

FROM OUR LEADERSHIP

A Letter to the Jofa Community

By Mindy Feldman Hecht, Interim Executive Director, Carmella Abraham and Marianne Novak, Co-Presidents

There is a phrase that stayed with us long after the lights went up and the last attendees made their way home from the December 2025 Jofa Conference in New York City:

“Ashreinu, ma tov helkeinu.”
“How fortunate we are,
how good is our portion.”

That is what it felt like to witness the Jofa Conference come to life after months of planning, dreaming, and deep conversation about who we are and who we want to be. It is also the spirit we carry into this issue of the *Jofa Journal*.

Back to Our Roots: Communities at the Center

If there was one clear message that emerged from our planning process, it was this: **Jofa’s most meaningful work happens in communities.** Not just at conferences, not just in the pages of a journal, but in the *shuls*, schools, living rooms, and kitchen tables where Orthodox Jewish



Co-Presidents Rabbi Marianne Novak (L) and Rabba Dr. Carmella Abraham (R) with Interim Executive Director Dr. Mindy Feldman Hecht

life actually unfolds.

That renewed focus shaped everything about the December conference. We built programming that was explicitly designed to send attendees home with something tangible: a concrete idea, a roadmap for a difficult conversation, a model to bring back to their rabbis or school principals or *shul* boards. We wanted every person who walked through the doors to leave not just inspired, but equipped.

The post-conference surveys confirmed that we hit that mark. One attendee wrote: “My goal is to utilize the information shared to take back to my own synagogue. We’re already talking about forming an Inclusion Taskforce and this was very helpful in having information, skills, and ideas to bring to them.” Another: “Got so many ideas of halakhically allowed things women can do in shul and thinking about which ones I can bring to my shul. YES!” And a first-time attendee reflected: “The audience found it extremely

continued on page 16

The State of Orthodox Women's Torah Leadership

By Ann Pava

Ann Pava is a visionary leader, philanthropist, and tireless advocate for women’s Torah learning and communal vitality. As co-founder with her husband, Jeremy, and President of Micah Philanthropies, Ann has invested in strengthening Orthodox women’s Torah leadership. She was a longtime member of the Jofa board and also served as its Vice-Chair. The following is an excerpt from Ann’s remarks at the plenary session of the conference.

I met Blu Greenberg 25 years ago, but she had shaped my life long before I met her. I had become Orthodox when Jeremy and I married, and my mother-in-law had given me Blu’s *How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household*. I read it cover to cover. It became my Bible.

Not long after we met, Blu invited me onto the board

of Jofa. “What’s Jofa?” I asked—the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance. And I said, “Wait, Orthodox women can be feminists?” I was excited and terrified at the same time—excited because I had always been a feminist, and terrified because I was secretly relieved that there was no role for me in my *shul*. I wasn’t particularly learned, and I was still busy figuring out how to run that traditional Jewish household. So how could I do anything else? But I said yes. And that yes began a



Ann Pava addressing plenary session

continued on page 21

New Frontiers in Orthodox Communities: Female Senior Spiritual Leadership in Synagogues

By Leah Sarna

The following is an edited excerpt from Rabbanit Sarna's remarks at the conference as part of the panel on New Frontiers in Orthodox Communities.

I am the spiritual leader of Kehillat Sha'arei Orah in Lower Merion, Pennsylvania, just outside of Philadelphia. My *shul* started with a small handful of families who wanted to *daven* together. It grew slowly until the pandemic, which precipitated great growth in Lower Merion and commensurately our *shul*.

The leadership of the *shul* realized that the community needed support with lifecycle events and pastoral issues, so they decided to hire a part-time spiritual leader. But what they did next is really important and unusual. The bylaws of the *shul* assumed that any spiritual leader hired in the future would be a man. Instead of saying, "Well, it's in the bylaws; I guess we're stuck," they changed the bylaws before even opening a search. When they opened up a search, they opened it up to men and women. At the end of that search, they hired me.

What this story shows is that **the creation of Orthodox women rabbis is insufficient without strong lay leaders.** Our community has gotten to a miraculous, transformative place that would never have happened without Jofa and Yeshivat Maharat, and the visionary leadership of Rabba Sara Hurwitz and Rabbi Avi Weiss. But the creation of Orthodox women rabbis and community exposure to women rabbis (and financial assistance to *shuls* to hire them) is not enough. There are three *shuls* in the United States that I can think of that had women in assistant rabbi positions, but when the senior rabbi position opened up, they did not open the search to women.

Too often a search committee at an Orthodox *shul* finds that 20 percent of the membership feels strongly that a senior rabbi search should be open to women. But another 20 percent—and often it's the people who have money or show up to daily *minyan*—threatens to leave the *shul* if they hire a woman. And the rest of the membership has no strong feelings either way. So what

does the search committee do? They say, "We'll hire a liberal-minded male rabbi and everyone will be fine." But where does that leave the women rabbis?

Initially, our sense was that exposure alone would be sufficient: We'll bring in women as scholars-in-residence, we'll have women as assistant rabbis, and that will eventually bring about the change. What we've learned is that this is not enough. My *shul* had a lot of exposure to women rabbis. I was already *davening* there. (We had moved to Philadelphia for my husband's job.) A colleague had been living in the community while she was studying at Maharat. We're in Philadelphia, where we even have a model of a *shul* led by Rabbanit Dasi Fruchter. There couldn't be more exposure.

Yet when I moved to Philly and asked around about potential positions, the answer was, "Not in Lower Merion, never. Find a different career." But during my years in Yeshivat Maharat, I had been trained as a community organizer. I used those tools to powermap the community and, over the course of years, in deep partnership with lay leaders, we laid the groundwork for an open hiring process. This involved strategic work and difficult conversations.

We asked ourselves who might have reservations and what it would take to bring them along.

As communal lay leaders, you can do this same work. But you need to be addressing this issue ten years before your search ever opens. You likely can already name that influential 20 percent of the *shul* who will threaten to leave if the *shul* were to hire a woman. They're the same people now as they will be in ten years when your rabbi

retires. Start talking to them. Put on your community organizing hat and say, "If this is something that matters to me, if I want the search to be open to equally qualified male and female candidates, then I need to start now to work on those 20 percent." They don't have to like it; they just need to not leave the *shul*—or enough of them need to not leave the *shul*—over the decision to open this hire to women. And that does not happen overnight.

You may want to start by having a conversation about why they really are opposed to having a woman rabbi. You may find it's not about halakhah, but rather about a fear of the unknown or a fear that the community they love is going to change into something they don't recognize. You have to show them that having a woman in leadership doesn't take anything away from them; it adds to the community. And you have to be patient. It's a slow process of building trust. And eventually you can move them from "no women" to "well, maybe if

continued on page 28



Rabbanit Leah Sarna and Rabbi Saul Beman at a celebration at the Eldridge Street Synagogue

How to Build a Feminist Community: Increasing Women's Participation in *Shul*

The following is an edited excerpt from the conference session "How to Build a Feminist Community."

Panel:

Rabbanit Bracha Jaffe is a member of the clergy team at HIR - the Bayit. She has semikha from Yeshivat Maharat, which she earned after a career in hi-tech.

Rabbanit Dasi Fruchter is the founder and spiritual leader of the South Philadelphia Shtiebel. She has semikha from Yeshivat Maharat and also holds an M.P.A. in nonprofit administration and an M.A. in Jewish Studies from NYU.

Dr. Talia Hurwich is a member of Congregation Darkhei Noam in New York. She holds a Ph.D. in Education and Jewish Studies from NYU and is currently the Director of Research and Evaluation at the Jewish Education Project.

Rabba Wendy Amsellem (Moderator) is on the faculty of Yeshivat Maharat. She has semikha from Yeshivat Maharat, is an alumna of the Drisha Scholars Circle, and has been a Wexner Graduate Fellow and a Mandel Jerusalem Fellow.

Rabba Wendy Amsellem: In our session, Rabbanit Bracha Jaffe of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale (HIR), Rabbanit Dasi Fruchter of the South Philadelphia Shtiebel, and Talia Hurwich of Darkhei Noam will talk about how their *shuls* are increasing women's participation. We'll also talk about the challenges of increasing women's participation and ways in which we could increase women's participation even more.

Rabbanit Bracha Jaffe: I am the Associate Rabba at HIR. This is a position that is designated specifically for a woman. It is unusual for an Orthodox *shul* to do that. The *shul* follows the Orthodox model of the *mehitzah*—women staying on their side of the *mehitzah*, men on their

While in a standard Orthodox *minyan* women are not counted in the ten for *minyan*, they are equal in importance to the eleventh man.

side of the *mehitzah*, and does not have men and women on the *bimah* at the same time when liturgy is recited. The first thing you notice when you walk into our *shul* is that you can't tell which is the women's side of the *mehitzah* and which is the men's side based on the configuration. The *mehitzah* runs down the middle, and there's equal access to the *bimah* from both sides. (And by the way, there is also handicap accessibility. People in wheelchairs or with canes or walkers can also come up to the *bimah*.) That layout immediately signals to the

women: you are important; you are just as important as the men. I want to remind everyone that while in a standard Orthodox *minyan* women are not counted in the ten for *minyan*, they are equal in importance to the eleventh man—the more people in the room, the more *kavod* (honor) being given to God.

At HIR, a female rabbi and a male rabbi have the same responsibilities, except where the halakhah requires differences. A woman is not counted for a *minyan*, a woman doesn't lead services or read from the Torah, except when we have women's *tefillah*.

We look for those spaces where there is breathing room within standard halakhah for women to both feel like they participate more as well as actually participate more. In many Orthodox *shuls*, you never hear a woman's voice—certainly not on her own. There are *shuls* where it's accepted that women say *Kaddish*, but there are also *shuls* where if a woman is the only one saying *Kaddish*, they require a man to say it with her. In our *shul*, you hear a woman's voice a lot. Much of it is mine because I announce page numbers. I will announce *Kaddish*. I announce different things as the service goes along. That would be just one small space where a woman's voice is heard.



Rabba Wendy Amsellem, Dr. Talia Hurwich, Rabbanit Dasi Fruchter, and Rabbanit Bracha Jaffe

We also allow women to speak in all the places in the liturgy that do not require a *minyan* or a male *hazzan* to lead, such as the *mi sheberach* prayers. At the appropriate time, the men go down from the *bimah* and women come up and say the *mi sheberach* prayers. This could also be done from the women's side in a *shul* without accessibility to the *bimah* from both sides. A woman announces the *molad* during *birkhat ha'hodesh* (blessing of the new month).

Women give sermons. Women give *divrei Torah*. Women have been president of the *shul*. At HIR we try to incorporate women wherever the halakhah allows, if it can be done in a respectful way—not making the service feel draggy, but streamlining it so that women can seamlessly be a part of the service.

Something that we instituted a few years ago was that women return the *Sefer Torah* to the *aron kodesh* (ark). Again, because there's accessibility from both sides of the

mehitzah, the men leave the *bimah*, women come up—they don't recite the prayers for returning the Torah to the *aron*, but they carry the *Sefer Torah*, open the *aron*, and put the Torah away. This happens both on Shabbat and weekdays; every space that we have is equal, and we follow that custom every time.

There's another beautiful custom that we have in our *shul*. When a girl has a bat mitzvah and she wants to have a women's *tefillah* where she leads *shaharit* and reads all or most of the Torah portion and Haftarah, we have what we call the flipped model. The women's *tefillah* is held in the main sanctuary and there's an alternate traditional *tefillah* with a *minyan* for men and those women who want to say *Kaddish*. This is because women's *tefillah* is not a halakhic *minyan*, and *Kaddish* requires a halakhic *minyan*. By flipping the model, we are signaling to the girls and their families: you are just as important as a boy who has a bar mitzvah. We work it out logistically—it takes some organization to make it work. But just the idea of asking people to switch in order to give the girl that place and that role—that's what is so special.

Here is the guiding model of HIR: we do our best to have women really feel welcomed, wanted, and included.



Rabbanit Bracha Jaffe teaching women to *leyn*

Rabbanit Dasi Fruchter: I am a product of Jofa. I grew up in a world of women's *Megillah* readings and the *Jofa Journal*. I grew up in Kemp Mill, where I saw women standing up and taking up space, and I got to create a path for myself, thanks to all the institutions that stand on the shoulders of Jofa, like the amazing Yeshivat Maharat.

My mother is particularly a role model for me in my approach toward Orthodox feminism. When I was a child, we *davened* at a *shul* in Long Beach. My father was the *hazzan* on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. There was a balcony in that *shul*. And guess what? My mom belted out the singing right from the balcony. I remember that women would come up to her and say, "I didn't know I was allowed to sing. Thank you for teaching me that I could sing."

So much of my approach to what is happening right now at the South Philadelphia Shtiebel and my prior position as the assistant spiritual leader at Beth Sholom is about singing from the balcony. What does it mean to be in the balcony and belt it out and to find roles that make sense for where we are in the Orthodox community?

At the Shtiebel we have a slightly different approach than the one described by Rabbanit Bracha. Our *shul* is a startup congregation that we founded six years ago with some amazing folks in response to wanting to see more women becoming solo or senior spiritual leaders. At the time, I was working in a congregation where we were

making huge strides in women's leadership, but there were real limits—what we might call a "stained glass ceiling." Creating the Shtiebel was in part about bringing a vision of Orthodoxy and feminism into a startup space, which actually gives us a little more breathing room.

One approach that we think about is how do we understand equality. In the Orthodox world, many people who are not "*frum* from birth" but are seeking something in a post-denominational space that is rich and authentic will say to me, "But the *mehitzah*, but the *minyan*—women do not have equal opportunities." And I will say, "It's true—though we are moving in various ways to make more room for ritual inclusion, in some ways Orthodoxy has snagged, has gotten stuck, particularly around gender."

Because of this snag, we decided to tackle the question of inclusion in a way that feels safer in our Orthodox

context. Can we reimagine what inclusion looks like outside of the lightning rod issues? Can we find ways to look at the way we do *davening*, and make it more inclusive for everyone—what if we need to flatten the experience of leadership and create 25 leadership roles on a Shabbat morning instead of the seven Torah readers? When you walk into the Shtiebel, you'll find that the

aron is on the women's side. The *shulhan* straddles the women's and men's and our modest nonbinary sections. You'll notice that there are specific roles for women that are not given to men at all, such as anything related to carrying the Torah.

Even though there are things in Orthodoxy that probably aren't going to change tomorrow, we need to find ways to create more voices and more inclusion. I think that it's beyond halakhah. It's about culture. It's about creating a space that invites additional participation. Just one example: the Shtiebel never waits for a *minyan* of ten men—we have a culture that whoever is in the room is enough. Yes, it would be important to do *Kaddish*,

Kedushah, and *Barekhu* should the formal requirement be satisfied. But if there are not ten men in the room and there are ten people in the room, we're going to start *davening*. We're going to take out the Torah and read it

The Shtiebel never waits for a *minyan* of ten men. If there are ten people in the room, we start *davening*.

without *aliyot*. And we're going to use a special adapted *Kaddish* for mourners that we started using during

continued on page 24

My Body. Whose Decision?

Abortion Advocacy in a Time of Rising Antisemitism

The following is an edited excerpt from the conference session “My Body, Whose Decision? Abortion Advocacy in a Time of Rising Antisemitism.”

Panel:

Dr. Noam Stadlan is Vice Chairman of the Department of Neurosurgery at Endeavor Health and Assistant Professor of Neurosurgery at the Pritzker School of Medicine of the University of Chicago. He also holds a Masters degree in halakhic medical ethics from New York Medical College.

Darcy Hirsh is Vice President, Government Relations and Advocacy at National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW), where she fights for equity and justice for women, children, and families. She has over 15 years of experience in public policy, leading advocacy efforts and educating and mobilizing Jewish community members in pursuit of our shared values. She holds a J.D. from Cardozo School of Law, an M.T.S. (Master of Theological Studies) from Harvard Divinity School, and a B.A. in Religious Studies from Barnard College.

Allison Tombros Korman is the founder of the Red Tent Fund. She previously served as Senior Operations and Strategy Director at the D.C. Abortion Fund until resigning in 2023 in response to antisemitic conduct by its staff and board. She holds a Masters of Health Sciences degree from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and a B.A. in English and Women’s Studies from the University of Michigan. She has certifications in Restorative Justice Facilitation from the University of San Diego and Executive Facilitation from Georgetown University.

Paula Eiselt (Moderator) is a Primetime Emmy-nominated, Peabody and duPont-Columbia Award-winning director and Sundance Jury Prize winner. Her films, including *93Queen* (HBO Max; PBS/POV), *Aftershock* (Sundance; Hulu/Disney+), and *Under G-d* (Sundance; PBS/POV Shorts), have screened at over 100 international festivals, received theatrical releases, and been distributed globally on platforms including Disney+, Hulu, HBO Max, PBS/POV, and ARTE. Her latest feature, *We Met at Grossinger’s*, premiered at DOC NYC 2025 and is slated for release in 2026.

Paula Eiselt: As reproductive rights face increasing threats across the United States, Jewish advocates are confronting a dual challenge: the erosion of abortion access and the rise of antisemitism, both of which target our moral agency, religious freedom, and communal safety. We find ourselves in a very difficult moment in time both as Jews and as people who care about reproductive rights. Our panel today will speak to this crossroads that we’re at and give insight into this moment in time—what we can do and what we’re up against.

Halakhic Views on Abortion

First Dr. Noam Stadlan will talk about the halakhic views on abortion.

Dr. Noam Stadlan: Within the Orthodox community, essentially everyone agrees that abortion is mandated when the mother’s life is at risk, and everyone agrees that abortion should not be done for less than serious reasons. But there are a number of cases between these extremes, where the mother’s physical or mental health is at risk. The mental health risk is usually due to cases of *mamzerut* or rape or a number of fetal defects. There is a wide diversity of opinions about what halakhah says in those in-between situations.

The different opinions are highlighted in a debate between Rav Moshe Feinstein, who lived in the United States, and Rav Eliezer Waldenberg, who lived in Israel. They give different rationales for the prohibition of abortion. Rav Moshe says that abortion is essentially

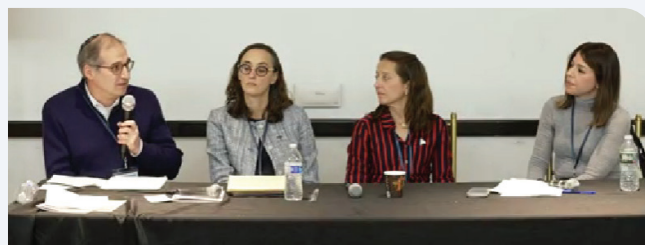
murder without the penalty—but it is murder. Rav Waldenberg says abortion comes under the category of *havalah*—injury to the mother; it also might come under wasting of seed, but it’s not murder.

Each *posek* comes to his conclusion using halakhic methodology. But what you don’t see from reading their *teshuvot* is that there are other non-halakhic factors influencing them. While Rav Waldenberg was at Shaare Zedek Hospital, he saw many women whose children had birth defects. In his *teshuvot*, he writes very emotionally about the suffering of mothers with deformed children. Rav Moshe doesn’t even mention the suffering of the mother in some of his *teshuvot*.

Rav Moshe was probably influenced by the surrounding culture. In the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, there was a big culture war in the United

States about abortion. And although Rav Moshe doesn’t mention Christianity specifically, a similar *teshuvah* by Rabbi Moshe Zweig of Antwerp prohibited abortion for fetuses with thalidomide-induced abnormalities; he wrote: “We cannot have the Divine Name profaned by a lenient ruling when the Church has unequivocally expressed its opposition to killing the fetus in this context.” While we don’t usually *paskin* based on what the Church says, you can see how much the milieu affected these decisions.

In our current situation in the United States, we have increasing patriarchy, Christian dominionism, and a milieu of oppression of women and minorities. The parts



Dr. Noam Stadlan, Darcy Hirsh, Allison Tombros Korman, and Paula Eiselt

of our community that find those factors resonant are going to be even more repressive in their decisions and in their approaches.

We have to understand that the permissive approach of Rav Waldenberg is extraordinarily well-founded and is mainstream in many parts of the Orthodox world. We should have absolutely no compunction about stating that fact, and showing that those who are being more restrictive are probably being more influenced by outsiders than by halakhah. In addition, any law that is more restrictive than the most permissive Orthodox position is denying someone their ability and right to practice Judaism. How can Orthodox Jews want a law that prohibits other Orthodox Jews from practicing Judaism? That just makes no sense. It's very important for us to understand that we have an extraordinarily valid—and in my opinion the best source-based—position, and that we need to be active in this situation.

Any law that is more restrictive than the most permissive Orthodox position is denying someone their ability and right to practice Judaism.

Abortion Activism after October 7th

Paula Eiselt: Darcy, please talk about the work of NCJW and how NCJW fits into the abortion policy space as a Jewish women's organization that works with many different organizations fighting for reproductive rights. Post-October 7th, where have you found yourself and the organization?

Darcy Hirsh: The National Council of Jewish Women is a 133-year-old Jewish feminist civil rights organization fighting for equity and justice for women, children, and families. We have a network of nearly 50 affiliates and 250,000 advocates around the country who we mobilize on issues related to our priorities. We've been involved in fighting for reproductive rights, health, and justice from the get-go. We were actually involved in the fight to establish birth control clinics in America in the 1920s, which led to the development of Planned Parenthood. We've really been in this fight from day one.

With the increased restrictions following the Supreme Court ruling in *Dobbs*, we have been the leading voice in the Jewish community on policy related to reproductive rights, both on the national and the state level. We've been fighting to push abortion ballot measures around the country. We're fighting on Capitol Hill for a federal right to abortion access. We fight against restrictions on reproductive health access in federal law and around the country. And key to this work is our working in broad-based coalitions.

One of the things that brought me to NCJW—I've been here for almost two years, after a variety of Jewish organizational work—was the broad-based coalitions

that we work in to accomplish all of our priorities—whether it's fighting for democracy, fighting for immigrants, fighting for justice against discrimination, or fighting against antisemitism. And it's because of our relationships in those coalitions that we're able to move our shared priorities forward.

October 7th was devastating for all of the reasons that we've all been devastated, and, additionally, because a lot of the relationships that we had in those coalitions were laid bare to see what those relationships really meant, and to consider how we could continue to do this work. And it was hard. It's still hard. People who had been our friends shared views that were very harmful and hurtful.

Coalition work is hard. I am privileged to work at a Jewish organization, and we have a long view of how we're going to unite to move our policy priorities forward. I've been working in the economic justice space—working to end food insecurity, working for healthcare—with a variety of faith and civil rights partners who have very different views of October 7th than I do. They have said, “Do we want Zionists at the table?” I've been at those tables, and it's very challenging. And we still continue to sit at those tables because, as a Jewish feminist organization, we have a really unique voice; if we step away, that voice is no longer at the table. And so it's hard. We call people in; we have a lot of individual hard discussions. But, in order to move forward, it's really important for us to stay at those tables.

I'll give an example. Just last week, a colleague of mine was in a repro coalition meeting with Senator (Raphael) Warnock's office. Senator Warnock was having a really hard time supporting an abortion access bill. And he said, “I'm having a lot of trouble with the faith angle on this.” My colleague from NCJW said, “You know, 83 percent of the Jewish community supports abortion access. At NCJW we commemorate Repro Shabbat every year when we read *Parshat Mishpatim*.” And she talked about the fact that, in our view, religious freedom is reproductive freedom. And his staffer said, “Thank you. That's really helpful and that will actually help him support this legislation.” If we're not at those tables, we're not able to make that change.

Paula Eiselt: Allison, I would love for you to talk about the Red Tent Fund and why it came to be. Allison and I both work in progressive spaces where our Jewishness has made us outsiders.

In relation to Allison's story, I would like to share a story of my own. When I was releasing *Under G-d*, it was a few weeks after October 7th. We had planned a Zoom webinar that was marketed and promoted as an interfaith program about abortion rights. I was on the panel as a filmmaker; the other panelists were Rabbi Dov Linzer, a Muslim imam, a Muslim lawyer, and two Christian leaders. We were supposed to talk about using our faith to safeguard abortion rights. And right after one of us—it was either me or Rabbi Linzer—started speaking, the Muslim lawyer said, “We really can't talk

continued on page 8

My Body. Whose Decision? *continued from page 7*

about this unless we're talking about what's happening to the women in Gaza right now." This was being live-streamed and someone said, "Yes, thank you for saying that." It completely derailed the conversation. Obviously, that's a different conversation that has nothing to do with U.S. abortion policy. But the fact that we were there speaking as Jewish people was enough that we had to answer for that issue.

Allison Tombros Korman: Thank you for sharing your story. This is something we see happening quite frequently in reproductive health and abortion access spaces.

I am the founder and executive director of the Red Tent Fund. We are an organization that funds abortion for all—"all" meaning any person of any religion, any political affiliation, any identity. We want to fund abortions, and we do so with funding through the Jewish community.

Speaking here next to Darcy is quite perfect because there would be no Red Tent Fund without the National Council of Jewish Women. NCJW opened the door and started the conversation about how you can talk about abortion and not just religion—but abortion and Judaism—in the same breath.

I'm a public health professional by training, and I've spent my entire career in sexual and reproductive health. In 2022, I took a job with the D.C. Abortion Fund, known as DCAF in the D.C. area where I live. Like most local abortion funds, they raise money through their community, and they use that money to pay for abortion procedures that are financially out of reach for so many people. I was delighted to be doing that work because I feel incredibly passionate about abortion work, and was able to help people living in or traveling into my community to get abortion care.

After October 7th, people who had been our friends shared views that were very hurtful.

After October 7th, many of our lives turned upside down. I certainly did not expect my professional life to change the way it did. Almost immediately, I was singled out within the organization. I was the only Jewish staff person and there were no Jews on the board. Pretty much the entire organization—with the exception of me—felt "Well, we have to talk about what's happening in Gaza." And my feeling was, "No, we don't. We're a local abortion fund; we fund abortions in the D.C. area. What do we have to add to the conversation that the smartest

minds of our generation have not been able to figure out half a world away?"

I was outvoted on this issue. Which is fine. But then I stuck my foot out again and I said, "Okay, but if we as an organization are going to say things about what is happening to the women of Gaza, how are we not also talking about rape used as a weapon of war, hostage-taking, and murdering?" And I just got "Nos" across the board.

Many people who were Jewish in a progressive space felt that they were being singled out or othered.

This went on for weeks. And the longer it went on, the more entrenched it became. It became me on one side, feeling like I was being asked to speak for all Jewish people—as if we're some kind of monolith and agree on everything, which of course we don't—and everyone else in the organization on the other side.

I made the decision to resign from the organization. When I called my board chair to tell her that I was stepping down, she didn't pick up the phone, and I left a message tendering my resignation. She texted me back a few hours later and said, "Well, we understand if DCAF is no longer a fit for you," which

to me said, "You're causing a lot of trouble; get out."

So I left. A couple of months later, I wrote about my experience in an online Jewish magazine. The outpouring of responses I got from people—not just in reproductive health, but in other progressive movements like climate change, immigration justice, and food insecurity—was staggering. So many people who were Jewish in a progressive space felt that they were being singled out or othered or being asked to answer for things that we have no control over.

And so I made the decision to start the Red Tent Fund so that people who care about domestic abortion and approaching the work through a Jewish lens have a place where they can come and do that work. We are not going to ask you about your politics on the Middle East. We are not going to ask you any type of litmus test question about why you're here. If you are here because you believe in funding abortion in this country and you are in line with the values that we as Jews bring to this work, we would love to have you in our tent.

What We Should Be Doing Now

Paula Eiselt: What should we be doing at this moment of time when we are being challenged by both antisemitism and the lack of abortion rights in the country? And how

continued on page 26



Navigating Egg Freezing, Genetic Testing, and Fertility

The following is an edited excerpt from the conference session “Navigating Egg Freezing, Genetic Testing, and Fertility.”

Panel:

Aimee Baron, MD, FAAP, is the founder and executive director of *I Was Supposed to Have a Baby*, an organization that provides support and educational resources for people struggling with fertility and infant loss.

Elana Frank is the CEO & Founder of the Jewish Fertility Foundation (JFF), an organization that provides financial assistance, emotional support, and educational resources to people struggling to become parents.

Melissa Rosen is the Director of Training and Education at Sharsheret, an organization that provides support, education, financial assistance, and genetic counseling to those faced with or at increased risk of breast or ovarian cancer.

Rabbi Dov Linzer (Moderator) is the President and Rosh HaYeshiva of YCT (Yeshivat Chovevei Torah) Rabbinical School. An acclaimed Torah and halakhah scholar, he has been a leading rabbinic voice in the Modern Orthodox community for over 25 years and has published over 100 teshuvot (responsa) and scholarly Torah articles.

Rabbi Dov Linzer: This session is on navigating egg freezing, genetic testing, and fertility, with a focus on egg freezing. We will address the social, financial, and emotional issues for people struggling with fertility challenges, the halakhic issues that need to be navigated, and the role of the Jewish community in supporting people, including single women, who are dealing with fertility challenges. Each of the panelists will address her particular area of expertise, and then I will address some of the halakhic issues.

Financial Issues

Elana Frank: I always thought I was going to get married and have a million babies, but it did not go as planned for me. Luckily, I was living in Israel while I started my fertility journey. It was hard, it was stressful, but Israel is a country that really values family building. We did a lot of crazy things to get there, but ultimately we were able to have two children through IVF (in vitro fertilization) for free.

We came back to America, where I met a woman who spent \$60,000 to have twins. One of my old friends said she spent a mere \$20,000 to have a baby. We all shared the helplessness, the stress, the losses, but I was shocked that they also had to deal with the financial pressure.

Today, I run a multi-million dollar nonprofit. We help people on their path to parenthood in three major ways: through financial assistance, emotional support, and education. We're a community-based organization.

We're currently in ten communities nationally, and we're scaling rapidly. We go really deep with the communities we're in. And we work with the full Jewish population, not just the Orthodox population.

I want to start by sharing a little bit about how to make a baby. An egg and a sperm make an embryo. An embryo plus a uterus theoretically could equal a pregnancy. It doesn't always yield a baby, but that is what could potentially happen. It sounds simple, but once you start introducing donor sperm, donor egg, donor embryos, it can get a little complicated.



Rabbi Dov Linzer, Elana Frank, Dr. Aimee Baron, and Melissa Rosen

For five years after I came back to America, I was going back and forth to Israel to use up all my embryos in order to have a third baby. I had about 23 embryos in Israel, and it yielded only two children. It was so stressful. Ultimately, I received two donated embryos, and today I have a six-year-old boy from that.

Egg freezing is one of the tools that people can use on their path to parenthood. It does not guarantee a baby, but it preserves options. Women freeze their eggs for many reasons: delaying childbearing, cancer treatment, carrying BRCA 1 or BRCA 2 mutations, or being single but wanting options. The younger you freeze your eggs, the better; mid-20s is the optimal time. If you wait till your late 30s, it's much harder.

I'm here to talk about cost. Cost is often the biggest barrier for people going through these procedures. Assisted reproductive technology in the U.S. is expensive, and many states do not mandate any sort of insurance coverage. IVF costs about \$25,000. Egg freezing costs about \$16,000, including medication, fees, and storage. In major cities like New York, it trends even higher.

Donor sperm costs \$250 to \$700. Donor eggs start at \$5,000 and can go up to \$30,000. But Jewish donor eggs can go up to \$65,000. That's with freezing and agency fees. Gestational carriers or surrogates can cost \$125,000 to \$250,000. All of these things don't necessarily guarantee a live birth. People sometimes need to do things multiple times.

These numbers are crazy; they're overwhelming. Jewish organizations like JFF, a local New York organization

continued on page 10

Navigating Egg Freezing *continued from page 9*

called Stardust, and Bonei Olam exist to help ease that financial burden.

Emotional Support Needs

Dr. Aimee Baron: I'm a pediatrician. I thought I would be taking care of babies for the rest of my life because I dreamed of being a doctor and loved kids. But sometimes what happens is not what you expect. For me, the unexpected was that I was having trouble getting pregnant. I married my husband after I finished medical school. We, thank God, got pregnant very quickly. I had my first child, and then I just couldn't get pregnant for three and a half years. Nobody knew why. The doctors couldn't figure it out. I was fine, he was fine. It just wasn't happening.

Thank God, after fertility treatments, we had our second child. Then, for some unknown reason, that inability to get pregnant never happened again. We had our second, we had our third. We thought we'd have four, five, or six. I got pregnant again with my fourth, and then at the 16-week ultrasound, I wasn't having cramps, I wasn't bleeding; I was completely fine, but there was no heartbeat. The baby died. And what made it worse was that, at 16 weeks, I was already in my second trimester. I was already showing, and everybody knew I was pregnant. We had to go around telling everyone we were not pregnant.

That same scenario happened three more times in the span of two and a half years. I would get pregnant, I would get to 16 or 17 weeks, and then there was no heartbeat. The doctors could not figure it out. This was somewhere between 15 and 18 years ago, so the world was a very different place in terms of publicly speaking about fertility challenges. I was basically alone, with no support. After that second loss, I never shared that I was pregnant again because I was afraid I was going to lose the babies again. And then I did. I also quit my job because taking care of other people's babies was just too hard. Even though I had three kids at home, it was just too much. I stopped going to *shul*, I stopped showing up to parent-teacher conferences and Hanukkah parties. I just retreated into myself.

My story does have a happy ending. After I quit my job, after all of those years I spent in my bed crying, after retreating from society, we kind of put it away and said, "Okay, let's focus on the good. We have three kids. I'll just deal with the disappointment and know that my dreams will never be realized." We did that for a few years. Then I said, "I think I need to try again." I got pregnant again. At the first ultrasound at eight weeks, when you're supposed to hear the heartbeat, there were two heartbeats on the screen. I turned to my husband, and I said, "Oh, good, there'll be two babies that die now, not one." Because that's trauma. Those two heartbeats are now 12 years old.

What I learned is that I really needed to do something about this. I had the tools as someone in the medical world and as someone with personal experience. I knew I could offer emotional support in a way that others couldn't. Organizations like Bonei Olam and A Time (ATIME, A Torah Infertility Medium of Exchange), which I used, weren't offering the emotional support I needed. So I started an organization called *I Was Supposed to Have a Baby* because I wanted the name to immediately convey why this is hard.

At *I Was Supposed to Have a Baby*, we provide support for people going through the entire spectrum of what a fertility struggle can look like: infertility, loss, donor conception, embryo donation. We hold space for people's dreams that are unrealized—the people who are childless not by choice. These are people who are going through a tremendous amount of grief. And we provide support to every person in the Jewish community going through a fertility struggle—from *frum* to unaffiliated.

We're here today to talk about egg freezing and why that is such an emotionally difficult issue. Just think about the people who are freezing their eggs; if they get to that point, it means that something hasn't gone right. Elana said that the best time to freeze your eggs is in the mid-20s. But practically speaking, nobody's doing that. Who has the finances to be able to do that in their 20s? So realistically, most people who are looking to freeze their eggs are coming at a much later age. Whoever that person is, they need a tremendous amount of support.

Some of these individuals will use these eggs because they hope to find a partner and have the family of their dreams. But many people will never

see that happen. How do we hold all of the different choices and emotional possibilities, knowing that the outcome is not guaranteed?

If your daughter or niece is coming to you and saying, "I want to freeze my eggs," your first response should be, "I'm here for you. What do you need? How can I support you?" Don't assume you know what they need. For someone to get to this place, the premise is that things haven't gone according to plan. People need to be held sensitively.

Cancer-Related Issues

Melissa Rosen: I work for an organization called Sharsheret. Sharsheret is an international nonprofit that provides culturally-nuanced psychosocial and emotional support to the members of the Jewish community who are impacted by breast cancer or ovarian cancer, and those who are living with higher diagnostic risk. We also do a lot of education in the general community about how to identify and then mitigate that risk. My perspective here today is that of "onco-fertility"—fertility as it relates to cancer diagnosis or heightened risk.

Elana mentioned that people freeze their eggs for a lot

continued on page 21



Technician freezing eggs

Navigating Antisemitism on Campus and in the Workplace

The following is an edited excerpt from the conference session “Navigating Antisemitism on Campus and in the Workplace.”

Panel:

Meredith Weisel is the Vice President, State and Local Advocacy for the ADL (Anti-Defamation League). In that position, she leads the development and execution of municipal and state legislative strategy. She is an attorney by trade and has had a long career in politics and government relations. She holds a B.A. from American University in the interdisciplinary study of Communications, Legal Institutions, Economics, and Government, and a J.D. from the Widener University School of Law.

Dr. Laura Shaw Frank is the Vice President for Education and Director of the Center for Education Advocacy at American Jewish Committee (AJC), where she oversees AJC’s work in education policy spaces, including working with Jewish students and parents, administrators in universities and grade K through 12 schools, and government policy-makers. She earned a Ph.D. in Jewish History from the University of Maryland, College Park, and holds undergraduate and law degrees from Columbia University.

Tiferet Grossman graduated from Barnard College in 2026, with a major in Political Science and a minor in History. At the time of the conference she was a senior at Barnard and President of her class. She attended SAR Academy and SAR High School and spent a gap year at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem.

Dani Kogan (Moderator) is the Program Director for the Center for Shared Society, a division of the Jewish Community Relations Council. Her work for JCRC involves community relations and anti-hate initiatives, both within and outside of the Jewish community. She has a dual M.A. from the Jewish Theological Seminary in Jewish Education and Biblical Studies.

Dani Kogan: What does antisemitism look like to you today? How are its manifestations changing? And what should communities understand about the specific challenges in your sector?

Meredith Weisel: First of all, ADL and AJC work very closely on a lot of these issues, from the national down to the local level. One of the things that ADL does is publish an audit of antisemitic incidents every year, which looks at the manifestations of antisemitism that we are seeing across the country. We’ve been doing the audit since 1979. The last audit that we did was for 2024. In 2026 we will be releasing the data for 2025.

It should be no surprise that 2024 data show the highest number of antisemitic incidents since ADL has been tabulating this information. In 2024 there were 9,354 antisemitic incidents across the United States. This

was only a five percent increase from the year before, but it was a 344 percent increase over the past five years, and an 893 percent increase over the past ten years. So, the trend has unfortunately continued upwards. The 2024 data most likely reflect the post-October 7th environment. When we look at specific categories of incidents, we see that in 2024 assaults increased by 21 percent, impacting over 250 victims, and there were over 2,600 incidents of vandalism. Harassment remained relatively steady, but there were a total of 6,552 incidents.

The one data point that I really want to leave you with is that for the first time in the history of the audit, a majority of the incidents contained elements related to Israel or Zionism. I want to be really clear that I’m not talking about criticism of the Israeli government. I’m talking about things that really bled into antisemitism, such as very specific things being said at a rally conflating Zionism with Nazism, or combining a picture of a swastika with the Israeli flag, or making anti-Israel statements that go beyond criticism of the government.

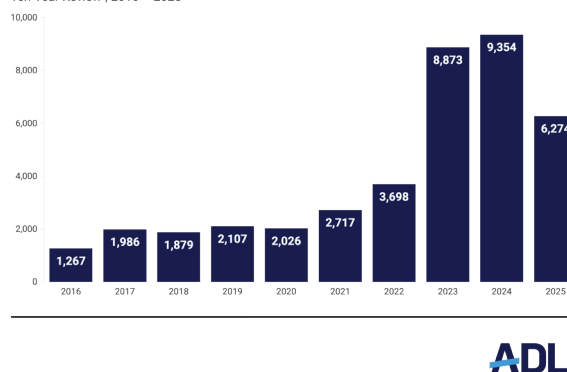
We recommend following the IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance) definition of antisemitism, which looks at demonization and delegitimization of the State of Israel, and judging it by a double standard. Our data show that anti-Zionism is a huge part of the current manifestation of antisemitism. It has permeated throughout society over the past 10 years or so, and we are continuing to see this in 2025.

Dr. Laura Shaw Frank: Indeed, AJC and ADL work together closely, and I think of us as pieces of a big puzzle, because each of us covers different elements of the issue.

I want to talk a little bit about philosophy to explain what’s going on in higher education. Dara Horn has said that throughout history—over the past few thousand years—antisemitism has been a righteous act. It has been a righteous thing to be antisemitic because whatever the evil of a society is, the Jews are made responsible for that

Antisemitic Incidents | U.S.

Ten-Year Review | 2016 – 2025



ADL 2025 Audit of Antisemitic Incidents Ten-Year Review 2016–2025. Photo credit: ADL (the Anti-Defamation League)

continued on page 12

Navigating Antisemitism *continued from page 11*

evil: In ancient Rome, Jews were responsible for killing Jesus. In the medieval world, Jews were responsible for the Black Plague or for killing little Christian boys. In Nazi Germany, Jews were responsible for the loss of World War I and for the pollution of the Aryan race. In the Soviet Union, Jews were capitalists. In central Europe, Jews were communists. So, whatever the evil is, that is what is righteous to oppose. And you can see how, if you are assigning to Jews the responsibility for what is evil in your world, it becomes righteous to oppose them.



Dr. Laura Shaw Frank, Meredith Weisel, and Dani Kogan

There's a new school of thought that is now developing about what antisemitism looks like at this moment. Some of the key thinkers in this area are Adam Louis-Klein, Izabella Tabarovsky, and Shaul Kelner. These scholars say that "antizionism" actually has nothing to do with Zionism. What it has to do with is hatred of the Jewish people being manifested through claiming

Whatever the evil of a society is, the Jews are made responsible for that evil.

that it's a political project about Israel—but it's not. Now, you can have critiques against Israel. You can even have critiques about Zionism. But that's not what antizionism is about. These thinkers remove the hyphen from "anti-Zionism" and make the letter Z lowercase to show that it's not really about Zionism; it's about Jew hatred. It's about saying that Israel is the new Jew—Israel is the evil being that we have to be righteously opposing. And once you see it, you can't unsee it.

This is the type of antisemitism that is mostly manifesting on college campuses. Our college campuses tend to be left-of-center, even far-left, particularly faculty. Now, not all campuses have an antisemitism problem. But what we are seeing as antisemitism on campus is generally that kind of antizionism—no hyphen, lowercase Z—antisemitism, and it plays out in two ways.

The first way is through intellectual culture. What I mean by that is professors who are part of a particular school of thought that is hyperfocused on Israel as the

locus of all evil in the world, a school of thought that has no ability to root itself in dialogue across difference, in fact-based inquiry, and in critical thinking, but instead is just hyperfocused on those 3 Ds that Meredith brought up — demonization, double standards, and delegitimization of Israel. We know this affects Jewish students who are in those classrooms. It also affects young scholars who are trying to advance in particular fields. It often spills over into general, traditional antisemitism because you're a Jew as well. And it spills over into academic societies, such as the American Anthropological Association and others.

The second way it's been playing out on campus is that Jewish students are being excluded from spaces because of their actual or their perceived Zionism. What that might look like is a student in the jazz club is no longer welcome in the jazz club because she is a Zionist. That actually happened at a university not far from here. It often happens in LGBTQ clubs, where a student who is part of that club, sometimes even the founder of that club, is asked to leave that club or is forced out of that club for being a Zionist or for being Jewish and perceived to be a Zionist.

Tiferet Grossman: I can only speak to my own experience. I'm a student at Barnard College. And Columbia-Barnard carries a very long legacy of political activism that I don't think is necessarily replicated at all or most college campuses in the U.S. My main takeaway from my experience these last two-plus years has been that what is and what isn't antisemitism is not very clear.

Jewish students are being excluded from spaces because of their actual or perceived Zionism.

Most often, we're not being told to "go back to Poland." But there is a normalizing of language surrounding Israel that people often use to couch other antisemitic sentiments. So, in the pedagogy on campus that I've witnessed, it is standard to address the genocide in Gaza. But it's less common to find a professor blaming the Jews for the latest government mishaps, though I'm sure that happens in some places.

I serve as my class president at Barnard, which I have done for three years. I also sit on various school committees dedicated to the code of conduct and the student judicial board. In those spaces, what we're seeing the most is the conflating of Zionists with Jews, and then the either subtle or overt exclusion of students on that basis, whether because of assumed political positions or because of stated ones.

We're also seeing a lot

continued on page 29



Tiferet Grossman

How to Move Jewish Institutions from a "Welcoming" Approach to a "Belonging" Atmosphere

The following is an edited excerpt from the conference session "How to Move Jewish Institutions from a 'Welcoming Approach' to a 'Belonging' Atmosphere."

Panel:

Stacey Aviva Clark is the Director of Education and Community Engagement for the Jewish Federations of North America. Over her 25-year career, she has focused on combating racism and antisemitism and fostering Black / Jewish relations.

Ely Winkler is the Director of Advancement at Eshel, whose mission is to serve Orthodox LGBTQ+ Jews, their families, and communities.

Rivka Herzfeld is a disability awareness educator and Tanakh teacher.

Rabbi Marianne Novak (Moderator) is a member of the Judaic Studies faculty at Akiba-Schechter Jewish Day School in Chicago, Illinois and the faculty of the Jewish Learning Collab and Melton+ and serves as the rabbinic advisor for the Skokie Women's Tefillah Group.



Daphne Lazar Price, Rivka Herzfeld, Ely Winkler, Stacey Aviva Clark, and Rabbi Marianne Novak

Rabbi Marianne Novak: In this session we're going to be talking about inclusion. But what do we really mean by it? What does it look like practically in our Jewish institutions and our communities? To start, how does Torah inform your belonging? And what does "belonging" mean in a Jewish context?

Stacey Aviva Clark: I believe that Torah is the foundation of belonging. We are a disparate group of people who are very different from one another, yet connected by Torah and by this vision of having *lev ehad*—one heart. One of the texts that I really appreciate is in Genesis 48 where Jacob says that God promised to make him into a "*kahal*

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch says that the strength of the Jewish people lies in our diversity.

amim"—a congregation of peoples. Commenting on this verse, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch says that the strength of the Jewish people lies in our diversity. That's the foundation of belonging. We've got to figure out how to belong together with one another

when we're all so different. It gives us an opportunity to look for the places where we fit. I often think of a mosaic. If you have a mosaic, you have all these different pieces. Separately, it's just a big mess of pieces. But when you put them together, it makes this vibrant, beautiful picture.

Ely Winkler: For me as an LGBTQ person, the term "belonging" can mean many different things. Does it mean that you're included? Does it mean that you're tolerated? Does it mean that you're fully welcome? The way the Torah informs my vision of Orthodoxy is based on a teaching by my teacher, Rabbi Steven Greenberg, one of the co-founders of Eshel: the Torah is a blueprint for our lives and no blueprint has every detail and every nuance captured. The stories in the

Torah of people who advocate for themselves, such as *B'not Zelophehad*, the stories of those who are different speaking to their leaders and rabbis and changing the conversation throughout our Jewish peoplehood—not going against *Hashem* in any way, but advocating for their own difference. That's how I see how belonging and inclusion fitting into the Jewish framework.

Rivka Herzfeld: To me, belonging means being part and parcel of the whole. It means that there's a literal space for you when you come into the *shul*. It means that you're able to get into the *shul*. It means that there are structural allowances, and there are no barriers for one to get in. It means that there are accessible things for people, such as accessible bathrooms. It means that there are Braille *humashim* and *siddurim* if a *shul* can afford that. It means that there are Hebrew-English *humashim* and *siddurim*. It means that there might be different *minyanim*, such as a slower-paced *minyan* or a fast-paced *minyan*.

A lot of people in *Tanakh* have disabilities, and the *Tanakh* does not shy away from that. Yitzhak is blind, Yaakov has a limp because of his fight with the angel, Moshe has difficulty speaking, and Yonatan's son Mephiboshet was lame. These are important texts that

continued on page 14

"Belonging" Atmosphere *continued from page 13*

can inform Jewish belonging because our forefathers did that.

Barriers to Inclusion

Rabbi Marianne Novak: What are the barriers—structural, cultural, halakhic—that keep people from feeling that they truly belong in our communities? And what does spiritual accessibility look like? How can prayer, learning, and leadership spaces be made more open and resonant for a wider range of Jews?

Stacey Aviva Clark: Something that is really needed in our Jewish community is unity, but not uniformity—an understanding that we are all Jews and what makes us different is what adds to our Torah and our story.

Organizationally, we need to be able to take an assessment of who is in our community and who is in need. Our data tells us that people with disabilities are not being included, even with the best intentions; also Jews of color, and those with financial vulnerability. Being Jewish, especially if you're Orthodox, can be very expensive. Do our organizations have tiered levels of participation, so that people can be engaged in Jewish life and it not be a financial burden?

Another area is how we train our volunteers and our board members and lay leaders to ask questions that open up a bridge to relationships rather than shut them down. I cannot tell you how many times someone has come up to me and asked, "How are you Jewish?" Halakhically we're not supposed to ask people those kinds of questions. And most of the time it's not coming from any ill will. We need to teach our members how to ask the question. If you see a Jew who looks different from you, a better question could be: "With your diverse experience, what is something that you would like to share with our broader Jewish community from your experience and from your background?" That acknowledges that I'm different in some way, but it also opens up the door to say that I have some wisdom that our greater community could understand rather than putting me on the spot to explain how I'm Jewish.

Ely Winkler: When I think about the barriers to belonging, I could rattle off dozens of *halakhot* that are gendered and binaried and written for the traditional heterosexual family structure. That is, of course, a tremendous barrier. But the number one barrier for our belonging is the perception that halakhah has no capability to change or find solutions, that there is no basis for us to look at the text and think about how it applies to our lives. At Eshel we are working with many rabbis who are putting together *halakhot* and research and guides for LGBTQ Jews to observe committed Torah lives.

From a basic spiritual accessibility standpoint within

the Orthodox framework, we need to start with leadership and we need to start with allyship. When a rabbi leads a community with inclusivity and belonging, the community members follow. We have seen that from working with 300 *shuls* at Eshel. Rabbis can lead by having conversations about inclusivity, and by putting inclusivity information on the *shul* website, so people don't have to go digging to learn a *shul's* policy when they want to find a *shul*. I am lucky enough to belong to a *shul* in Brooklyn where we have LGBTQ speakers and scholars-in-residence every few weeks, and sometimes I don't know that they're LGBTQ because they're not even speaking on LGBTQ topics. They are a normal part of the community, and that makes that community accessible to me because I see myself there.

We are blessed to be living in a world where we are now having conversations about moving forward, about removing the barriers, and building better spaces. Those conversations help take down some of those barriers.

The number one barrier for LGBTQ belonging is the perception that halakhah has no capability to change or find solutions.

Rivka Herzfeld: Some of the barriers are actual physical barriers. If there is no doorstop in a door that opens outward, then I can't open it by myself in my motorized wheelchair. I love the *pasuk* at the end of *parshat Yitro*

that says, "Do not step up to my altar with stairs, so that you don't let your nakedness show." In those days, there were ramps that were installed in the *mishkan* and in the *mikdash*, making it an accessible space. Today, there are *shuls* where people do not have access to the Torah or to the *aron* because of stairs, but that's something that can be easily remedied. Somebody who had a stroke and who now has a limp, or who is elderly and uses a cane, or who is using a wheelchair should be able to get up to the Torah and feel part of the community.

To me, spiritual accessibility is very simple because we all have a direct spiritual connection to *Hashem*. In theory, I don't need a Jewish communal space to be physically accessible, because I can just speak to the Master of the Universe in my own way, any time I want. However, we are a community and we do things as a community, and that makes accessibility important.

Creating "Belonging"

Rabbi Marianne Novak: How might we expand our definition of community so that we can include everyone? A recent study found that 20 to 25 percent of people who want to participate in Jewish life feel there's no place for them, and concluded that institutions need to be working together to redefine community, perhaps under some umbrella organization. What might such an expanded definition of community look like for Jewish institutions?

Stacey Aviva Clark: From a Federation viewpoint, we want to be co-creators with the broader community on belonging. Belonging is something that is dynamic—it's always evolving. We have to be in conversation with one

another and be continually asking, “Is this working? What’s not working?” Getting feedback from people. We also need to know what one another is doing. We have to break the silos. We just convened a belonging summit earlier in the year, so that we can understand what pieces each institution is doing well, where we can collaborate, and how we can support the institutions in the things they are doing well rather than reinvent the wheel.

In the Jewish community, you can tell what we care about by where our dollars go. There needs to be a line item in the budget for belonging. It needs to touch every aspect of the organization. It’s got to be so foundational that the organization feels like we can’t do what we’re doing without this element.

Ely Winkler: To understand LGBTQ belonging in Orthodox spaces, it takes a little bit of understanding of Eshel’s journey and the work we have done. It was never enough just to say, “Are you LGBTQ-friendly?” Eshel began its work first to push back and reframe the conversation around what LGBTQ meant in Orthodox spaces. The way for us to ensure belonging is to start with one-on-one conversations—to sit down with somebody and explain to them what an LGBTQ person feels like when they come into *shul* and why it doesn’t feel comfortable.

Belonging is not about tolerance. Even the term “inclusivity” has felt a little shortchanged for us in recent years. “Inclusivity” has felt to me like the rabbi running up to me and saying, “Oh, hi. I’m so glad you’re here. Come sit down in my *shul*!”—but he doesn’t do that for anybody else. Belonging is having LGBTQ people being brought into the *shul* by the leadership that I don’t even know about. It’s about a community looking to the needs of its congregants and responding to those needs without the congregants having to constantly step up and advocate for themselves.

One of the ways Eshel is working to increase belonging is ally training. We’ve worked with rabbis, but now the work of inclusion has to come from the entire community. We’re training people, primarily parents and friends of LGBTQ people, to speak up when they hear someone using derogatory language and to advocate to their rabbis and teachers.

Rivka Herzfeld: I’m trying to help make Jewish communal spaces accessible. And it’s exceptionally difficult. People look at me, a young woman who has a disability, and they say, “Oh, but we don’t have that in our *shul*.” People don’t consider that there might be a person who breaks a leg or an elderly person or somebody who is pregnant. Some of the simplest things are a Shabbat elevator or a ramp. Because the women’s

A lot of people in *Tanakh* have disabilities, and the *Tanakh* does not shy away from that.

section in my *shul* was not accessible, I have had to sit in what was essentially a corral that was made for me in the men’s section, which is not a lovely feeling. I think people need to understand that having a disability is not something we chose. Why don’t you make the space

comfortable for everybody? Make it so that people can get into the *shul* and sit next to their peers and not be cordoned off to the side. The solutions are much easier than one would think. In my

shul there was a Shabbat elevator but there was still a step leading to the women’s section. When I pointed out that the space was still not accessible to me, I was told that it would cost thousands of dollars to level the whole platform, and I said, “Well, why don’t we just gradate the step?” And it was done by the next Shabbat. It’s very simple to do if one has the motivation and is mindful about making the space accessible for all.

Next Steps

Rabbi Marianne Novak: What are the steps, individual or institutional, that we can take to move beyond the idea of “inclusion” to “belonging” as a lived reality?

Stacey Aviva Clark: To start with, we have to stop making belonging “for” others and “giving” people a seat at the table. We have to help them to actually *set* the table. Let’s ask people who need that belonging to say what that should look like; help us design a new table. In the Center for Jewish Belonging, we have created a fellowship where we work with local Federations to build a partnership between professional and lay people to define what is needed in their community and come up with a plan to build it—not something that has been designed *for* the community, but something that’s been designed *with* the community.

Ely Winkler: When Eshel started its work 15 years ago, I don’t think anyone could have envisioned where we’d be today. We were founded on a need to support LGBTQ people and give them hope. Today we’re not meeting

The way to ensure belonging is to start with one-on-one conversations.

people for support—we’re supporting people to thrive. We’re seeing more LGBTQ *smaḥot*, families being built, children and babies being born. When it comes

to what’s next, I think about a story Rabbi Greenberg tells about a young couple he married. He said, “Great, you’ve done it. You’re a *frum* gay married couple, *mazal tov*.” And they looked at him and said, “Rabbi Greenberg, we need a *shul*. We need someone to help us have kids. We need a school that’s going to accept our kids. We need a summer camp.” That’s what’s next. We’ve been starting to work with more day schools and more camps, but there’s still a lot of work to be done.

continued on page 16

Rivka Herzfeld: The “next steps” to help the community don’t necessarily have to be steps. They can be accessible spaces. They can be pathways that allow for everybody to join—somebody with a cane, somebody with a walker, somebody in a wheelchair, somebody with a tremor, a mother with a stroller, a father with a stroller. The pathways forward are going beyond *shuls*, going beyond schools. I love the mitzvah of *tevillat keilim* (immersing new vessels in a *keilim mikveh*). But I can’t do it because it’s inaccessible to me; there is a literal step to get up to the *keilim mikveh* in my town. We need to find ways to make sure that everyone is able to participate in all Jewish communal spaces.

Ely Winkler: The focus on families in most *shuls* is very difficult for many LGBTQ people. Family memberships, memberships of same-sex couples, memberships of parents with children—everyone is still figuring it out. Too few people are actually trying to build an inclusive model and too many are trying to put a band-aid on something that should have been built in from the top.

Rivka Herzfeld: In addition to designing curricula about inclusion, we need to consider who is doing the teaching. I wanted to be a *Tanakh* teacher. I have an

M.A. in *Tanakh* from Yeshiva University. I had multiple interviews in different schools across the religious divide and within the Orthodox community, and nobody could find a place for me. That is incredibly disheartening because it means we’re not teaching our children that there are people who look like me and that they can still be contributing members of society.

I’ve tried hard to make disability not scary to people. I want them to know I’m not so different from everybody else; I just have to go about things in a different way. I’m not “special needs”—my needs are special. I think we

have done a good job at helping the developmentally disabled Jewish community. Now it’s time to recognize that the Jewish community is getting older and people are having more babies, and we need to make spaces that can accommodate that in a real way.

Rabbi Marianne Novak: Accessibility for one includes accessibility for everyone. It doesn’t make the space “special;” it makes it greater, stronger, and holier. When we come in with the mindset that inclusion is not the “extra,” but the necessary piece in order to create communities, that mindset allows us to do so much more.

We have to stop “giving” people a seat at the table and help them actually *set* the table.

From Our Leadership *continued from page 1*

interesting, engaging and eye-opening. A lot of the questions had to do with: ‘how can we bring something like this to our own community?’”

One attendee, a first-timer and one of the relatively few men in the room, wrote that the conference reminded him that “*progress comes from many directions*,” and that the day gave him real strategies to bring back to his more traditional community, even if he would need to lead with the sources rather than the Jofa name.

This is exactly the conversation we hoped to start. It is also the animating spirit of this issue of the *Jofa Journal*. The pages of this issue are filled with voices from the field: educators, lay leaders, rabbis, and community members who are doing the daily work of building a more inclusive Orthodox world. Their wisdom is not theoretical. It is lived.

A Day That Exceeded Every Expectation

We had planned for 250 attendees. We welcomed 416 participants, and 51 speakers participated across 12 workshops and plenary sessions, filling eight hours of programming.

Many participants noted a shift in the conference’s tone and atmosphere: an openness, a feeling of possibility, a sense that the conversation had moved to a new level. One longtime Jofa participant named it “*the best Jofa conference ever*.”

The energy in every room was electric, alive with purpose and what Rabbanit Dasi Fruchter so beautifully named “sacredness.” A window into some of what unfolded:

Rabbanit Dasi Fruchter reframed the *minyan* conversation entirely, offering a new approach that tells people: *whoever is here at the start of davening is enough*. One attendee came away with her specific idea: “*exploding davening—creating 25 leadership roles and sharing them equally*.”

Rabbanit Bracha Jaffe described practical, concrete ways HIR (Hebrew Institute of Riverdale) makes space for women’s voices, from page announcements to using a flipped model that gives the main sanctuary to the women’s *tefillah* for a bat mitzvah. Her suggestion that women announce pages was highlighted by multiple attendees as a tangible first step for communities not yet ready for a partnership *minyan*.

Shoshanna Keats-Jaskoll ignited the crowd with her reminder that every single person in the room has a role to play in ending the *agunah* crisis. One attendee called that session alone worth “*the price of admission*,” describing it as “*dynamic and impactful*” with panelists whose “*outward personalities, styles, and tactics in fighting on behalf of agunot are appreciatively different*.”

Ann Pava shared that there are now 50 Orthodox women Torah leaders serving 50 communities, and that demand for women leaders today exceeds the supply.

The **New Frontiers in Orthodox Communities** session that featured emerging women leaders drew some of the conference's highest ratings, with one respondent writing: *"Loved the variation of the panel—a high school student, [a community leader], and a rabbinic leader of a congregation."* Another took away that *"Sarna on using community organization strategies to build support for appointing female clergy"* and [another speaker] noting that *male rabbis have to engage in tzimtzum to make room for female clergy's authority* were among the most memorable lessons of the day.

Rabba Wendy Amsellem guided women of all ages in lifting a Torah for *hagbah* for the first time. Multiple survey respondents called this experience out specifically as a highlight. Among those who did it: two 80-year-old women. One attendee wrote simply: *"I got to try doing hagbah, which was fun."*

The closing plenary, featuring **Rachel Goldberg-Polin and Jon Polin**, moderated with reverence by **Abigail Pogrebin**, was the emotional and spiritual culmination of everything that had come before. Introducing Rachel and Jon felt surreal. We shared words that still resonate with us: *"Fierce mothers like Blu [Greenberg] and Rachel remind us that women's voices do not merely belong in the public square; they can shape the moral direction of our world."*

Rachel's presence was electric and heartbreaking and somehow filled with hope all at once. She reminded us: *"We all have our Esther moments. Sometimes they're huge. Sometimes they're just about what change you can make today."* Surveyed attendees called it *"a zekhut to be in the presence of Rachel Goldberg-Polin and Jonathan Polin."*

One of the most meaningful moments for us personally was handing **Rabba Anat Sharbat** and **Rabba Sara Hurwitz** the inaugural Blu Greenberg Awards for Orthodox Feminist Leadership. Rabba Anat served as spiritual leader of Hostage Square in Tel Aviv, offering pastoral care to families in desperate situations. And because of Rabba Sara's vision, over 100 women have now been ordained at Yeshivat Maharat. What a legacy!

What Comes Next

As Rivka Herzfeld, disability awareness educator and Jofa Board Member, reminded us at the conference: *"The next steps to help the community don't necessarily have to be steps. They can be accessible spaces. They can be pathways that allow everybody to join."* That spirit animates everything we are building.

The conference launched two initiatives that are already bearing fruit. The **Jofa at Home** program—a framework for bringing Jofa's educational and community-building work directly into homes and local networks—drew five to six applications within days of the conference, including two high school girls from Atlanta who attended and immediately wanted to get involved. We have since launched

with our inaugural cohort of 12 participants and could not be more energized by what we are seeing. We recently hired **Rabbanit Goldie Guy** as the inaugural Jofa Scholar to teach and lead this engaged group of lay people.

The **Feminist Community Toolkit**, developed in collaboration with Jofa Board Member Dr. Talia Hurwich and beautifully illustrated by our own Sarah Small was launched at the conference and is now available at jofa.org/toolkit. Titled *"So What Happens During the Torah Reading?"*, it is a step-by-step guide to partnership *minyán tefillah*: demystifying every role at the *bimah*, from the *gabbaim/gabbaiot* to the *leyners*, to those called for *aliyot*, with original illustrations and a companion digital toolkit that includes audio recordings for leading key parts of the service. Whether someone is launching a new *minyán*, strengthening an existing one, or simply curious about how partnership *tefillah* works, this resource was designed to lower every barrier to participation. You do not need to live in a major city, belong to an established *minyán*, or have prior Torah-reading experience to step into leadership. You only need interest and the desire to build an inclusive Orthodox community.

A Living Community

We often speak about the Jofa community as if it is an abstract thing. But it is not. It is the 80-year-old woman lifting a Torah for the first time. It is the ninth graders who are eager to bring Jofa's resources to their friends. It is the longtime attendee who has *"been coming since the very first conference"* and called this one *"exceptionally well run."* And it is the person who wrote: *"It was invigorating to be back."*

That is who we are building for. That is who we carry with us into every issue of this journal, every webinar, every Jofa at Home session, every college campus initiative, every fellowship, every program we are only beginning to imagine.

We are so grateful to everyone who showed up in December, who fills these pages, and who does the quiet, daily work of building a more inclusive and joyful Orthodox world.

Ashreinu. How fortunate we are.



Jofa.

Swag for every level of giving.

\$1,800	Sponsor an Issue in Honor or Memory
\$180	Limited-Edition Teddy Sweatshirt
\$72	Jofa Sweatshirt
\$54	Tote Bag + Sticker Set
\$36	"I ♥ Eruv" Tote Bag or Mug

Scan to Donate



Every donation to Jofa comes with a thank you gift. Give at the level that's right for you.

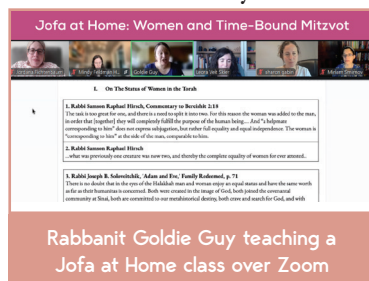
The spring and summer months were filled with meaningful learning, bold advocacy, and expanding community engagement for Jofa. We are also marking an exciting milestone with the release of the first-ever digitally available Jofa Journal, making our thought leadership and Torah scholarship more accessible than ever before. From rich scholarly sessions on halakhah and gender equity for our Jofa at Home participants to standing alongside dozens of faith organizations in a landmark legal case, Jofa continues to lead with purpose.

Jofa at Home: Women and Time-Bound Mitzvot

On June 4, Jofa at Home participants from around the world gathered for a Zoom session led by our inaugural Jofa Scholar, **Rabbanit Goldie Guy**. Rabbanit Goldie was ordained by Yeshivat Maharat in 2017 and is a passionate educator based in Chicago, where she serves on the Rabbinics faculty at Hebrew Seminary, teaches for the Jewish Learning Collaborative, and is a beloved presence across the Chicagoland Jewish community. She has previously served as Director of Hadar Chicago and Director of Religious Engagement at Anshe Sholom B'nai Israel Congregation. We are thrilled to welcome her to the Jofa team.

The topic of the June session, “Women and Time-Bound Mitzvot,” opened a rigorous and timely conversation about gender equity in Jewish law. Drawing on Rav Soloveitchik’s teaching that men and women hold equal status in halakhah with both created in God’s image, both present at Sinai, and both in dialogue with God, the session explored the Talmudic debate over whether women may voluntarily perform *mitzvot* from which they are exempt. A key halakhic principle emerged: the Rif’s ruling (Rabbi Isaac ben Jacob Alfasi, Northern Africa (1013-1103)) that when communities voluntarily adopt a practice, it becomes obligatory. This provides a powerful precedent for women’s voluntary observance, such as counting the omer, to take on binding communal status in the future. Our Jofa at Home participants went on to teach this topic in their home communities, expanding the circle of Jofa Torah.

Our July session explored a foundational question: Are women obligated in *Kiddush* and can they make it for others? The answer, rooted in the rabbinic teaching that *shamor* and *zakhor* were uttered simultaneously at Sinai,



is a clear “yes”: anyone obligated in *shamor* is equally obligated in *zakhor*. The *Shulhan Arukh* is explicit that women have a biblical obligation in Friday night *Kiddush* on par with men, and the *Pri Megadim* (Rabbi Yosef Teomim, Eastern Europe (1727-92)) extends this principle: “In all matters of Shabbat, men and women are equal, even in rabbinic matters.” The class also tackled a nuanced scenario: When a man fulfills his obligation for *Kiddush* in *shul*, a woman at home who hasn’t yet heard *Kiddush* not only may make it herself; she arguably should. The session closed with a question from a participant in Leipzig about women making *hamotzi*, a reminder that these halakhic conversations are unfolding in communities from Copenhagen to New Jersey.

Jofa at Home exists to give lay people the grounding to bring these conversations and practices into their own communities.

Advocacy in Action: SRE Network Convening

Jofa Interim Executive Director **Dr. Mindy Feldman Hecht** represented Jofa at the SRE Network Convening in New York City on June 15 - 16, dedicated to building safer, more equitable Jewish communal spaces through education and cultural change. The conference addressed harassment, pay inequity, and the persistent gap in women’s leadership. SRE Network cast a clear vision for 2030: communities led by professionals and lay leaders who reflect their constituencies, pay equity as a norm, accountability structures when harm occurs, and policies that genuinely support family well-being.

Jofa was a visible presence at the conference, distributing the *Jofa Journal*, meeting with partners in the field, and affirming our organizational commitment to women’s safety, visibility, and equity in Jewish communal life.



Dr. Mindy Feldman Hecht with Aimee Baron, Founder and Executive Director of I Was Supposed to Have a Baby, at the SRE Network Convening

Dr. Mindy Feldman Hecht with Rachel Gildener, Executive Director of SRE Network, at the SRE Network Convening

Signing the Brief: Reproductive Rights and Religious Freedom

In June, Jofa joined 39 other faith organizations as a signatory on an amicus brief filed with the Indiana Supreme Court, challenging Indiana’s abortion ban. The brief makes a clear and principled argument: The ban

violates religious freedom. Under Jewish law, abortion is not only permitted in some circumstances, but is sometimes required. Any law that prevents Jews from following halakhic guidance infringes on our religious liberty.

Oral arguments are scheduled for September 10, 2026. Jofa is proud to stand with this coalition in defense of both reproductive rights and the freedom to practice one's faith.



Jofa Board Retreat

In July, Jofa's leadership, board members, and partners came together for a strategic planning retreat to reflect on where Jofa is making the greatest impact, identify opportunities for growth, and imagine how we can continue meeting the evolving needs of the Orthodox community. These thoughtful conversations help ensure that Jofa remains responsive, mission-driven, and rooted in the voices of our community. We are grateful to everyone who shared their perspectives, and we look forward to sharing updates as these ideas develop into new programs, resources, and opportunities to engage with Jofa.



Jofa board members during a strategic planning session at the Jofa board retreat

Webinar Recap: Women in Leadership

Jofa welcomed a strong turnout for our recent webinar, **Women in Leadership: Where Does the Orthodox Community Stand Today?** Dr. Mindy Feldman Hecht and Mark Trencher, founder of Nishma Research, explored new data from Nishma Research on attitudes toward women in leadership across the Orthodox community. They discussed emerging trends and considered what the findings may mean for the future of Orthodox communal, educational, and organizational leadership. We are grateful to everyone who joined us

52%

strongly agree that women in the Orthodox community should be given formal leadership roles in shuls



Formal leadership roles = teaching, pastoral care, Va'etzel halachah — not board or admin roles
Nishma Research Survey 2020 | nishmaresearch.com

Jofa
JEWISH ORTHODOX
FEMINIST ALLIANCE

Data from Nishma Research

for this thoughtful and engaging conversation. You can watch the full conversation at Jofa.org and access the research report at nishmaresearch.com.

New Initiative: Women in Shul Leadership

We are excitedly working on a new initiative called **Jofa's Women in Shul Lay Leadership Project**. This undertaking is a first-of-its-kind peer community initiative that combines learning, connection, and practical support. The goal is to support, connect and increase the number of women in synagogue lay leadership roles. We are actively seeking community members who want to get involved and help us build this project from the ground up. If you are a lay leader interested in participating or learning more, please reach out to our Program Manager, Jordana Fichtenbaum, at jordana@jofa.org.

Resource Spotlight: The Ezrat Nashim Database

Planning summer travel? Jofa has partnered with the **Ezrat Nashim Database**, a resource that helps people find synagogues with equitable women's sections. The database tracks women's section size and sightlines across communities worldwide, as well as whether and how *shuls* allow women to say *Kaddish*. Whether you're visiting family or exploring somewhere new this summer, the Ezrat Nashim Database makes it easy to find and contribute information about synagogues that meet your standards. You can access this great resource as part of our updated Feminist Community Toolkit: <https://www.jofa.org/resource/feminist-community-toolkit/> Check it out before your next trip!

Community and Partner Highlights

Jofa congratulates the Yeshivat Maharat graduating class of 2026. Each graduating class adds to the growing field of learned, ordained women leaders in Orthodox and traditional Jewish communities. We are proud to celebrate their achievements. We also want to wish a *mazal tov* to longtime Jofa supporters Ann and Jeremy Pava on their well-deserved honor and recognition from Yeshivat Maharat.

This year's graduation comes amid continued developments in Israel, where three Orthodox Jewish



Jofa Co-Presidents Rabbi Marianne Novak and Rabba Dr. Carmella Abraham with Ann and Jeremy Pava at Yeshivat Maharat's 2026 graduation

women participated in a high-level religious examination process within established Orthodox certification and rabbinic frameworks. Their experience has drawn both attention and debate, highlighting not only expanding opportunities for advanced Torah study for women, but also broader questions raised by community members and institutions about standards, transparency, and how women's religious expertise is formally recognized. Together, these moments reflect a dynamic and evolving conversation around women's scholarship and leadership in Orthodoxy, in Israel and around the world.

Grants Received

We are pleased to share that Jofa has received a general operating grant from Micah Philanthropies, Ann and Jeremy Pava, Trustees, as well as a grant from Elluminate. We are also grateful for a generous SRE Network Microgrant supporting our ongoing work to digitize nearly 30 years of the *Jofa Journal* archive.

Jofa Selected for Third Plateau's Organizational Health Assessment Pilot

We are thrilled to share that Jofa has been selected to join Third Plateau's Organizational Health Assessment pilot program, a select cohort of growth stage, gender-based nonprofits. Over the coming weeks, we will complete a structured organizational health assessment and take part in two guided sessions with Third Plateau's team of experts to reflect on our strengths, identify areas of growth, and shape practical next steps as we continue building out our leadership and infrastructure. Stay tuned for updates as we move through the process this summer and fall.

THIRD
PLATEAU

Recommended Listening

We are delighted to spotlight Rabba Aliza Libman Baronofsky's new podcast, "Mishna Accomplished."

Rabba Aliza studies two *mishnayot* per episode, documenting her journey through all six orders of Mishna alongside her children in preparation for their *b'nai mitzvah*. It is joyful, serious, and deeply personal Jewish learning. Find it on Spotify and Apple Podcasts.



Support Jofa

Everything that Jofa does, from convening scholars and attending national conferences to signing legal briefs and launching new community initiatives, is made possible by the generosity of our supporters. Every donation to Jofa above \$54 comes with a thank you gift. Give at the level that's right for you.



Community members learn together at the Jofa conference in December 2025

By joining the Jofa Ambassadors Circle with a gift of \$5,000 or more, you become a key partner in advancing women's voices, leadership, and opportunities within Orthodox Jewish life. Ambassadors receive exclusive learning opportunities, complimentary copies of *Hilkhhot Nashim* Volumes 1 and 2, a hosted Jofa program in their home community, opportunities to connect with Jofa partners, early access to emerging digital tools, and recognition on the Jofa website.

Consider making a gift today and helping shape the future of Orthodox Jewish life: www.jofa.org/donate/.

Behind the Report That Shook the World: AN EXCLUSIVE BRIEFING WITH COHAV ELKAYAM-LEVY

Join Jofa and our partners for an exclusive behind-the-scenes conversation with Cochav Elkayam-Levy, the human rights lawyer behind the landmark October 7th report, in conversation with journalist Abigail Pogrebin.



Scan to Register



Women's Torah Leadership *continued from page 1*

journey that so many of us in this room have lived. We were there at the beginning. We were rescuing *agunot*, organizing women's *Megillah* readings, creating women's *tefillah* groups. We fought to say *Kaddish*. We advocated for girls to learn Talmud in school. And we proudly watched as Orthodox women became *shul* presidents. What once felt bold and daring is now simply the world my daughter and granddaughters inhabit.

What began as a group of brave, revolutionary women became a movement. And that movement became a field—a field of Orthodox women's Torah leadership. A field of women doing things we could only dream of. And the biggest, most unimaginable dream of all: Orthodox women becoming rabbis, leading communities. And now our dreams are no longer dreams. Yeshivat Maharat opened in 2009 as the first Orthodox yeshiva to ordain women. This year Yeshivat Maharat reached a historic milestone—100 ordained women.

In 2020, Jofa launched the Devorah Scholars program in partnership with Jeremy and me and our family foundation, Micah Philanthropies, placing women Torah leaders in Orthodox synagogues. During our time with Devorah Scholars, we placed 11 women in nine *shuls*. When we saw its impact, we created a full-time placement office in-house at our foundation called The Hub to expand this work. Today there are 52 Orthodox women in leadership roles in Orthodox *shuls* across North America. They come with *semikha*, master's degrees and doctorates in Talmud, *Tanakh*, Halakhah, and Judaic studies, and training in chaplaincy, having studied at Drisha, GPATS, Nishmat, Maharat, YU, Ohr Torah Stone's International Halakhic Scholars Program, and other top universities and seminaries. They serve communities in 25 states, Washington, DC, and Canada. There are 22 *Yoatzot Halacha* serving 26 communities. There are 43 Orthodox women heads of school being supported by Prizmah's Orthodox Women in Leadership Project—ten in all-girls schools and 33 in co-ed Orthodox schools. We're seeing a growing number of Orthodox women Torah leaders publishing scholarly books and articles, hosting podcasts, and becoming public intellectuals.

And we recently learned something surprising: There are more *shuls*, schools, and institutions that want to hire women Torah leaders than there are women available. So we need to build the pipeline for the future. One of the things that we're doing is starting our new Pava Center for Women's Torah Scholarship at Yeshiva University. It will be an elite honors undergraduate program designed to encourage young women to consider a career in Torah scholarship and leadership.

So what comes next? Or maybe I should say, what do we need to be doing right now? I believe our moment, our historic moment, is right now. We are living through frightening, polarized times. Not only is our nation divided, but the Jewish community is divided. Antisemitism and anti-Zionism are at an all-time high. Families are so torn apart over Israel that some are no

longer speaking to each other. And I believe that you, the women in this room, and others like you, will help heal our fractured world. Why? Because study after study shows that women bring leadership qualities the world desperately needs now. We are collaborative. We are listeners. We are consensus builders. We share power and elevate others. And we have something else.

My dear friend Rabba Sara Hurwitz wrote in her Rosh Hashanah sermon, "What the world needs today is radical kindness—a kindness that does not wait for another person to deserve it." Radical kindness is a deliberate choice to treat people with dignity, generosity, and patience, especially when it's hard, inconvenient, or emotionally costly. And I believe with all my heart that Orthodox women leaders embody radical kindness. You bring deep Torah wisdom, collaborative spirit, humility, strength, and a profoundly nurturing approach to leadership. And that more than anything is why I believe the world will heal—because you have stepped forward to lead. And the Jewish world, and the whole world, are better for it.

Navigating Egg Freezing *continued from page 10*

of reasons. A cancer diagnosis is one of those reasons. Onco-fertility is a really uncomfortable place to reside. People who find themselves in this world may not have a cancer diagnosis and they may not even have trouble conceiving a child, and yet they find themselves here because they carry a hereditary cancer mutation.

There are certainly cancer patients who freeze eggs before treatment begins—fertility preservation—because treatment is pretty toxic and, even if no body parts need to be removed, it may push a woman into early menopause. But what I want to focus on today is BRCA and other hereditary cancer mutations. If we took the entire island of Manhattan and tested every adult—male and female, and every ethnicity—about 1 in 400 would carry a mutation on one of their BRCA genes. For those of Ashkenazi Jewish descent, that number is 10 times the risk—1 in 40.

While the vast majority of cancers are not hereditary, about 5 to 10 percent are. For those who do carry these mutations, the risks are significant. Men and women carry these mutations in equal numbers. Carrying one of these mutations raises the risk for breast cancer, ovarian cancer, male breast cancer, prostate cancer, pancreatic cancer, melanoma, and possibly others. In the case of breast cancer, we're talking about a risk of developing cancer of as high as 80 percent for those who carry the mutation as compared to a risk of about 12 percent for those who do not. For prostate cancer, the risk is about 30 percent for those who carry the mutation as compared to a risk of about 12 percent for those who do not. The risk for ovarian cancer is almost, but not quite, as high as that for breast cancer. But I want to be clear that while carrying the mutation raises the risk dramatically, it does not guarantee a cancer diagnosis.

continued on page 22

Many people choose to use assisted reproductive technology to ensure that they are not passing down these mutations to the next generation. They choose to conceive via IVF with PGT (pre-implantation genetic testing) and only implant the embryos that do not carry one of those mutations. The Jewish community has been a leader on the forefront of genetic testing for prenatal mutations. Many people undergo testing before they get married or become pregnant, but these tests typically do not test for the BRCA mutations. Sometimes we hear, “Oh, I got genetic testing before I got married; they would have told me if I carried a BRCA mutation.” That is, in general, not the case. The BRCA tests are generally done separately with the support of a genetic counselor.

There is a lot of support out there for people facing a cancer diagnosis. There is not a lot of support out there for people who find themselves in this space of onco-fertility, which creates all sorts of additional traumas, guilts, and worries. Sharsheret and JFF co-host the only onco-fertility support group that I’m aware of. Onco-fertility raises so many different issues than people going through either cancer or infertility on its own.

Halakhic Issues

Rabbi Dov Linzer: I’ll share some thoughts from the halakhic perspective. My primary message here is that the challenges people face with fertility are profound enough in terms of the medical, emotional, and financial issues. Halakhah should never be a cause of additional stress or obstacles when it comes to issues of fertility.

In preparing for this, I found an article in the Israeli press about a woman who said she had waited two years to get an egg because her rabbi had told her it had to be from a Jewish donor, until finally some other rabbi told her she could take an egg from a non-Jewish donor. Halakhah should never be a source of that kind of stress or obstacle.

Just to touch on some key issues:

Supervision (*Hashgaha*): After the eggs have been extracted, do you require a *shomer*—a *frum* person—to track what is happening with the egg and sperm to make sure there is no accidental mix-up? This is an issue more generally in the area of assistive reproductive technology. It has been treated somewhat like a *halakhah l’Moshe mi’Sinai* (orally passed down from God to Moshe) in the rabbinic world, but it is not based on anything in the Talmud or anywhere. It is based on a reasonable concern—it matters that it’s really your child—but there’s no halakhic requirement that there be observant people watching the processing. There have been some mix-ups in the past, so you do have to take the necessary responsible care that you would anyway to make sure that it is your child. In short, if you can have a *shomer* and it’s not a hardship, great; but it is not a halakhic requirement.

Sperm/Egg Donors: Another issue is the source of the donated sperm and egg. Surprisingly, *poskim* really prefer

as a general rule that if the sperm donor is anonymous that it be non-Jewish sperm, because if it’s Jewish sperm, then there is a halakhic issue as to who the father is. Rav Moshe Feinstein says that’s only *l’khatila*; even with anonymous Jewish sperm, the likelihood that you’ll be marrying your sister is minuscule. And, certainly, if you know who the donor is, it can be a Jewish sperm donor, and you just have to pay attention to who his relatives are.

As far as the egg is concerned, it gets to the question of how you determine maternity if you have one person donating the egg and another person carrying the child. *Poskim* have different positions on this issue. The question of whether the child needs to be converted will be a function of where your *posek* comes out on this issue. My personal position is that it goes by the mother who carries and births the child.

For women who want to donate some of their eggs, if you believe, as I do, that maternity is determined by who carries and births the child, then there are no halakhic issues with donation. For somebody who rules motherhood is defined by whose egg it is, then the egg donor has to be aware that the child birthed from that egg is halakhically their child that is now being raised by another family. It doesn’t mean it’s not okay, but it means something has to be attended to because there are halakhic consequences.

Discarding Embryos: Many eggs are frozen and embryos created, but not all are implanted. Can you discard the additional embryos, or donate them to another couple, or donate them to science? Even Rav Moshe, who takes an extremely strict view on abortion, is concerned only once the fertilized egg is in a hospitable environment and in the womb. *Poskim* as a rule are totally fine with discarding embryos done in a respectful way or using them for science.

The last thing I will say is that rabbis can play an important role in supporting couples with infertility issues. Rabbis will often be the first person that people go to within the *frum* community, after their doctor. In addition to providing halakhic guidance, rabbis can provide pastoral and emotional support, be a listening ear, and point couples to the available resources. The most gratifying experiences I have had as a rabbi are the times when I’ve helped guide women who have gotten terrible halakhic answers, by giving them both emotional support and halakhic guidance that resulted in the birth of a healthy baby.

Egg Freezing by Single Women

Audience Question: Is there funding available for single women to freeze their eggs?

Dr. Aimee Baron: It is financially impossible for some people to freeze their eggs, so they have to reach out to organizations for funding. Bonei Olam is an absolutely incredible organization that has probably put thousands of babies into this world. About three or four years ago

they started an egg-freezing program specifically for single women because the women in yeshivish communities were coming to them and saying they needed options. But their contract says if you accept money from us, you will not use this egg to become a single mother or for a same-sex couple. The funding exists, but the options are limited in that way.

JFF and some other organizations do not have that kind of limitation. We know there are single women who want to freeze their eggs but don't want to sign such a contract because they can't predict what their future will be and want to preserve the option of single motherhood. There is a whole community of women who have decided to become single mothers "not by choice." We are opening up a support group specifically for them. Single motherhood is halakhically permissible. As a community, we need to understand that this is happening and that we need to be accepting and supportive.

Elana Frank: We help women regardless of their religious preferences or observance levels. But we find that funds for egg freezing are limited. Organizations are more interested in financing a "sure deal" like IVF or surrogacy, where you have a greater chance of seeing a baby sooner, because that's what donors like. But there are ways to finance egg freezing. A woman might negotiate with a fertility clinic. There are interest-free loans and Hebrew Free Loans, and some granting organizations and pharmacies have loan programs. It's not great if you don't want to sign your rights away with a named organization, but there is some funding out there.

Cofertility is another amazing organization that exists today. It makes egg freezing affordable, but with a stipulation—you have to donate half of your eggs to another family.

Rabbi Dov Linzer: These organizations, A Time and Bnei Olam, are amazing and have brought so many babies into the world. They're working within their *hashkafic* world, and people who give them money want to support certain things and not other things. The position that they're taking regarding single mothers is not a halakhic one; it's a *hashkafic* one. Halakhah has consistently recognized the profound need and right for a woman to have a baby. When Rachel says to Yaacov, "Give me children or else I die," the Gemara understands that when a woman can't have a child, she feels as if she's dead. When Yaacov responds without sensitivity, the Gemara takes him to task: "Is this how you respond to women in anguish?"

On the YCT website we have a *teshuvah* by Rav David Bigman that deals with the question of providing communal funding in support of single mothers by choice. I wrote a *teshuvah* in response to a single woman who asked whether she could make the *brakhah* of *l'hakhniso b'vrityo shel Avraham Avinu* (to bring him into the covenant of Avraham our forefather), which is typically made by the father at a *bris*. My answer, which is also on the YCT website, is that she could. But to me,

the most important part of that *teshuvah* was that I didn't comment on the facts of the case—because I believe that we have to normalize the reality of single motherhood by not problematizing it.

Genetic Testing of Donated Eggs

Audience Question: Should people who are using donated eggs get those eggs tested for the BRCA mutations?

Melissa Rosen: There are no obligations to get anything tested. However, we want to make decisions from a point of being educated. But even among people who carry the BRCA mutations, some choose to have children via IVF with PGT, and some choose to have children naturally and with their own eggs, for a variety of reasons—maybe it's financially out of reach or maybe they believe by the time this child comes of age, there will be a cure for cancer.

Rabbi Dov Linzer: Halakhah gives a lot of latitude in terms of people's freedom to make medical decisions. I came across a case where a woman was told by her doctors that her life was at risk if she got pregnant again, but she still wanted to get pregnant. The rabbi, quoting the *pasuk* where Rachel says to Yaacov, "Give me children or else I die," said if it's really important to her to have a child, we are not allowed to stand in her way; if she wants to take that risk, that is her choice.

Sharsheret Genetic Counselor: With respect to the question about testing eggs: You can't test eggs for BRCA because the cell that you test gives up its life in the process. You can take cells from an embryo, but you cannot test eggs for mutations. Period.

Communal Responsibility

Rabbi Dov Linzer: What do you see as the Jewish community's responsibility towards single women navigating fertility planning—pastorally, financially, and socially?

Elana Frank: One idea that I thought was really interesting is that *shuls* should create some sort of fund to help the young women in their community freeze their eggs. I think it's the community's responsibility. Also, I think it's very much the mom's—and dad's—responsibility to talk to their children early to empower them to make their own choices in the future. Finding the right language is complicated, and parents should work with rabbis and the decision-makers in their lives to come up with appropriate language.

Dr. Aimee Baron: My thoughts center around "how can we do this better?" There are many people in your life who are single. We have such a beautiful community that does a wonderful job once you have children or are coupled up. But singles walk into the community and immediately feel othered. We need to start in our homes, even at the

continued on page 24

Navigating Egg Freezing *continued from page 23*

Shabbos table. Singles shouldn't be sitting at the end of the table; they should be interspersed with everyone else. In our *shuls*, we need to pay attention to how we talk about rates for *shul* membership or event attendance. Instead of listing the rates per couple, we should list the rates per person. If everything is coupled, it makes single people feel unwelcome. Just simple language changes can make everyone feel welcome.

Melissa Rosen: When we talk about onco-fertility, we're talking about married women as well as singles. We need to do a better job of training our clergy—rabbis, chaplains, *yoatzot halacha*—to understand the needs of what these people are going through. Sharsheret is doing this training with many rabbinical schools and rabbinic organizations. The goal is that if someone comes to the rabbi, they will know what to say, what not to say, and what resources are available—and can actually be proactive in raising potential concerns and dispelling fears about halakhic requirements.

Rabbi Dov Linzer: We very much make this part of the training at YCT. There are so many opportunities for rabbis to raise these topics in their communities. When

we read the *parshiot* about the *Emahot* struggling with infertility, let rabbis dedicate one Shabbat each year around these *parshiot* to talk about fertility challenges. Rabbis can do so much to normalize these situations and embrace everybody in the community.

Rabbi Dov Linzer: Do you have any final thoughts?

Elana Frank: Tell three people you came to this panel today and what it was about because that sparks conversation.

Dr. Aimee Baron: You all know people who are going through this. Don't close your eyes. Keep them open and bring those people into your lives. Envelop them and make sure they feel loved, even as they go through this process. We have an egg-freezing support group where people meet monthly to discuss it—this is no longer taboo.

Melissa Rosen: For those who are of childbearing age, if they are considering genetic testing, this would be the time to do it, so they have time to make any decisions that may be necessary.

Rabbi Dov Linzer: Thank you to all of our panel.

Build a Feminist Community *continued from page 5*

Covid. There are pulpit rabbis and *rabbaniot* where 20 percent of their jobs is gathering ten men in a room so there can be a *minyan*. And that experience of the *minyan* gathering can do really pernicious things to women.

One other small piece we introduced is doing *Pesukei d'Zimra* in a Sephardic style, around the room, with no one up at the *shulhan* leading it.

When I think about building a feminist community, my approach is not to imagine taking the roles that are reserved for men and sticking women in them. I want to examine the whole ecosystem of Orthodox *tefillah*. We can see feminism as about introducing the experience of feeling marginalized (which, by the way, could in theory be the experience of every eleventh man) and think about what it looks like to reimagine *tefillah* so that everybody is engaged, and that our communities serve all people in a different, more nourishing way.

Talia Hurwich: I grew up in the Jofa world. My bat mitzvah was the second women's *tefillah* in my synagogue. The first one was so that the kinks would get worked out. But my bat mitzvah and the women's *tefillah* group in general generated a great deal of controversy among the community. Every women's *tefillah* after my bat mitzvah was held in the social hall, not the sanctuary, despite the fact that there were two sanctuaries. And that lit a fire under me.

My participation at Darkhei Noam started because of Rabba Wendy Amsellem. I offered to *leyn* my bat mitzvah *parsha*, and Rabba Wendy reached out to me

and said, "Would you also like to lead the *tefillot*?" I said, "I'd love to learn," and she talked me through the Torah service. Some time later she asked, "How about *Pesukei d'Zimra*?" Well, I had never done that before. So she taught me *Pesukei d'Zimra*. From there, I became one of the *gabbaiyot*, and later became the women's *davening* coordinator. And from there I did other things, including helping run the Zoom *minyanim* during Covid.

When I became the women's *davening* coordinator, one of the co-chairs of the *shul* said, "You need to know that this job is not just about finding the women to lead *Pesukei d'Zimra* and the Torah service. It's also about training." Darkhei Noam is a partnership *minyan*—a halakhic congregation in which if something was not explicitly labeled for a man, we can have a woman do it. So *Kedushah* is led by a man, but *Pesukei d'Zimra* can be led by a woman. The Torah service—taking the Torah out and returning it to the *aron*—can be led by a woman. On the *Yamim Noraim* (High Holidays), *musaf* is really long. There are elements that men are halakhically required to lead, but there are many *piyutim* (liturgical poems) that are part of that service. And so we have a woman co-leading *musaf* on Rosh Hashanah. We have a woman co-leading *Kol Nidre*. Leadership in these roles doesn't require accreditation; a woman can say, "My Hebrew is good enough. I can do this," and she does.

There are also smaller roles. And we need to draw women from the community to fill those roles: serving as *gabbai't* alongside the *gabbai*, doing *gelilah* (rolling the Torah scroll), taking an *aliyah*, going up to the *aron kodesh* and carrying a *Sefer Torah* through the women's

side. We have to find women to do these things every single week. And there is a lot of work that needs to be done, both individually to train people as well as communally to make sure that we have a community of volunteerism, of standing up and saying, “Sure, I can do this. I’ve never done it before, but I’ll figure it out.”

Challenges to Women’s Participation

Rabba Wendy Amsellem: It sounds like in each of your *shuls* there are parts of the service that you specifically want women to take on, but that sometimes women are reluctant to take them on. What do you think is behind the reluctance, and how do you go about trying to persuade women that this is really something that they might want to do?

Rabbanit Bracha Jaffe: Sometimes the biggest challenge is to have a woman agree to do it. Women are not used to being front and center. It’s rare to find a man who will say, “I don’t want an *aliyah*.” They consider it an honor. It is not rare to find a woman who will say, “Oh no, I can’t carry the *Sefer Torah*; I can’t open the *aron* and put it in.” Often it’s because they’re not familiar with it. So we have workshops during the week or on Shabbat to give women an opportunity to practice these honors, so they won’t feel so uncomfortable doing it “for real.” In our workshops, women can practice in a smaller and safer space where there are only women in the room. That has made a big difference. In women’s *tefillah* settings it also always just feels safer. We are careful about the women who perform the public speaking roles. We want women who speak Hebrew fluently, and are clear and articulate; otherwise it feels like the men know what to do but the women don’t know what to do.

When we want to introduce a new practice, we do it systematically. For example, when Rabbi Steven Exler wanted to introduce having women say *Kiddush* for the congregation, he first spent some time speaking about it. He had some classes where he taught that men and women have equivalent obligations in *Kiddush*, and that therefore a woman can make *Kiddush* for a man in the same way a man can make *Kiddush* for a woman. The problem is the cultural aspect—people are not used to it. But now you will hear a woman making *Kiddush*—Rabbi Exler and I alternate going up to the *bimah* at the end of *davening* and making *Kiddush* for the entire congregation.

I think that the reluctance to participate comes from a few places. One of them is cultural for women in general, and one of them is specific to women in Orthodox Jewish spaces. And when they come together, it’s difficult for women to break free. Being warm and encouraging is

helpful. Often I hear women say, “I’ve never held a *Sefer Torah* before. I might drop it.” And I tell them, “I’m not a strong person and I can carry this *Sefer Torah*. I will be right with you every step of the way. I will show you exactly what you need to do. And if for some reason you’re uncomfortable, I can hold the Torah.” The key is helping women feel that they are important and that they have a role and a place in *shul*. That is done with smiles and with warmth and with finding openings and spaces to do that. And I think that’s something that unfolds over time. Anywhere you see an opportunity to do it, that’s what you do.

Rabbanit Dasi Fruchter: We have a conversion class at the Shtiebel, with 12 people in it right now, and I see a similar reluctance by both the men and the women in that class.

I think the reluctance comes from a lack of Jewish literacy, a lack of familiarity with the particular roles. The way we address this is by first introducing people to smaller, less technical roles. For example, we ask people to stand in front of the room and turn the pages. This teaches them that it’s okay to stand in the front of the room, and it’s not a weird space to be in. I agree that we need an on-ramp for participation—not going from 0 to 60, but finding gentle ways where someone’s voice might be heard solo or someone’s body might be in the main space.



Rabba Wendy Amsellem teaching girl to do *gelilah*

Talia Hurwich: I think the reluctance stems in part from perfectionism, and women are more perfectionist than men by and large. Often when you reach out to women, they say, “Maybe sometime later, but I’m not ready yet.” And my answer is, “No, you are ready. You can do this. Just go for it and in the worst-case scenario, we won’t ask you again, and you’re off the hook.” I think that one of the drivers behind perfectionism being higher with women than men stems from their Jewish *tefillah* education. Many Orthodox women went to day schools where *tefillot* were not led by them, but by boys. When boys have in their minds the memory of a peer leading *Hallel* with his voice cracking, that communicates pretty effectively that some degree of imperfection is okay. The point communicated to boys is the importance of stepping up when asked. Women didn’t have this experience growing up.

For me, the question is: how do you get teen girls involved and engaged, not just in their bat mitzvah? With a partnership *minyán*, a month after their bat mitzvah you can reach out and ask them to do *gelilah* or get an *aliyah*, and soon after, you reach out again saying, “That was awesome. Do you want to do it again?” The current women’s *davening* coordinator at our *shul* is very keen on getting these teen girls leading.

continued on page 26

And I think it's wonderful because that's how you start to get women to be polished, but also to be okay about not being fully polished.

The way that I often used to find women to lead is by listening to their *aliyot*. If a woman gets an *aliyah* and I hear a clear voice who sounds confident, that's a person I reach out to. So many of us wait to be invited without stepping up on our own. It's about observing who is doing what and who has the skills to do more.

Audience Question: If a person is in a synagogue that does not have opportunities for women's participation, what would you suggest as a way of starting?

Rabbanit Dasi Fruchter: One way is singing. Is there a group of women who feel comfortable singing and can model that for other women? Another thing I saw when I was growing up was "*Kaddish* buddies"—a system of people to stand with women in their year of mourning or when they have *yahrzeits* to really be present and to answer their *Kaddish* loudly and clearly. These are smaller steps to start to hear more women in the *shul* space.

Rabbanit Bracha Jaffe: If women's participation can't happen in the *shul* during services, I think it's okay and beautiful to create spaces for women outside of that. I also want to say that knowledge makes a big difference. If we teach women that women and men have the same halakhic obligation for *Kiddush* and therefore a woman is allowed to make *Kiddush* for a man, then even if she never makes *Kiddush*, she knows enough to respond when a man or a woman objects that she can't make *Kiddush* for them. Have a learning group. Jofa has prepared wonderful brochures on these topics. You may need a facilitator or a teacher to lead such a learning group and may want to have this learning in a "women only" space for women's comfort level.

A young woman in my community said, "We need an *oneg* for just women to sing because there are also spaces where only men sing." So she created that and now we have events for just women to lift their voices together in song. Another beautiful custom in our *shul*: if someone has a *yahrzeit* and they come to say *Kaddish*, we give them an opportunity to speak about the person who passed away, either at the end of *shaharit* or between *mincha* and *maariv*. That's not a ritual role; it's not a liturgical role. But it creates another space to hear a woman's voice. And the men and women have equal access to that space.

Even if they don't have an active role in the *davening*, we can still empower women and help them feel part of the community and important by having spaces that are meaningful and not "dumbed down" for women. It's important to not feel paralyzed by the limitations of your *shul* and end up not doing anything. Look at it differently: Where can I create spaces for women? If not in the main *shul*, let's find other spaces and other locations.

My Body. Whose Decision? *continued from page 8*

do we keep the abortion conversation going? Because usually when any minority group is fighting for their survival or to preserve their identity, that has to be their first priority. And in many of these cases, women's rights are the first to go. So how do we address this climate of antisemitism and eroding rights while making sure that the abortion conversation is not going to get lost in our communities?

Allison Tombros Korman: It's a great question. Darcy and I represent two different approaches to that question. Darcy and NCJW stayed at the table in coalition with these other organizations and I'm so grateful they did; someone has to be at those tables making our voice heard. And at the same time, I think it was completely appropriate for me and others to walk away and say, "We're going to do our thing the way we do it."

We have seen this before—whether it's universities or social clubs or law firms. We've stepped aside and made our own institutions, and have made those institutions so undeniably important in the work that they do that they continue to keep the conversation going. What's really important to me is that: (1) we're out here funding abortion because there has never been a more critical time to fund abortion; and (2) I don't want us to walk away from the table wholesale and lose this space in the abortion conversation that Jews have been a part of for so long.

So I think it requires a complementary series of actions, with folks in coalition staying there, and folks like Red Tent going out and carving their own path.

Darcy Hirsh: To echo Allison, there are different tools for different times and for different organizations and people. I think the overarching takeaway is that we need to be part of the conversation in whatever way feels comfortable for us. But it's really important that we stay in the conversation.

Here's an example of our approach. On the one-year anniversary of October 7th, an organization in the reproductive rights space released a horrifying statement about the attack. Jofa released a statement condemning their statement, which was extraordinarily meaningful for many in the Jewish community, and it's really important that Jofa spoke out in that way. NCJW did not, because we are positioned differently — we work in coalition with that organization and wanted to work within that relationship in order to make change. Instead, we were able to create ground rules to make sure that we were able to work productively in coalition with them moving forward, on the issue the coalition was formed to advance: reproductive rights in the US.

Another area NCJW is working on involves the FACE Act (Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances). This is a law that was passed in 1994, a little over 30 years ago, in the face of horrific attacks on clinics, to protect health providers and people seeking reproductive health access to clinics. NCJW was part of the coalition that worked

to pass this law. The law also protects access to houses of worship. It is now being used to protect houses of worship that have been seeing violent protesters blocking access to them. But the current administration has stopped using the FACE Act to protect clinics. One of the things we're talking about at NCJW is how we can use our understanding of this law to protect access to both houses of worship and clinics. Both of these aspects of the law reflect our Jewish values, and this is an area where we can bring a unique perspective.

We need to be part of the abortion conversation in whatever way feels comfortable to us. But it's really important that we stay in the conversation.

Dr. Noam Stadlan: From a halakhic point of view, I think we need to educate within our community that having access to abortion in the cases that are allowed—and sometimes mandated—by halakhah is important. We need to educate as many people as possible as to what the halakhah actually is, and clear up any misconceptions. It's also important to emphasize that these restrictive laws are impinging on our, and everybody else's, religious freedom.

Paula Eiselt: Noam, there have been a lot of reports of antisemitism in the medical space. For example, Jewish women in the United Kingdom recently reported that they need to have a Jewish doula come to the hospital with them because they don't trust the health care system in the UK. Are you seeing any of that?

Dr. Noam Stadlan: I personally practice in an area that's heavily Jewish, and I see very little of that. I think that here in the United States the vast majority of medical staffs are professional, and even people who have deeply-held beliefs are constrained by that. There have been isolated incidents, but they are very few.

Questions from the Audience

Audience Question: What does halakhah permit or require in the case of abortion?

Dr. Noam Stadlan: The most commonly-quoted position is that of Rav Eliezer Waldenberg, who said abortion is permitted where there is a "great need." "Great need" is a pretty amorphous concept. He permitted abortion where the child would have been born with Tay-Sachs and was going to die in a couple of years. He also permitted an abortion in the seventh month where the child would have been born with Down's Syndrome. You have to remember that at the time he was writing, in the 1970s, the care and treatment of someone with Down's Syndrome was very different than they are today. But, perhaps noting the difference in prognosis between a

child with Tay-Sachs and one with Down's Syndrome, he stated that it was necessary to obtain a *heter* from a Rav (as well as permission from the father) when abortion was contemplated for a fetus diagnosed with Down's Syndrome.

But the key point, which is important today, is that he allowed abortion because of the mother's distress. And the only person who can measure the mother's distress is the mother herself. Similarly, if the child is a product of rape or is a *mamzer*, the mother might have psychological distress. And he viewed psychological distress as just as important as physical distress.

Rav Moshe Feinstein's position was that abortion was permitted only if there's a pretty certain risk of death to the mother. Rav Waldenberg permitted abortion even if there was a significant risk of medical problems. But his focus was on the mother.

Audience Question: When is abortion considered murder under halakhah?

Dr. Noam Stadlan: If either the head or the majority of the fetus is already out of the birth canal, then it's considered a separate life. At this point, the mother's life is not prioritized over the baby's because the baby is considered to have independent life. Prior to that, Rav Moshe Feinstein would say abortion is considered murder, but there's no murder punishment attached to it. Rav Waldenberg would say it's not murder; it's a different sort of prohibition.

Paula Eiselt: To add to that, as part of my research for my film *Under G-d*, I interviewed Rabbi Jeremy Wieder of Yeshiva University (who recently announced that he is making *aliyah*) and he said that Rav Moshe Feinstein's position is a minority viewpoint. Everyone I have spoken with said it's really up to the mother in terms of psychological distress. On a hopeful note, I have a son who is in a mainstream Modern Orthodox high school, and in his halakhah class he is learning that abortion is permissible under Jewish law.

If rabbis understood how many women in their community need abortion care to complete a miscarriage, they would think twice about opposing it.

Audience Question: The Jewish community as a whole has moved to the right, especially after October 7th. Has that affected the Jewish community's attitude toward abortion?

Paula Eiselt: As Noam mentioned, decades ago Rav Moshe Feinstein was influenced by Christian viewpoints on abortion. I think something similar is happening within the Orthodox community today. The mainstream

continued on page 28

My Body. Whose Decision? *continued from page 27*

view in the Jewish community, which is not my view, is that the Trump administration is better for Jewish people. That attitude leads them to overlook other policies of the administration. This is especially true about abortion, where the topic is so stigmatized.

Allison Tombros Korman: I'm sure you are right that some of that is happening. I have always been amazed at the mental gymnastics people can do when it comes to things that impact their life directly, particularly abortion. If you talk to most abortion providers, they will tell you a story about someone who is outside their clinic protesting every weekend. And then one week that person is seeking an abortion in their clinic, either for themselves or for their child, and they find a way of explaining why their case is different.

Darcy Hirsh: I can't speak to that question directly, though I'm sure you're right. One of the things that really concerns me about the right—and it's not just the Trump administration—is that it is legislating Christian values under the guise of religious freedom. But it's not religious freedom for everyone; it's religious freedom for those with a minority extremist Christian view. This goes to reproductive health access, bodily autonomy, religion in the schools. We are fighting in several states to stop the Ten Commandments from being posted in schools. When we think about a Jewish movement around abortion access and the many ways in which the administration has been good on antisemitism, we have to think about how to tie these things together.

Dr. Noam Stadlan: I think the right wing in the Orthodox community has found resonance with the right wing politically, and they interact with each other. Most people who would support a lot of what the administration is doing are against having this Jofa conference and other women's rights things, and in favor of restrictions on abortion. I think there is unfortunately common ground

between the right wing in our community and the right wing in our culture, and that's something we have to work on.

I was talking to someone in Israel who said that within the *haredi* and very right-wing communities, when they talk or write articles, they're very restrictive, but when applied to specific individual cases, they are more supportive of the less restrictive position. Rabbi Jeffrey Fox, the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Maharat, was telling me that Rabbi Eliezer Melamed, who is a major Israeli *posek*, told him that he is moving his approach toward the less restrictive position because he is seeing the results of being more restrictive.

Audience Question: What can individuals do to support reproductive health access?

Allison Tombros Korman: There's so much you can do, and most of it starts within your own sphere of influence. At the Red Tent, we have synagogue partners—synagogues across the country that sign on and say, "We stand behind what you're doing." But there's an absence of Orthodox congregations doing that. The best way to get a synagogue to sign on is to have the pressure come from within the congregation. Whatever the denomination, it is always more successful when the congregant asks the leadership for it.

Paula Eiselt: As we all know, the vast majority of the leadership of the Orthodox community is male. There's a lack of awareness and education about abortion and miscarriage. I think if these rabbis understood how many women in their community need abortion care to complete a miscarriage, they would think twice about opposing it.

I spoke to a rabbi early on after *Dobbs*, and he was convinced that if the mother's life was at stake, the hospitals would act. We now know that's a fiction because they're not going to risk violating the law, and women have actually died. Rabbis need to be made aware that this is happening.

Darcy Hirsh: One of the best things you can do is around education and normalization of abortion. The more we talk about abortion, and the more rabbis and congregational leaders talk about it, the less stigma there will be. At NCJW we teach clergy how to talk about abortion and reproductive health access, and that's an important part of our role.

Another thing I wanted to share is that there is an increasing threat of criminalization of clergy who are providing counsel to congregants about reproductive health access. Depending on the legal situation in your state, clergy could be penalized for having a conversation with somebody about what their options may be. NCJW has launched a 50-state privilege guide for clergy of all faiths, explaining what conversations with congregants are privileged, and how they can be within their legal rights.

New Frontiers *continued from page 3*

she's the right woman." And that's as far as you need to go, because then you can open up your search. And once you've opened up your search, you can have a fair process.

I want to send each of you home with the thought that you can accomplish this in the same way that the lay leaders in my *shul* did it. And you can make a change in your community.

Rabbanit Leah Sarna is the Spiritual Leader of Kehillat Sha'arei Orah and Director of Public Education and Media at the International Beit Din. Trained at Migdal Oz, Yale University, and Yeshivat Maharat, she is a sought-after speaker and award-winning educator.

Navigating Antisemitism *continued from page 12*

of language to the effect that the board of trustees and donors, Jewish and Zionist ones, are in the ears of the administration, creating a very strong divide between students and administration that is somehow linked ultimately to Jews.

Again, I can only speak to my campus experience, but so far those are the ways in which antisemitism has mostly manifested. It's in pedagogy. It's in the subtle conflation of Judaism and Zionism, and in assumptions about people's political and social identities. And it's in the personal and in the friendships—especially in cutting off people because of assumptions or because of knowledge that someone spent a year in Israel or has a family member there. And that cuts deeper for most of my friends and me than overt statements by professors or clubs, because it has a certain isolating effect that leaves you with only your Jewish friends.



SJP (Students for Justice in Palestine) protest at Stanford University 2026 graduation. Image credit: Compilation from Stanford SJP / Instagram, available on Amcha website.

Meredith Weisel: I'd like to add one more thing to put things in perspective for campuses in particular: It's not that campuses haven't had antisemitism before. Throughout history, we have seen antisemitic incidents, but from 2023 to 2024 there was an 86 percent increase in incidents, and there were close to 1,700 incidents that we tracked. Those are only reported incidents, which means there are likely more—and the majority of them were related to what we would consider antizionism or anti-Israel sentiments that bled into antisemitism. And that started after October 7th.

Some students were told to "go back to Poland." That actually happened several times at George Washington University, where it was yelled at students who were leaving the Chabad House or Hillel. We also saw a lot of

From 2023 to 2024 there was an 86% increase in antisemitic incidents on campus.

incidents that came after student governments were voting on divestment resolutions. Even if the university never decides to divest it creates a climate on campus that is not inclusive of Jewish voices. And there are some student governments that have pretty much kicked off all the Jewish students on their student governments. Some of this may not be direct antisemitism, but it is creating a hostile climate.

But I also want to be clear that Jewish life is still thriving on campus. I actually am a mom of a college

student. It's our responsibility to make sure that we are giving our children the information to help them speak up for themselves and the tools to navigate this climate that most of us adults didn't encounter. I saw antisemitism when I went to college, but it was minor, and it didn't create a climate that wasn't inclusive.

Jewish life is still thriving on campus.

Steps To Combat Antisemitism

Dani Kogan: Moving on to steps that we can take: What are three concrete action steps that students, employees, parents, and community members can take to move the needle on addressing antisemitism where they live and work?

Dr. Laura Shaw Frank: I want to start by saying that it shouldn't be the responsibility of the Jewish community to confront antisemitism; it should be a society-wide effort. AJC does a survey of antisemitism every year which dovetails very well with ADL's collection of incident data. We collect data on how Jews feel and how the general American public feels. Over the past number of years, we've asked a question about whether people see antisemitism as a problem of

the Jewish community or a problem of society as a whole. And 90 percent of the general population of America says that antisemitism affects society as a whole; everyone is responsible for combating it.

There are lots of different ways to combat or confront antisemitism. I don't know if we're ever going to eliminate it. It's been baked into Western thought for thousands of years. But we can tamp it down. I'm not going to talk about lawfare, even though that is a real thing. Lawfare is using the courts to fight antisemitism. We don't generally engage in lawfare at AJC, although it is an important tool. I'm going to talk about what we do at AJC. We engage in very deep, very close work with university presidents, college presidents, deans, heads of school, superintendents, and elected officials; and we believe very deeply in the power of long-term close relationships with leaders to make change.

The first concrete action step is to partner and create voluntariness. What do I mean by that? Probably every person in this room has some connection to an educational institution—whether you are a parent or a grandparent of a child in a K-12 school or in a higher ed space, whether you yourself are a student, whether you pay property taxes and therefore have a stake in your school board, whether you have neighbors, friends, nieces, or nephews, who are students.

What we have seen is that when you are a person they can trust—who is invested in the school, who is invested

continued on page 30

Navigating Antisemitism *continued from page 29*

in the success of educational institutions in general, who is invested in this country and the success of the educational system in this country—if you can be trusted, you will be able to transmit information and goals to the schools that they will accept from you. You have to be in it for the long haul. Be a resource. When I say create voluntariness, what I mean is that when they say, “Oh, there was a swastika in the boy’s bathroom; we don’t know what to do,” they will think, “Let’s call that parent who was really helpful to us that time,” or “Let’s call our local person from AJC or ADL.”

We have created action plans for higher ed administration, for K-12 public schools, and for K-12 independent schools. We also create guidance—on all sorts of issues where schools have requested our help: how to bring a speaker into school, how to address an incident of antisemitism in school, what to do in the December holiday season, how to ensure an inclusive school cultural evening, how to address complicated conversations about whatever the issue is. We created these resources carefully, to truly meet the needs of educators, and many educators have gotten in touch to tell us how helpful they are. Be the resource for the schools in your area—share our action plan and guidance documents with them and offer to connect them with AJC’s Center for Education Advocacy if they need further assistance.

I want to be honest with you: It is much easier to be the resource in a K-12 space than a higher ed space. Higher ed spaces don’t want to hear from you unless you are a student, a faculty member, or an alumna—or, of course, a significant donor. In general, we recommend not trying to get involved with making change in your child’s college. Instead, help empower your child to do that. Of course, there may be very severe instances when you have to step in.

Second of all, report, report, and report. We have found that 78 percent of Jews who had experienced antisemitism did not report it. When we asked them why they didn’t report, their top three answers were: 54 percent said, “I didn’t think anything would be done”; 44 percent said, “I didn’t think it was serious enough to report”; and 22 percent said, “I didn’t know how to report it.” Colleges and universities all now have portals where you can report antisemitism. We tell people to report to schools and also report to Hillel and ADL. It’s really, really important. We can’t address a problem that we don’t fully understand because we lack the data.

And the third concrete thing is making sure that you are engaging with other groups in your community—whether it’s in the education space or just generally in your community—the way you want them to engage with you. We always speak about antisemitism in school spaces through a lens of democracy—of the fraying of our American democracy. We know that about two-thirds of Americans, if not more, are worried about the state of our democracy. It’s not a Republican thing. It’s not a Democrat thing. It’s not a young thing. It’s not an old thing. It’s not a woman thing. It’s not a man thing. It’s an everyone thing. So, we talk about antisemitism

through a lens of democracy, because people don’t necessarily care about Jews, but people do care about the security of democracy in our country. And we know

.....
People don’t necessarily care about Jews, but people care about the security of democracy in our country.
.....

that a nation that can have the tough conversations to solve the many problems that face us, a nation that is not afraid to hear things that they disagree with, where we’re more acutely understanding of the misinformation and disinformation that we get on social media, that’s going to be a better nation for all of us.

We encourage people to use what we call our TEACH framework. We use it in education spaces, but it applies everywhere. TEACH stands for **Trust, Empathy, Accountability, Curiosity, and Humility**. And that’s what we want to seed in our communities. We want to interact with others that way. We can be curious. We can be humble. We can admit that we don’t always have all the answers, and we expect that those we interact with feel the same way.

To sum up, three things to do are: (1) partner and create voluntariness, (2) report, report, report, and (3) engage with other groups the way you want them to engage with you.

Meredith Weisel: I agree with Laura that antisemitism is not a Jewish problem—it’s an everyone problem. We have to start from that place when formulating action items. At ADL, I oversee our state and local advocacy. We also have an entire federal affairs team that is working with the federal government. There are real policy solutions to combatting antisemitism, but that is not something that has been talked about enough. It’s more than just strengthening hate crime laws. That was crucial for a very long time, and there are still some states where we are working to do things like strengthening the laws.

But data drives policy. It sounds cliché, but it is actually very true. Real-life examples of what is happening on the ground drive our policy agendas to make real changes. We have a very robust policy agenda that we are working on for combatting antisemitism. What you can do as community members is get involved in your local community. You don’t always have to join your ADL regional chapter or your local JCRC. You can get involved on your own. But I would encourage you to be a part of some of those groups because we create robust lobby days, and you want to be up there telling your story whether you’re a student, a parent, a grandparent, or a general community member who cares about antisemitism. And bring a friend—they can also come and do this work.

One of the projects we are working on is trying to understand what is happening in each state, because in 2024 every single state and the District of Columbia had at least one antisemitic incident. It doesn’t matter if you are in New York, where you have millions of

Jews, or you are in Arkansas, with a very small Jewish population, antisemitism still shows up. You can help influence legislation by telling your story. I am a lobbyist so I often speak to legislators. But they need to hear from constituents. Trust me, my congressman listens to me more than the one whose district I don't vote in. That's reality. It's the same thing with your state representatives.

The second action item is to get involved in your school, whether you're still in high school or on a college campus. There are organizations that have the resources to help you. We are doing the research and have the data to help you have conversations with your administrators when they are not responding to antisemitism on campus. And if you are a parent, help your student—but they need to be the voice and they need to be the ones speaking up, because they're the ones who are there on the campus on a day-to-day basis.

The third action item is community. A lot of synagogues are starting to get involved. They're forming committees and antisemitism trainings, not just within the Jewish community, but outside the Jewish community. My synagogue has done trainings with several different churches, so that they can understand the manifestations of antisemitism. If they can recognize it, they can call it out. Antisemitism leads to other forms of hate. Everybody knows that just because they start with the Jews, it doesn't end with the Jews.

Getting involved in the larger community is crucial. I don't just want a Jewish legislator advocating for a bill to create a buffer zone around a synagogue where protestors can't go. I would also like to have a non-Jewish legislator advocating for these protections. One, it impacts all houses of worship; but two, it shows that this is part of our community and society. Political involvement is hyper-local, because the reality is that everything that happens at the federal or state level is still about the local community. And the things that affect the local communities eventually trickle up to the federal and state level.

Tiferet Grossman: I want to start with something not to do. This might be unpopular and contrary to other things you've heard, but I think there is a very delicate balance of when to get involved in college campus affairs if you are not yourself involved on a college campus. More often than not, outside actors—be it well-meaning parents, well-meaning Jewish donors, politicians—their involvement in campus affairs has often not led to meaningful, productive change. It has often actually added fuel to the fire.

As for action items that we can take to support students during this time: Right now, it's much harder to change peoples' opinions, or even to calmly discuss the terms of the debate, like what counts as antisemitism. It's much more within our control to change the way we react to antisemitism, whenever we identify it.

So, these three things are more immediate steps you can take: The first is encouraging your students or your friends or your children to first and foremost speak to people. When your classmate says something abhorrent

or says something that feels like a microaggression and is not obviously offensive, respond to them in a respectful rather than patronizing way. This has been one of the more effective ways of engaging in a personal and meaningful dialogue. If that doesn't work, it may be necessary to go to your student government or your deans or outside resources, but it should start on a more human level. Speaking to people also means using your voice as a voter on a college campus, as one who has a vote in your government. Voter turnout at Barnard College, for example, is incredibly low, despite it being a very vocal college campus.

The second thing is to keep sending kids to these colleges if you are in a position to do so. I think that there's a strong tendency to conflate being very uncomfortable on a college campus with being unsafe. I have never felt physically unsafe, but I have often felt extremely uncomfortable. But to me, it is still overwhelmingly worth it to be on the college campus. And I can say that because we have a very strong Jewish community at

I have never felt physically unsafe on campus, but I have often felt extremely uncomfortable.

Barnard—which I know is not the case on a lot of college campuses. What I tell parents who come to Columbia-Barnard with prospective students is that the infrastructure is there, that the people I've met and the diversity of professors and students and opportunities available to me make it overwhelmingly worthwhile, and I think it would be a shame to see Jewish presence on my college campus diminished.

And my third thing is to start education about the conflict very young with an eye toward what students might encounter later. I'm very grateful that the first time I heard about the Deir Yassin massacre was not on my college campus, but I don't think that's the case for most of my Jewish peers. I think there are ways for yeshiva day schools, in particular, and other Jewish spaces to ensure that people are receiving a rigorous Israel education that does not shy away from some of the less positive aspects of Israeli history, but also instills Jewish pride in students.

Dr. Laura Shaw Frank: I want to emphasize again what Tiferet just said. One of the most important things that we have found at AJC is that when something happens on a campus, the first thing we need to do is find the Jewish students on that campus and talk to them. Very often they say, "Please do not post on X about it. Please do not do anything. You're just going to rile things up on campus." Jewish students are adults. They are the citizens of campus who understand best what's going on in their campuses. And we must listen to their experience and let them provide guidance about how we should be interacting on campus.

The other thing I want to say—something that we tell Jewish parents all the time—is live with Jewish joy. We

continued on page 32

Navigating Antisemitism *continued from page 31*

can't go on just being aggrieved and angry and hurt. And yes, we are living in a really hard time in America right now. But we have an incredibly resilient tradition, people, and history. So, let's live with Jewish joy, and let's remind our families and communities about the incredible tradition, the incredible religion, the incredible people that we come from.

Questions from the Audience

Audience Question: We've been hearing a lot about antisemitism from the left. What are you seeing and doing about right-wing antisemitism?

Meredith Weisel: Antisemitism is not left or right. Antisemitism is antisemitism. Just because we have seen an increase in antisemitism on the left, it hasn't stopped on the right. And actually antizionism also exists on the right. In the past few weeks we have seen a number of antisemitic incidents on the right. Professional academic associations have had a lot of antisemitic incidents within their communities. It doesn't matter where it shows up, we must condemn it.

Dr. Laura Shaw Frank: We at AJC talk a lot about the horseshoe—where extremists meet extremists at the bottom. In the end, antisemitism is rooted in conspiracy theories about Jewish power, Jewish depravity, and Jewish control, which are often shared by the right and the left. If you're in a community filled with like-minded people, those people “over there” become the “evil people” whom it's easy to blame for whatever is going on. And that is not a province of the right or the left. It's a province of both.

Tiferet Grossman: I'm not sure that I can speak to this from my campus experience. People who identify as conservatives on my campus have often voiced feelings of isolation and ostracization for their expressions of conservative political leanings. Whether or not that's actually worrying, and while I'm positive that there is antisemitism from the right on my campus, the right-wing voice is rather minimal and maybe even stifled. Antisemitism from those quarters is just not as visible.

Audience Question: How do we prepare high school seniors going into college? What resources are available for them?

Dr. Laura Shaw Frank: AJC has a program called LFT, Leaders for Tomorrow, that's been going on for 12 years now. It's a program that offers both education and mentoring in advocacy skills. It offers students the opportunity to explore their Jewish identities, understand the broad scope of Jewish history and history of antisemitism, and unpack the history of Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict. And it provides skills development in how to be a good advocate, how to build bridges, how to create dialogue across difference, how to reach out and

build allyship on campus. I highly recommend LFT. It's really important for kids to have a strong sense of who they are as Jews.

As parents, you can play a significant role as well. Our teens are working to chart their own course, and it may seem like they're not listening to you. But they are—and they are watching what you do. Modeling what it means to be an engaged, loving, passionate Jew is the best way to send them off.

Meredith Weisel: We have a conference called “Never is Now.” We bring hundreds of high school students together to come and learn about how antisemitism is manifesting. Often we recognize something as antisemitic, but can't articulate it to others. It's important for teens to learn how to navigate the process to report an antisemitic incident. It's not just about Israel education because antisemitism is not always about Israel. Antisemitism is based on conspiracy theories and it shows up differently from other forms of hate and discrimination. This is why so many professionals don't understand antisemitism. We do trainings at schools for all their faculty, so they can recognize antisemitism in its many manifestations.

Tiferet Grossman: I think modeling a robust and diverse Israel education is incredibly important, as is emotionally being there for your child in the transition period. You should also discuss with your child some of the emotional red lines, so they have a sense of when to engage with someone on campus who says something that is offensive, and when it is better to not engage and just report it. This is not necessarily a binary choice, since these situations are complex. You should also encourage your child to think about “where do I draw the line at certain values or statements, and where am I open to discussion.”

A Note of Hope

Dani Kogan: I want to end on a note of hope in a moment of rising hostility. What is giving you hope right now?

Tiferet Grossman: This is the hardest question. In my experience on campus, things feel both bleak and, in my individual one-on-one interactions, positive. Two things give me hope. My work in student government and with the administration of the college is incredibly productive. I've been doing this work since before October 7th, and they have always been receptive to my feedback—as a student, as a Jew, as a campus leader. I'm not always sure what their motives are, but I'm grateful when people are willing to listen and learn and take me seriously.

The same can't be said about the student body, but I'm hopeful every time I have a positive one-on-one interaction with someone who's not Jewish and should have no reason to be kind to me, given the culture on campus of othering Jews and Zionists.

Dr. Laura Shaw Frank: I'll say three things. The first thing is I see a renewed desire among Jews who are tangentially connected to the Jewish community returning and

When We See You Again

By Rachel Goldberg-Polin
Random House, 2025 (\$30)

Reviewed by Amalia Haas



I approached the writing of this review with enormous trepidation because it is a book unlike any I have read, by a person who is a spiritual giant. Like the *Hineni* prayer said on Yom Kippur by the one leading the congregation, I fear I am unworthy to review this book; and I pray that I will not cause harm through misrepresentation.

This book is the story of the catastrophe that befell the Goldberg-Polin family, whose facts are well known to the Orthodox community. But it is so much more. It includes joy, humor, playfulness, referencing children's stories such as *Where's Waldo*. By shifting backward and forward in time and through a narrative that circles from poignant stories, to Torah, to agony, we see a mother in the unpredictable process of grief.

In reading *When We See You Again* I was struck by how much of the book is given over to describing and reflecting on the engagement of fellow Jews (excluding political leaders) with the family. I have chosen to highlight that aspect of the book. Goldberg-Polin ascribes nearly all of these engagements to *intended hesed* (lovingkindness), but many attempts increased her distress. In a brief teaching near the very center of the book, Goldberg-Polin gives us this quote from the Mussar master Reb Shlomo Volbe on *hesed*: "This most complicated of disciplines requires looking at the person in front of us and asking ourselves, 'What does *this* person need?' rather than, 'What do I imagine I would need in this person's situation?'"

What does intended *hesed* that harms look like? When they feared the worst on October 7th, it is the many who filled Rachel's house who were "busy lying to make me

feel better." It is the many parents around the world who have also lost children flooding her with the message the moment news of Hersh's murder broke that "You will never recover from this." However, the most common experience of the author, who is now recognized by all, is being stopped by a stranger who expresses their heartbreak over Hersh and then shares the story of their personal losses. To these, Rachel wishes she could say, "Your pain is so real. But I am not strong enough to carry mine and yours too."

Goldberg-Polin gives us many examples of true *hesed*. *Hesed* is truth-telling: She accepts it when she is told, "The grief of a parent who loses a child never decreases, but it changes." *Hesed* is also shopping and cooking and doing what is needed for as long as is needed without being asked. *Hesed* is a released hostage, still in the hospital, asking Jon and Rachel to come to him so he can fill them in on the chapters in Hersh's life that they were missing. It is also evidenced by Hersh who, after choosing to not keep Shabbat halakhically, nevertheless pulled himself out of bed every Shabbat morning to go to *shul* with Jon, so that Jon would not be alone when all the fathers have their sons with them. (Rachel holds up Hersh as a consummate model of *kibbud av v'em* (honoring one's parents), and says that she will honor his memory by working to improve her own observance of this mitzvah.)

As a child, Rachel's parents made her feel "lucky, special, funny, and deeply beloved." In turn, Rachel loved everything about Hersh, her firstborn, and "perhaps more important—he knew I adored him." She credits the protective armor of this love for Hersh's and her own persistence during his long captivity. One gift her parents bestowed was the ability to accept the hand she was dealt. When the last hostages were released, she received "endless messages.... Each saying different versions of 'It should have been you hugging Hersh.'" Her response: "They are mistaken. It was not supposed to be us.... I don't like it. But I do feel it."

wanting to learn about Jewish history and study Jewish texts, and to show up as Jews with pride.

The second thing is that education works. A study done by a professor at UC Berkeley showed that less than 50 percent of the students who used the chant "From the River to the Sea" knew what river and what sea. But after the students were shown a map and told that there were over 10 million people living in that area—Jews, Muslims, and Christians—under a democratically elected government, and when they understood the emotional impact that phrase has for Jews, almost 70 percent of the students who had previously used the phrase said they weren't going to use it anymore.

And the last thing is that, over the past month, I've been teaching workshops at Columbia University on understanding Jewish identity and antisemitism as part of the university's Community Citizenship Initiative. Each time I teach, following the workshop there's always a line of non-Jewish students who come over and say, "Thank

you. I understand so much better now, and I'm ready to be an ally."

Meredith Weisel: I get hope from seeing the younger generation, including my own kids, who are speaking up. I recently attended an event at American University. Talking with the Jewish students on campus gives me hope—their Jewish pride is so strong. In my job, I get to travel across the country and I see people supporting us from all corners of this country.

And the last thing—the Jewish people have not only survived, but we've thrived and we will continue to thrive. This is something we need to remember. Even though sometimes it may feel dark and gloomy, there is always a light. It may be hard to see some weeks, but it is there. We just have to hold on to that. Every Friday night when I light my Shabbat candles, I post a picture of that. It is my special thing that I do to say this is my Jewish pride and nobody's going to take that away from me.

By subjecting hostage families to “ambiguous trauma”—a continuous and present-tense experience that keeps the victim in a state of hypervigilance—Hamás perpetuated continual abuse to family members outside the tunnels. Goldberg-Polin has not recovered. Like a war veteran, she is living in a trance: “Most days, I feel like that is all I have. A faint, shallow pulse. It’s not enough. So what I am doing every day is trying to try to live. And one day, I want to not just be living or surviving, but actually thriving.”

Rachel is a self-described introvert who was forced onto the public stage to rescue her son. But sharing this sometimes raw narrative with us was a choice. May we merit her sharing and may Rachel and her family find comfort.

Rabba Amalia Haas is an educator, Hillel professional, chaplain, and beekeeper. She is the mother of six, including a lone combat soldier, and a savta to one. She has semikha from Yeshivat Maharat.

Heart of a Stranger: An Unlikely Rabbi's Story of Faith, Identity, and Belonging

By Angela Buchdahl

Pamela Dorman Books / Viking, 2025 (\$32)

Reviewed by Sara Hurwitz

When Angela Buchdahl was eight years old, long before she knew she wanted to be a rabbi, she began leading nightly prayer services with her sister, Gina. They would huddle under their covers, and Angela led them in the *Shema*, followed by personal prayers and a harmonized and “elaborate ‘amen.’”

I can picture this nightly ritual, as it brings me back to my own young self having long, elaborate conversations with God from my bedroom in Johannesburg, South Africa. In fact, while reading *Heart of a Stranger*, I had the odd sensation of looking into a mirror; Rabbi Buchdahl’s words reflecting back the many ways that we have lived (unlikely?) parallel lives.

When I was eight, I also did not know I wanted to be a rabbi. Unlike Angela, I had no model of a woman rabbi, as she did at her synagogue in Tacoma, Washington. I had not even an inkling that Orthodox female rabbis were a possibility. But, like Angela, I was drawn to Jewish ritual and community, feeling a tremendous sense of belonging, even though we would ultimately both have to fight to belong.

Rabbi Buchdahl and I shared a stage at the 92nd Street Y in 2010. I had just been ordained; she had not yet become Senior Rabbi at Central Synagogue. We were brought together to tell different stories of “firsts”—both rooted in being outsiders and unlikely rabbis.

Rabbi Buchdahl is the first Asian American to be ordained as both a cantor and a rabbi, having been raised by a Korean Buddhist mother and an Ashkenazi Jewish father in Tacoma. When she told her mother she wanted to become a rabbi, her mother responded, “You have three strikes against you: You’re a woman. You are Korean. You have a non-Jewish mother. Why choose this fight?” She chose it anyway, undergoing what she calls a “reaffirmation ceremony” and becoming the first woman to serve as Senior Rabbi at Central Synagogue.

I came from a more traditional Orthodox background but had to forge my own path to the rabbinate, becoming the first Orthodox woman publicly ordained to serve in an Orthodox synagogue.

Both of us faced questions about our legitimacy and authority, creating new language for roles that didn’t yet exist, navigating naysayers and critics who said we did not belong. Both of us carry a double outsidership. For Rabbi Buchdahl, race and gender; for me, gender and pushing boundaries within a halakhically bounded tradition. Her question was less “can a woman be a rabbi?” than “can this woman, given her racial and patrilineal-descent background, be seen as authentically Jewish?” Mine was the inverse; my Jewish status was never in question, but the title and authority structure, and acceptance that I could be a rabbi in a space where a woman had yet to do so, had to be built from scratch within a halakhic framework.

We both experienced overt and subtle misogynistic behavior. Rabbi Buchdahl recounts a moment with her predecessor, when he asked, with apparent concern, how she’d handle the job with three young kids at home—a question, she notes, no one asked her male colleagues. He warned that working mothers face a litmus test their male peers never do: who shows up at the emergency room with their child. But despite the lack of confidence that he and others on the temple board displayed, she persevered, proving her critics wrong and exceeding all expectations for her success.

I, too, was overlooked for a more senior level position after five years at my *shul*. I was told that I was not eligible for the promotion because my familial obligations would not allow me to be available around the clock. At the time, I was pregnant, unwell, with two toddlers at home. I felt that I had no leverage, and had to accept the gendered perception that women cannot actually have it all. (Both Rabbi Buchdahl and I read and wrote responses to Anne-Marie Slaughter’s 2012 *Atlantic* article, “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All.”)

Perhaps these experiences of being treated as “other” made us more empathetic, stronger rabbis. Rabbi Buchdahl’s title reflects this very notion: *Heart of a Stranger*, recalling the *pasuk* from Shemot 23:9: “You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart (*nefesh*) of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.” Her message is clear. There is strength and dignity in standing apart. Rather than rejecting the parts of herself that made her feel unlike everyone around her, she has embraced them, allowing those very attributes to



help her soar and become the phenomenal leader, rabbi, and role model that she is today.

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl's book is a tapestry of hard-won wisdom, offered as a gift to us through the lens most natural to rabbis: her Torah.

Rabbi Buchdahl has long been a friend and supporter of Yeshivat Maharat and of my journey, and my students have benefited from learning from her for years. I, too, have been inspired by her wisdom and ethics, and particularly, by her courage in telling her story, even as I write my own memoir. From her, I see how I can weave my journey through Torah, putting my own vulnerabilities on display and knowing that I am still living inside my story, not yet knowing how it ends.

Rabba Sara Hurwitz is the first woman to be publicly ordained as an Orthodox rabbi. She is the co-founder and president of Yeshivat Maharat and served on the rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale—the Bayit from 2003 through 2026.

Going Out with Knots: My Two Kaddish Years with Hebrew Poetry

By Wendy I. Zierler

The Jewish Publication Society, 2025 (\$32.95)

Reviewed by Beth Kissileff

One of the envisioned outcomes of having female rabbis and scholars was to have women who were educated in the tradition view its texts differently, with a lens that has not been used in the past, to yield new insights. Wendy Zierler's memoir, *Going Out with Knots: My Two Kaddish Years with Hebrew Poetry*, fulfills and extends that hope beautifully, through analysis of Hebrew poems, mostly by women, enabling readers—as well as mourners—to see texts in a new way through grief and interpretation.

A crisis in Rabbi Dr. Zierler's life led to the writing of this book: the deaths of her father, who was run over as he was walking in a parking lot, and then of her mother a year later from illness, giving her barely a pause between the obligation of saying *Kaddish* separately for each parent. Zierler is explicit about both her mourning and her project in penning the book.

At her *shul*, different congregants speak each day of the week after morning *minyan*. Looking to add a woman's voice to the service, she chose to teach a weekly analysis of different Hebrew poems as her contribution. She called it *Shir Hadash shel Yom* (new song of the day), patterned after the *Shir shel Yom* (daily psalm) recited as part of the morning liturgy. These talks are woven together with her personal reflections to form the basis of this book. Lea Goldberg, Rachel Morpurgo, Ruhama Weiss, and Rachel Bluwstein are among the poets she

discusses, teaching those of us who are not expert in modern Hebrew poetry about this female lineage in the holy tongue.

In the course of discussing the poem "I Am Still Praying" by Ruhama Weiss, Zierler reflects on attending an Orthodox synagogue—sitting on the women's side of the *meḥitzah* and not being able to lead the prayers—and what it means to "count" in a public forum for prayer: "Though I wasn't counted in the minyan in a ritual or halakhic/legal sense," she writes, "if I didn't make it to shul on a given morning, I would get texts and emails from regulars, both men and women, asking me if everything was okay. If that isn't 'counting' what is?" Though the answer may not satisfy all readers, it is important to see a woman of her erudition grapple with the issue and come to a response that satisfies her and enables her to be a full agent, participating as fully as possible.

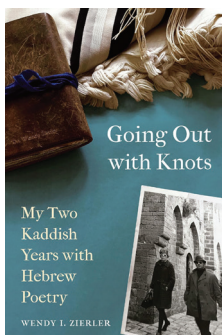
In the chapter on "Searching for Female Liturgical Voices: Mourning and Studying with Rachel Morpurgo," Zierler writes about her Maharat ordination in spring 2021 as the "first academic or career milestone I would be celebrating without my parents there in any way to cheer me on." This occasions fresh grief, yet she finds a model for coping in Rachel Morpurgo of Trieste (born 1790)—in Zierler's words, "a devout Orthodox woman scholar and the first modern Hebrew poet" and a descendant of Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto (1706–46), author of *Mesilat Yesharim* (*Path of the Just*).

Zierler writes about teaching Morpurgo: "No traditional Jewish prayers speak in a woman's voice. We often ignore the plain fact that the prayers in the *siddur* had authors and editors, and they were all men. Teaching 'Behold the Letter' served a potent testament to the fact that claiming a voice for women in traditional Jewish prayer was a task still yet to be accomplished, and that my Maharat studies and the *Shir Hadash* were furthering that cause."

Toward the end of the chapter on Morpurgo, Zierler writes: "Reading and teaching this poem during this lead-up to my ordination, when I was studying for exams and missing my parents especially acutely, offered needed comfort and strength. It reminded me of my own privilege to be one of a cohort of women trying to change the face of Jewish leadership and Jewish ritual life. And it encouraged me to imagine how poems such as these might make their way, one day, into mainstream, traditional *siddurim*, where they deserve to be."

Zierler herself has provided us with a guide to poetry and mourning, making space for women in the synagogue and its liturgy as well as widening what sacred texts can be.

Beth Kissileff is the author of the novel Questioning Return and the editor of the anthologies Reading Genesis: Beginnings and Bound in the Bond of Life: Pittsburgh Writers Reflect on the Tree of Life Tragedy. She is a freelance journalist and writer, currently at work on both fiction and non-fiction books.





JEWISH ORTHODOX
FEMINIST ALLIANCE

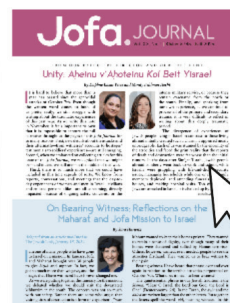
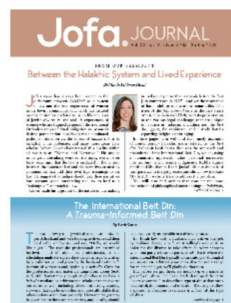
PO Box 139
New York, NY 10024

NONPROFIT
ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
LANCASTER, PA
PERMIT #299

The Jofa Journal Archive: Now Online!

Available Digitally for Free at www.jofa.org

We haven't forgotten our print readers. Love holding the Journal in your hands? Continue your annual print subscription for just \$54, supporting Jofa's mission while we embrace a more sustainable future. Same bold feminist voices. Your choice of format.



Scan to Read & Donate

