Jews the children of Jewish women who chose non-Jewish partners.



Keren McGinity's 2009 book, *Still Jewish: A History of Women and Intermarriage in America*, is a research-based, academically presented, historical study of 100 years of trends influencing American Jewish women who intermarried and the impact intermarriage had on their individual Jewish identities and on American Jewry more broadly. Citing Jewish continuity as the primary concern of the organized American Jewish community (and the fate of Israel as the next highest priority), McGinity confronts two widely-held beliefs about intermarriage—that markedly increasing intermarriage rates have caused the Jewish birth rate to decline and that children of intermarriage are "lost" to other religions, both threatening Jewish continuity.

McGinity interviewed 43 women from three different time periods and political eras. She identifies how social, political, and economic factors influenced Jewish women to make increasingly independent personal choices, both within and outside their marriages. Dividing the century into three distinct periods, 1900 to 1930, 1931 to 1960, and 1961 to 2004, her research explores three overarching questions: 1) "What did intermarriage mean to and for women who were Jewish at the time they married Gentile men? 2) In what ways did Jewish women shed or retain their ethnic or religious heritage despite marrying 'out'?" 3) How was intermarriage portrayed by the mass media and religious activists?" She questions how Jewish women's lives changed after intermarrying—did they "further integrate into non-Jewish society or contribute to Jewish continuity by self-identifying as Jews and raising Jewish children."

The book includes much to satisfy sociologists, cultural theorists, and historians: It follows the at times impassioned debate thread "assimilation v. transformation" over the full century researched, and shows how the "triple marginality" (constant influences facing Jewish women who intermarried) of "being a Jew in a Christian world, being a woman in a



male society, and being a Jewish woman married to a Gentile man") affected the choices Jewish women made. She describes the impact of WWII, the Holocaust, the Women's Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, the war in Southeast Asia, and other socio-political events on Jewish women's increasing self-empowerment and fulfillment of personal choice. Rich in data, *Still Jewish* is written in academic style; this reviewer would have liked to read more excerpts from its interview subjects.

While the author states that *Still Jewish* is not about her life, she seeks to provide intellectual honesty by telling the reader in the Introduction that she is a formerly intermarried Jewish woman with one daughter who she is raising Jewishly. In this, and in the book title she chose, she foreshadows some of her research outcomes by telling us up front that most divorces of intermarried couples are not caused by the partners being from different religions, but rather from economics, politics, and infidelity.

The changing roles over time of intermarried Jewish women, it turns out, have positively intensified their Jewish identities, increased their Jewish practice, and made more religious and cultural Jewish education available to their children than they'd been given. What they experienced in their marriages paralleled their progressive independence in the community. McGinity concludes that "intermarriage may actually be a catalyst for a more clearly defined and meaningful lifestyle," and is "not an adversary to Jewish continuity; rather, intermarriage was an opportunity for self-reflection and personal growth." The author quotes Sarah Coleman, 'an intermarried, third-wave Jewish feminist': "In forming partnerships with non-Jews, we intermarrieds are spreading Jewish values and culture into the population at large."

And with an uncharacteristically non-academic and perhaps joyful flourish, McGinity says in closing that "it is perhaps the inherent attraction of Judaism itself that ensures its continuity." Her research conclusion justifies her optimism about Judaism's future. I appreciate Keren McGinity's historical perspective of my experience.

Reading *Still Jewish* became personal for me. Approaching the book's end, I began to feel the author was describing me. Her academic conclusions accurately represented my own experience as a Jewish woman who'd married "out." I'd always known that I would raise my children as Jews. I'd tiptoed into but then progressively increased my own and my children's active participation in the organized Jewish community after my divorce, and my identity as a Jewish woman over time became an even stronger source of courage and drive.

*Karen Morton is a retired social services manager and trainer who has married "out" twice and is Still Jewish.*



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# Finding Their Story: Books for Children of Interfaith Families

Children's and young adult literature has begun to reflect the reality of interfaith families, particularly those blending Jewish traditions with other religious backgrounds. These books validate the experiences of children growing up in interfaith homes, helping them feel less alone in navigating dual traditions. For children from single-faith backgrounds, these stories build empathy and understanding, breaking down stereotypes and expanding their worldview.

For younger readers, *Hanukkah Moon* by Deborah da Costa provides a gentle introduction to interfaith family life. This picture book, suitable for ages 4-8, follows a young girl named Isobel whose aunt is getting married during Hanukkah. The story addresses questions about belonging and tradition when families blend Jewish and Mexican Catholic heritages.

*Gingerbread Dreidels* by Jane Breskin Zalben (ages 4-7) follows siblings Max and Sophie through their interfaith family's celebration of both Hanukkah and Christmas, but it breaks new ground in representation: their Jewish grandmother is Ethiopian-American and depicted as Black, making this the first picture book to clearly show a Black Jewish member of an interfaith family and mixed-race interfaith children.

*Queen of the Hanukkah Dosas* by Pamela Ehrenberg expands the interfaith conversation beyond Christianity and Judaism for ages 4-7. Little Sadie's multicultural family (her mom is Indian and her dad is Jewish) celebrates Hanukkah while incorporating Indian traditions like eating dosas, showing how interfaith families can blend multiple cultural traditions into something uniquely their own.

*Blended* by Sharon M. Draper, appropriate for ages 8-12, tackles interfaith family dynamics through the story of Isabella, an eleven-year-old whose parents' divorce has her shuttling between two households. Her Black father is Christian, while her white mother is Jewish, and Isabella navigates the complexities of belonging to both worlds while dealing with racial identity and contemporary social issues.

*The December Box* by Leslie D. Guccione (ages 9-13) explores what happens when a Christian mother marries a Jewish father. The story follows a family learning to honor both Christmas and Hanukkah traditions, addressing the tensions and joys that arise when deciding which holidays to celebrate and how to respect both religious backgrounds.

*Keeping the Castle* by Patrice Kindl, suitable for ages 12 and up, weaves interfaith family dynamics into a humorous historical romance, showing how religious differences have long been part of family narratives.

Other recent novels explore diverse interfaith combinations. *Sonora* by Hannah Lillith Assadi features Ahlam, the daughter of a Palestinian father and Jewish mother, raised in Arizona. In *I Wanna Be Your Shoebox* by Cristina Garcia, protagonist Yumi Ruíz-Hirsch has a Jewish-Japanese father and Cuban mother. Set during a difficult eighth grade year, the novel realistically portrays what it's like to be "a poster child for the 21st century" with mixed heritage. *Half/Life: Jew-ish Tales from Interfaith Homes*, edited by Laurel Snyder, offers an anthology of essays by people who grew up in Jewish-interfaith homes.

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## CBS-CS Speakeasy Purim

by Kelly Klapper, Director of Youth and Education

On Monday, March 2, CBS-CS is hosting a 1920's themed Speakeasy Purim event. The evening will start at 6:30 pm with delicious appetizers prepared by Chef Nate Schloss, and a fun trivia game with a mix of Purim trivia, Jewish trivia, and 1920's trivia questions. Folks are invited to play on a team with old friends or new, and the game will be led by CBS-CS admin Lawrence Wilde. Everyone participating in the trivia game will be able to earn the password to the sanctuary for the next portion of the Purim evening.

At 7:15 pm, everyone with the speakeasy password will be invited to the sanctuary for a brief *Ma'ariv* led by Rabbi Steinitz, followed by the Purim spiel and the Megillah reading. This year's spiel will center around "Club Shushan," a speakeasy run by Ahashverosh with his trusted assistant Haman. The cast is comprised of CBS-CS students from ages 4-14, and scenes from the spiel will be interspersed with chapters of the Megillah, and cheers and boos will fill the sanctuary as a fun time is had by all. **For more information, contact [admin@cbscs.org](mailto:admin@cbscs.org) or call the office at (315) 446-9570.**

## 2026 Winter Schmooze with 3GNY

3GNY: Descendants of Holocaust Survivors will host a Winter Schmooze for grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors on Monday, March 16 from 6:30-8 pm in the Jewish War Veterans' Lounge of the JCC, 5655 Thompson Rd, Syracuse, NY 13214. Light refreshments and engaging conversation will be provided.

3GNY is an educational non-profit organization founded by grandchildren of Holocaust survivors. As a living link, it preserves the legacies and the lessons of the Holocaust. Its mission is to educate diverse communities about the perils of intolerance and to provide a supportive forum for the descendants of survivors. **RSVP to Eileen Angelini at [eangelini@3gnewyork.org](mailto:eangelini@3gnewyork.org) by Friday, March 13.**

### Calling All Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors: 2026 Winter Schmooze with 3GNY

Join us for light refreshments  
and engaging conversation.

**When:** Monday, March 16th from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m.

**Where:** Jewish War Veterans' Lounge at the JCC  
(5655 Thompson Rd, Syracuse, NY 13214).



Please RSVP by Friday, March 13th  
to Eileen Angelini at [eangelini@3gnewyork.org](mailto:eangelini@3gnewyork.org)

3GNY is an educational non-profit organization founded by grandchildren of Holocaust survivors. As a living link, we preserve the legacies and the lessons of the Holocaust. Our mission is to educate diverse communities about the perils of intolerance and to provide a supportive forum for the descendants of survivors.



## The Most Powerful Performance You'll Ever Experience: Defiant Requiem



**Defiant Requiem: Verdi at Terezín** is a staged concert that combines a live performance of Giuseppe Verdi's *Requiem* with narration, projected images, and dramatic scenes that tell the true story of how the work was performed by Jewish prisoners in the Terezín (Theresienstadt) concentration camp during World War II.

Audience members will hear the full Verdi *Requiem* performed live by the Syracuse Orchestra and the Syracuse University Oratorio Society, with professional vocal soloists. The music is presented largely as a traditional concert performance, but it is interwoven with spoken narration and short theatrical moments that provide historical context. These spoken sections include excerpts from survivor testimony and commentary explaining how conductor Rafael Schächter rehearsed the *Requiem* with fellow prisoners under extreme conditions.

Between, and sometimes during, movements of the *Requiem*, actors appear on stage to portray individuals connected to the Terezín performances—including Schächter and members of the chorus. These scenes are brief and understated, designed to clarify the story rather than dramatize it. The actors do not interrupt the music but frame it, helping the audience understand when, why, and for whom the *Requiem* was sung.

Projected images are an essential part of the experience. Archival photographs of Terezín, pages of musical scores, Nazi propaganda images, and translated text appear on screens above or behind the performers. These projections supply historical detail and allow the audience to follow the narrative without needing prior knowledge of the Holocaust or of Verdi's work.

The chorus plays a central role. Rather than functioning only as a musical ensemble, the singers represent the prisoners who learned and performed the *Requiem* in Terezín. At moments, individual choristers are visually highlighted to emphasize that the original performances were carried out by ordinary people—teachers, laborers, students — using music as an act of cultural and moral resistance.

The overall tone of the program is educational, reflective, and direct. The staging is restrained, with simple lighting and limited movement. There are no elaborate sets or costumes; the focus remains on the music and the historical narrative. The performance runs continuously, moving between music and narration without an intermission, creating a sustained and immersive experience.

Audience members can expect to leave with a clearer understanding of the historical context of Verdi's *Requiem*, the story of its performance in Terezín, and the role music played in maintaining dignity and humanity under Nazi imprisonment. The program is designed not as a theatrical spectacle, but as a documented musical experience that connects a major work of the classical repertoire to a specific moment in history.

*The program will take place at 7 pm on April 16 in the Crouse Hinds auditorium of the Onondaga County Civic Center. It will be performed by the Syracuse Orchestra and the Syracuse University Oratorio Society. Tickets are \$36; under 18 are free when accompanied by an adult. Use the QR code to order tickets. For further information, contact [bdavis@jewishfederationcny.org](mailto:bdavis@jewishfederationcny.org).*



## New Federation Matan b'Seter Food Pantry



Food pantries exist at the intersection of necessity, compassion, and communal responsibility. They respond to food insecurity, a condition that affects millions of individuals and families who lack consistent access to nutritious food due to low wages, fixed incomes, medical expenses, housing instability, or sudden crises. Contrary to common assumptions, many people who rely on food pantries are employed, caring for children, or elderly individuals who must stretch limited resources. Food pantries do not replace government assistance programs; instead, they fill critical gaps, offering immediate, local relief when other systems fall short.

Within Jewish tradition, the work of food pantries is deeply rooted in longstanding religious and ethical teachings. Feeding the hungry is not viewed as optional charity but as an obligation grounded in justice. The concept of *tzedakah*, often translated as charity, more accurately means righteousness. It reflects the belief that ensuring others have enough to eat is part of creating a just society, not an act of generosity alone. Jewish texts consistently emphasize that meeting basic human needs takes precedence over ritual observance. The prophet Isaiah famously challenged

communities to understand that true religious devotion is demonstrated by “sharing bread with the hungry,” linking spiritual life directly to acts of care.

A central value underlying these efforts is *kavod habriyot*, human dignity. Jewish law and custom emphasize giving in ways that avoid shame and preserve self-respect. That is why the food pantry that the Federation created at Menorah Park during the COVID pandemic was named the *Matan b'Seter*/Giving in Secret pantry. No one knows who donates and no one knows who takes what they need.

The *Matan b'Seter* pantry has been in operation for over six years. It has been funded by private donations, a generous subsidy from Five Star Bank and now an extremely generous grant from members of the Solomon family. Federation handles the bulk of the food provisions, supplemented

by members of the community. Currently, Jackie and Neil Kassel stock the cabinet on a biweekly basis. The physical cabinet itself has had to be replaced three times due to the ravages of Syracuse winter weather. The most recent cabinet was installed in December and was custom-made by Amish craftsmen for its intended purpose. Liza Rochelson, who connected Federation with David Miller who built the cabinet, expressed gratitude to the Solomons for “helping to fulfill this vision.”

Members of the community can donate food items (packaged and canned; no glass) at any time knowing that the cabinet is regularly emptied by those who can select items appropriate to their dietary, cultural, or medical needs, filling gaps when government assistance benefits run out or do not cover rising food costs.



## Will Work for Food Chronicles Labor Across the Food Chain

Consumers are demanding healthier and more sustainable food system, yet labor is rarely part of the discussion. Laura-Anne Minkoff-Zern, associate professor of geography and the environment at Syracuse University, is the co-author, with Teresa Mares, of a new book entitled *Will Work for Food*. The book that takes readers on an eye-opening journey through the American food system, following the workers who grow, process, cook, and serve the nation's food, and even those who handle what gets thrown away.



*Will Work for Food* tells a story that doesn't get nearly enough attention: the people who feed America often struggle to feed themselves. From farm workers

picking vegetables under the hot sun to restaurant staff working double shifts to grocery store employees and sanitation workers, the authors show how low pay and difficult conditions are woven throughout the entire food chain. Many of these workers are immigrants facing uncertain legal status, making them especially vulnerable to exploitation. The authors argue that a truly sustainable or ethical food system cannot exist while the people doing the hardest work struggle to make ends meet. Even small farmers get squeezed by the system because most of the money spent on food goes to large processors



and retail chains, not to the farms where it is grown.

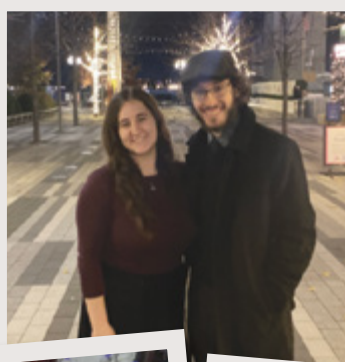
The book does not just document problems, it offers the hopeful message that change is possible. Better labor standards and solidarity among workers across different parts of the food industry could transform the system. The book serves as a timely reminder that discussions about “good food” must include the people whose labor brings it to the table.



# HADASHOT TOVOT



Ryan Hinshaw and Sasha Giniger



Sarah Young and Eri Solomon



Talia Zames and Yoni Leiderman

## A Meaningful Passover Seder at Temple Adath Yeshurun

*Second Night Seder*  
at Temple Adath Yeshurun  
Thursday, April 2 at 7:00 pm  
Led by Rabbi Moshe Saks  
\$36 per person (age 13 & older)  
\$18 per child (ages 5-12)  
Free of charge ages 4 and younger  
Catered by Temple Adath Yeshurun  
RSVP Deadline Friday, March 15  
RSVP at [adath.org](http://adath.org)

Temple Adath Yeshurun invites the community to gather for a memorable Passover Seder on the second night of Passover, Thursday, April 2, 2026. This special evening offers a rich blend of tradition, learning, and fellowship—an opportunity to celebrate our shared story of freedom in a welcoming and engaging setting. The seder will be led by Rabbi Moshe Saks, whose guidance and insights will bring depth and relevance to the Passover narrative for participants of all ages. Whether one is deeply familiar with the seder or experiencing it in a communal setting for the first time, Rabbi Saks will ensure an inclusive and inspiring experience that honors tradition while speaking to contemporary life.

Guests will also enjoy a delicious, carefully prepared Passover meal crafted by Andrée Finkelstein, TAY catering manager. Featuring ceremonial favorites like matzah ball soup, brisket, chicken, and a vegetarian option, the meal will enhance the joy of the evening and allow participants to focus fully on the Seder experience. The cost to attend is \$36 per adult (ages 13 and up); \$18 per child (ages 4-12); free for children 3 and under. Advance registration is required by **March 15 at [Adath.org](http://Adath.org)**. For additional information or assistance, contact [info@adath.org](mailto:info@adath.org).

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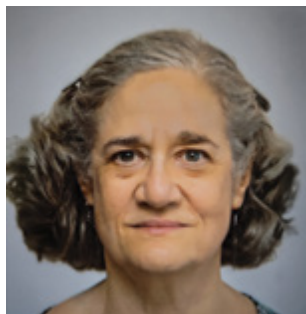
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# Kindertransport: The Account Of One Child Survivor, as told by her Daughter

by Karen J. Docter,  
TAY Adult Education Committee Chair



The internationally recognized date for Holocaust Remembrance Day corresponds to the 27th day of Nisan on the Hebrew calendar. It marks the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. This year, Holocaust Remembrance Day takes place on April 14.

Initially, the term “Holocaust survivor” was reserved exclusively for human beings who had been interned in Auschwitz, Treblinka, Mathausen, Bergen-Belsen, or any of the other hundreds of camps where millions of Jews were murdered by the cruelly efficient Nazi death machine. But there were 10,000 other survivors—children who were saved from death by their desperate parents and relocated to Britain and other European countries in the 1938-1939 rescue mission known as the “Kindertransport”.

Almost 88 years later, and a lifetime after fleeing the Nazis, some Kindertransport children told their stories. Yet there were other Kindertransport survivors who remained silent about their experiences and passed away without ever revealing their histories. Their children were left to piece together the narratives of their parents’ lives. One of those Kindertransport survivors was Hilde Strauss, a German Jew,

who spent all of World War II as a child in a Nazi-occupied European country.

Hilde’s daughter is Debby Berlyne. On April 12, 2026, at 9:30 am, in commemoration of the Kindertransport children and in memory of their parents, Temple Adath Yeshurun is honored to host Berlyne, who will share her mother’s story with adults in the Syracuse Jewish community. Debby has spoken about her mother’s experiences at schools in Maryland and New York City. She is a member of several Holocaust-related speakers’ bureaus, including those of The Kindertransport Association and The Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington. She grew up in Toronto and moved to the U.S. to earn a Ph.D. in philosophy at Brown University. She lives in Rockville, Maryland with her husband, Danny Bachman.

Debby will be introduced by Irene M. Stern, Ph.D., local Syracuse psychologist. Although she was not part of the Kindertransport, Dr. Stern is herself a child survivor of the Holocaust. **For more information, please email [education@adath.org](mailto:education@adath.org).**



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**Jewish Observer**  
 of Central New York

## New Tween Youth Group

CNY area Jewish tweens in grades 5-8 are invited to participate in a new youth group, regardless of religious affiliation. The youth group launched in January 2026 with a successful laser tag event at Fun Warehouse. Twenty-two tweens from ages 10-14 came together for an afternoon of laser tag, arcade games, and fun with friends. The fun continued in February with a tween lunch and hamentaschen baking at Kimber Road, where the tweens were able to take home everything they prepared. It was Purim preparation and a sugar rush all in one.



Three more fun events are planned for the spring. On Sunday, March 15, tweens are invited to a STEAM Party & Lunch at Kimber Road from 12-2 pm. There will be games, crafts, and activities ranging from engineering challenges to minute-to-win-it style competitions. The April event takes place on Sunday, April 12: bowling at Green Lakes Lanes from 2-4 pm. Kids are welcome to bring cash for the snack bar during that time. The end-of-the-school-year celebration will occur on Sunday, May 31 with a Fantastically Fun Seabreeze Trip! Pickup and dropoff will be at Kimber Road, and kids will be able to take a bus with chaperones to Seabreeze Amusement Park for a day of fun with friends.

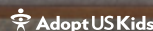
All of these these events have the common goal of fostering and deepening friendships within the Syracuse area Jewish community and encouraging continued participation in Jewish life post b'mitzvah. **For more information, contact Kelly Klapper at [kelly.klapper@cbcs.org](mailto:kelly.klapper@cbcs.org).**



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# Summer Camp at the JCC: Registration Opens March 2

by Ashley Schmitz

Summer may be a couple of months away, but the Jewish Community Center of Syracuse is already heating up in preparation for the much-anticipated return of Camp Joe & Lynne Romano Summer Camp!

Registration for the JCC's 2026 Summer Camp opens **Monday, March 2 at 7 am**, and families are encouraged to set their alarms as camp spots tend to disappear faster than sunscreen on a hot summer day. With a reputation for packed programs and happy campers, early registration is the best way to lock in top choices.

Camp will run from **June 29 through August 21, filling weekdays from 9 am - 4 pm**, with games, creativity, and classic summer fun. "Our summer camp provides families with dependable, high-quality care while offering children a fun, engaging environment where they can thrive all summer long," says Pamela Ranieri, director of children's programming. One way the JCC offers high-quality care is by providing a little extra breathing room to parents via extended care options, including early care beginning at 7 am and late care running until 6 pm.

Designed for children from infancy through their teen years, JCC Summer Camp offers a wide range of age-appropriate programs for both members and non-members.

## Early Childhood

(6 Weeks old to Entering Kindergarten)

Early Childhood Camp welcomes children as young as six weeks old, easing them into camp life with a balance of indoor and outdoor play, including sensory experiences, music and movement, and daily Red Cross swim lessons (18 months and up), proving that even the littlest campers can make a big splash.



## School Age

(Entering Grades 1 - 6)

For campers entering grades one through six, the options are endless with something new each week! Ideal for camp beginners, the fun-filled traditional day camp Nitzamin has a little bit of everything: daily Red Cross swim lessons or free swim, themed weeks, playground time, and more. For campers with more specific interests, a variety of specialty camps and field trips are offered each week, ranging from ceramics, cheerleading, horseback riding, Pokémon and more! Due to popular demand, a new specialty camp will be debuting this summer: Girl's Lacrosse Camp.



## Teen Programs

(Entering Grades 7 - 10)

Older campers can take the show on the road with the SyraCruisin' Teen Travel Camp, a five-week program for grades seven through ten running **July 6 to August 7**. With an action-packed schedule of trips and experiences, it's summer on wheels.

Campers will enjoy a little international flair to their summer fun with a July visit from the Friendship Caravan, a group of Israeli teens that tour the U.S. and share Israeli culture through music, dance, and storytelling. In addition to the performance, two Tzofim Israeli Scouts will spend the entire eight-week season at Camp Romano, staying with different host families throughout the community. Their presence offers campers a hands-on, high-energy way to connect with Israeli culture and adds a little extra *ruach* to every day.

For generations, the Jewish Community Center of Syracuse has been a summer staple for families across the community and everyone, including camp staff, is eager for its return. "It's a privilege to watch our campers grow in confidence and independence each summer," says Ranieri. "Our staff works hard to create an environment where every child feels seen, valued, and excited to come back each day."

Though bathing suits and camp t-shirts may still be tucked away, enthusiasm is already running high, and families are urged to register early to make sure their campers are part of another unforgettable season.



For more information or to register, visit [jccsy.org/summer-camp](http://jccsy.org/summer-camp) or contact the Camp Admin Team at 315-445-2360 or [camp@jccsy.org](mailto:camp@jccsy.org)

# Passover for Every Generation at the JCC

by Ashley Schmitz

Passover arrives each spring with an invitation to gather, reflect, and retell a story that has connected generations for centuries. At the Sam Pomeranz Jewish Community Center of Syracuse, the holiday will be celebrated as a shared community experience, with programming designed for all ages. From its youngest learners to longtime members, Passover will be celebrated with warmth, inclusivity and just the right amount of matzah-fueled joy.

The festivities begin with the JCC's youngest members. On Thursday, March 26, children in the Early Childhood Development Program will take part in a special Passover seder featuring songs, storytelling, and hands-on activities. Our Pre-K and Pre-School classrooms will enjoy a Passover-style meal prepared by the JCC's kosher kitchen, complete with traditional favorites.

Older members of the community will have their own opportunity to celebrate at the Senior Passover Lunch on Friday, March 27 at noon, featuring a kosher-for-

Passover meal and a Passover prayer lead by Rabbi Shore, adding meaning to a gathering centered on connection, memory, and community.

The momentum will continue during the Spring Break Vacation Camp, running Monday, March 30 through Wednesday, April 1. School-age campers will enjoy creative projects, group activities, outdoor play, and a field trip. Camp runs from 9 am to 4 pm, with extended care available from 7 a.m. to 6 pm.

In recognition of Passover, the JCC offices will be closed on Thursday, April 2, Friday, April 3, Wednesday, April 8 and Thursday, April 9 while the Fitness Center will remain open with regular hours.

More information on what's happening at the JCC is available at [jccsy.org](http://jccsy.org). For questions specific to the children's seder or Vacation Camps, contact Kevin Smith at 315-445-2360, ext. 133, or [ksmith@jccsy.org](mailto:ksmith@jccsy.org). For questions about the Senior Passover Lunch, contact Raven DiSalvo-Hess at 315-445-2360, ext. 128, or [rdisalvo-hess@jccsy.org](mailto:rdisalvo-hess@jccsy.org).



This column features businesses owned by members of our community, as well as artists and musical programs and is generously sponsored by RAV Properties.

## Bringing Hollywood to CNY: American High Studios

Entering a century-old middle school in Liverpool, one might expect to find old textbooks and chalky blackboards. Instead, there's a thriving Hollywood production hub that's been quietly revolutionizing how teen comedies get made.

American High Studios transformed the abandoned A.V. Zogg School building at 800 Fourth Street into something remarkable. Over the past seven years, this unlikely operation churned out nearly 30 films that captivated audiences on Hulu and Netflix, proving a simple but powerful truth: you don't need sunny California to make movies that resonate across the country.

The story began in 2017 when writer, director, and producer Jeremy Garelick, the creative mind behind *The Wedding Ringer*, *The Hangover*, and *The Break-Up*, walked into the boarded-up building and saw what others couldn't: potential. He bought the 91-year-old structure for approximately \$1 million from a Thai businessman, betting everything on an unconventional idea.



What made the building so perfect? Its past. Hollywood studios spend fortunes constructing artificial high schools on expensive Los Angeles soundstages, but Garelick stumbled onto the real thing. The 100,000-square-foot facility came

with everything intact: classrooms that felt like classrooms, gymnasiums with decades of scuff marks, cafeterias that carried memories of a thousand lunch periods, auditoriums where students once performed. The production team expanded this foundation, adding a hospital wing, office spaces, and sound stages, creating a self-contained film production ecosystem under one roof.

The transformation came with an unexpected twist. Local zoning laws demanded that Garelick provide an educational component alongside his film production. What could have been a problem became an opportunity: the Academy at Syracuse Studios, which offers hands-on training and real-world experience to aspiring filmmakers and crew members who might never have gotten their shot otherwise.

Garelick's ambition was never just about making movies; it was about capturing something authentic. He wanted to do for today's generation what filmmaker John Hughes did for audiences in the 1980s: tell genuine stories about diverse characters navigating the most transformative, terrifying, exhilarating years of their lives. The studio specializes in coming-of-age comedies that embrace the chaos, triumph, and awkwardness of high school in all its glory.

The commitment to fresh voices runs deep. Seven of American High's first 11 films were directed by first-time filmmakers—people getting their big break, their chance to prove what they could do. The studio's filmography is a streaming service's dream lineup: *Big Time Adolescence*, starring Pete Davidson and Griffin Gluck, *The Binge*, directed by Garelick himself, which brought Vince Vaughn into the mix, *Crush* director Sammi Cohen's feature film debut, *Plan B*, directed by Natalie Morales, and titles like *The Ultimate Playlist of Noise*, *Banana Split*, and various sequels that built dedicated audiences across streaming platforms.

The partnership with Hulu proved golden. In 2019, American High secured a first-look output deal with Hulu Originals, cementing its position as a reliable pipeline of teen-focused content that connects with viewers. The impact ripples beyond box office numbers or streaming views. According to Syracuse film commissioner Eric Vinal, American High has fundamentally transformed Central New York's film industry from a gig economy, where crew members scrambled for occasional work, into something with real stability. The studio built a core team of 50 to 60 crew members from the local community, creating sustainable employment in a region that never thought of itself as a film production hub.

American High's vision extends further. In 2022, the studio launched American High Shorts and College Life—two social media accounts producing sketch comedy content. Using a production process echoing *Saturday Night Live*, they recruited comedians including several with Syracuse University connections, creating what some have dubbed "Gen Z SNL." In 2025 American High won the Webby People's Choice Award for Best Social Media Comedy.



When COVID-19 brought global film production to a stop, American High's crew converted soundstages and produced over 25,000 high-quality face masks and face shields for medical centers across Central New York and beyond. In the middle of a pandemic, they proved that their commitment to community ran deeper than business. In 2023, American High partnered with the Make-A-Wish Foundation to produce *Marshall Man*, fulfilling a 9-year-old's wish to write, direct, and star in a superhero movie.

Their reach extends beyond Syracuse Studios to offer internship programs spanning development, creative work, and production. The programs immerse students in everything from script analysis to marketing, social media to location scouting, delivering the kind of practical experience that shapes careers. American High's educational commitment has helped propel Syracuse University's film department into *The Hollywood Reporter's* ranking of the top 25 film schools in the United States. The studio regularly hosts networking events, workshops, and Q&A sessions with industry veterans, creating opportunities that would normally require moving to Los Angeles or New York City.

Success, however, hasn't meant smooth sailing with everyone. In 2025, the relationship between American High and the Village of Liverpool hit turbulent waters. Village Mayor Stacy Finney wrote to Syracuse.com with a litany of complaints including noise disturbances, generator use, road closures, and traffic backups. Her suggestion? American High should pack up and leave. Code enforcement officials documented 248 fire code violations at the facility.

Garelick pushed back, attributing many violations to the inherent challenges of renovating and maintaining a century-old building while simultaneously running an active film production operation. When neighbors raised concerns about generators disrupting their peace, Garelick didn't debate or delay; he immediately shut them off and worked out a permanent solution.

The controversy split the community. While some residents rallied behind the mayor, others came to the studio's defense. Resident David Mix told local media that the mayor doesn't speak for everyone and that the studio brings genuine benefits. Garelick responded to the criticism head-on, emphasizing the studio's contributions and its commitment to being a responsible neighbor. Then, in June 2025, he made a move that stunned everyone: he announced plans to run for village mayor himself. He hosted a public Q&A session to address community concerns directly, standing face-to-face with critics and supporters alike. He also made clear that the studio had brought itself completely up to code.

The success of American High demonstrates something powerful about what is possible when creativity meets commitment. An abandoned middle school in Liverpool became proof that with vision, determination, and genuine community engagement, a thriving entertainment industry hub can be built in the most unexpected place, bringing authentic stories of teenage life to screens across America. American High is also one of the first studios to embrace ethical AI technology, fully integrating it into the filmmaking process. Judaism lies at the core of what Garelick does. He is deeply committed to transmitting Jewish values to his family. "We want our kids to see the immediate result of helping somebody and to see how good that feels," he says. He credits his wife, Samantha with being supportive of everything that he does and with setting an example of what it means to be a strong Jewish leader. He is passionate about his work at American High, saying, "Together, we will transform Liverpool into a beacon of hope, opportunity, and prosperity that other communities will study and aspire to become. Because if we can build a miracle here once, we can do it again—and again—and again."

**DR. LAURENCE THOMAS**  
December 27, 2025

Dr. Laurence Thomas, 76, passed away on December 27, 2025 at The Nottingham. An American philosopher, he was Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Political Science at Syracuse University.

Dr. Thomas was the author of over 80 articles and four books. His articles on moral theory, on social philosophy and on American Blacks and Jews have been widely anthologized. One of Laurence Thomas's most highly regarded essays is entitled "Being Moral and Handling the Truth".

He held appointments at Notre Dame, University of Maryland, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Oberlin College, and in 1994 was a visiting scholar in the Religion Department at the University of Michigan. He was the Andrew Mellon Faculty Fellow at Harvard University in 1978-79. Thomas's teaching has been widely noted and praised. He was named Syracuse University's Scholar-Teacher of the Year in 1993.

Though Dr. Thomas never married or had children, his legacy is his students who he thought of as his family. "I regard parental love as the greatest of all moral gifts," he said. "Over the years, my students have been a profound source of inspiration. My signature course was Philosophy 191, Ethics and Value Theory." That course has been and continues to be a tremendous source of moral and intellectual inspiration.

Funeral services will be at 10 am on Wednesday at Sisskind Funeral Chapel, 3175 E. Genesee Street. Burial will be in Frumah Packard Cemetery.

Contributions to perpetuate his memory may be made to Shaarei Torah Orthodox Congregation of Syracuse.

**JOANN FINKEL**  
January 7, 2026

Joann Finkel, 84, died Wednesday at St. Joseph's Hospital. Born on May 24, 1941 in Boston, MA to A.D. and Thelma Fineman Finkel, she had been a resident of Syracuse for most of her life. Her father passed in 1985, her mother in 2007 and her brother Robert in 2020.

She is survived by her longtime companion Glenn Lystad and her nephew Alexander (Lori) Finkel.

Contributions may be made to The Syracuse Jewish Cemetery Association.

Graveside services will be on Monday the 12th at 10 am in Poiley Tzedek Cemetery.

**ISAAC JOSEPH SIGNORELLI**  
January 23, 2026



Isaac Joseph Signorelli, 33, died as a result of injuries from an accident Friday evening. Born on November 17, 1992 to Frank and Sari Signorelli, he had been a life resident of Syracuse. Isaac was a graduate of the Syracuse Hebrew Day School, Manlius-Pebble Hill, Syracuse University Whitman School, and Syracuse University College of Law.

Isaac's passions were philosophy, law, debating and his close friends and family. He reveled in his Model UN and Mock Trial teams at Manlius Pebble Hill. The leaders of those teams, Jeff Mangram and Phil Rothschild, respectively, nurtured the moral compass that was at his core.

His family includes his parents Frank and Sari Signorelli, his grandmother Selma "Sis" Zucker, uncles Harold Zucker, Jody (Allison Weiner) Zucker, and Joseph Signorelli, cousins Sloane, and Maxwell, and his partner Emily Flood. He was predeceased by his grandparents Theodore A. Zucker, and Carmela and Joseph Signorelli.

Contributions to perpetuate Isaac's memory may be made to the Syracuse Hebrew Day School.

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**ROBERT SAKS**  
January 17, 2026

Robert Saks, father of Rabbi Moshe (Meira) Saks and Rabbi Allen (Annette) Saks, grandfather of 12 (and their spouses) and great-grandfather of 13 children, died on January 17, 2026. Robert was predeceased by his wife, Yetta, and son, Rabbi Joseph Saks. Contributions in Robert's memory may be made to the Rabbi's Discretionary Fund, Temple Adath Yeshurun ([www.adath.org](http://www.adath.org)) or to Menorah Park of Central New York ([www.menorahparkofcny.com](http://www.menorahparkofcny.com)).



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