The Russians Are Here
JOSH TAPPER

Hagigah Ivrit: A Celebration of the Hebrew Language
NAAVA FRANK

The Life and Work of Julius Rosenwald
ARI L. GOLDMAN

Daf Yomi: Drawing the Talmud with Jacqueline Nicholls

IN THIS ISSUE:
The Spring issue of Contact explores Jewish community, diversity and expression in worlds ranging from a Russian Jewish festival in New York to an artistic interpretation of the Talmud in London. Opening with a report on the Russian Jewish community in North America today, the issue offers surprising and often ambivalent perspectives on the degree to which Soviet Jewish immigrants have acclimated, or even wish to acclimate, into pre-existing Jewish communal organizations and life.

The issue then takes a tour through Hagigah Ivrit, an annual multi-city festival celebrating Hebrew language and culture, now in its second year. In the Profiles section, we visit three individuals who have taken unorthodox and creative avenues towards Jewish living. We visit a new film that suggests a broader historical view on Jewish involvement in the civil rights struggle, and we spend time with an extraordinary British artist whose visual interpretation of “Daf Yomi” — daily Talmud study — is both fascinating and provocative.

Taken together, the articles and profiles reveal a multifaceted community embracing history as it embarks on new vistas of experience and expression.
On a sweaty July evening last year, more than 1,300 people filled the pews inside the main sanctuary of Toronto’s Beth Tzedec Congregation, where Natan Sharansky, the former Soviet Jewish dissident and political prisoner, and Irwin Cotler, his one-time lawyer, were sharing the stage. It was the sort of event that had been taking place in Jewish venues across North America over the previous few years, as communities marked the 25th anniversary of milestones in the history of the Soviet Jewry movement: first the Freedom Sunday for Soviet Jews march on Washington in 1987, then the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the massive outpouring of Jews it precipitated.

In Toronto, the reunion of Cotler and Sharansky was one steeped in nostalgia: Sharansky, the symbol of a decades-long struggle to win emigration rights for Jews repressed by the Soviet regime, and Cotler, one of thousands of North American Jews who made the grass-roots campaign to free their Soviet brethren a Cold-War era cause célèbre, forcing it onto the international political agenda in the 1970s and 1980s.

To hear Sharansky and Cotler tell it, the legality of the Soviet Jewry movement was one of lasting solidarity between ex-Soviet Jews and their cousins in the United States and Canada. Sitting across from the diminutive Sharansky, Cotler, a recently retired Canadian Member of Parliament, explained how the human-rights battle informed his own Jewish identity and sense of purpose. In response, Sharansky spoke of how Jews trapped behind the Iron Curtain discovered “that there were Jews all around the world who were like family and wanted to help us.”

After the event, as the two speakers posed for pictures, a friend and I considered its familiar, self-congratulatory message. My friend was the daughter of Russian-Jewish immigrants from Moscow and a co-organizer of the Toronto chapter of Limmud FSU, an offshoot of the international Jewish culture festival designed exclusively for Jews with roots in the former Soviet Union. To her, the grand, triumphalist narrative of the Soviet Jewish exodus seemed woefully out of touch. What about the very real struggles of cultural and religious integration that came later?

From the 1970s through the early 2000s, some 500,000 Russian-speaking Jews are believed to have landed in the U.S. The majority arrived in the 1990s, years after the heyday of the refusenik movement, according to Sam Kliger, the director of Moscow and a co-organizer of the Toronto chapter of Limmud FSU, an offshoot of the interna-
Today, the total of Russian-speaking Jews—a culturally diverse category that includes Mountain Jews from the Caucasus and Bukharan Jews from Central Asia—is disputed, but estimates range from 600,000 to as high as 800,000. In 2013, the Pew Research Center's survey of U.S. Jewry found that Jews born in the former Soviet Union, along with their descendants, comprise about 10 percent of the American Jewish population.

Rather than immediately joining the ranks of American Jewry, these hundreds of thousands of Russian-speaking Jews developed into a distinctive cultural, political and economic force well outside of it. Indeed, their experience in the United States and Canada has been less about commonality and cohesion—the legacy of the Soviet Jewry movement espoused by people like Sharansky and Cotler—than it has been about difference and division.

The phenomenon can be traced back to the early days of Soviet immigration, in the 1970s. “There was this general expectation that Russian Jews would come to the United States with their head down and say ‘thank you,’” for unshackling them from the Soviet Union, said Anna Shternshis, Associate Professor of Yiddish and Diaspora Studies at the University of Toronto and an expert on post-Soviet Jewry. Synagogues and social-service organizations funded by American Jews, notably the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), assisted in the resettlement process, carrying over the vigorous financial and moral support of the Soviet Jewry movement. The implicit quid pro quo was that these Jews from the Soviet Union they had worked so assiduously to liberate would embrace the American Jewish way of life once they settled in stateside.

Instead, they mostly rejected it. Cloistered in dense Russian-speaking enclaves like Brooklyn’s Brighton Beach neighborhood, the Jews who managed to secure exit visas under the Jackson-Vanik amendment to the Trade Act of 1974—which compelled countries with restrictive emigration policies, including the Soviet Union, to loosen them in exchange for economic benefits—had other concerns, like tackling the hardships of navigating a new country: learning English, acquiring degrees and diplomas, finding jobs. “It was like they were parachuting in from Mars, and acculturation was pretty intensive,” Kliger said of the new immigrants, many of whom arrived as highly trained academics, scientists and engineers but found themselves marginalized on the U.S. labor market.

Waves of Russian-speaking Jews, through the post-Soviet 1990s, exhibited little interest in joining the American Jewish family—and when they did, it was often on their own terms. “There was no thanks,” Shternshis said. “They didn’t want to go to synagogues and they didn’t want to go to Jewish community centers—except to ask for help.” Jonathan Sarna, a professor of American Jewish history at Brandeis University, explained that Jewish communities, with the best of intentions, often viewed the new immigrants as new recruits, fresh blood to populate their synagogues and day schools. The plan, reliant on membership and tuition subsidies, “was doomed to fail,” Sarna said. It only bred mutual resentment, feelings that lingered well into the 21st Century.

“There were a lot of complaints on the side of Jewish American organizations about Soviet Jews of the first immigrant generation being ungrateful for all the support and help that they received from HIAS and other organizations during the initial resettlement period,” said Larissa Remennick, a sociologist at Bar-Ilan University in Tel Aviv and the author of Russian Jews on Three Continents: Identity, Integration, and Conflict (Transaction Publishers, 2007).

Lea Zeltserman, a Toronto-based writer who publishes The Soviet Samovar, an email newsletter devoted to Russian-speaking Jewry, explained the friction as a case of mismatched expectations. Born in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), Zeltserman’s family left the Soviet Union in 1979 when she was an infant, and transited for several
months in Vienna and Rome before arriving in Edmonton, Alberta, in 1980. Zeltserman, whose own family managed to escape thanks to the Jackson-Vanik amendment, said she doesn’t know of anyone with a similar story who isn’t grateful for the Soviet Jewry movement. “It’s why we’re here — and I’m definitely glad I’m here and not there,” the 38-year-old said, referring to Russia.

Growing up in Canada, however, she had a sense that whatever her community did, it wouldn’t be enough to reciprocate the efforts of North American Jews. “All my life I’ve been hearing comments: Were we grateful enough? Were we Jewish enough, even though we spent our lives in the Soviet Union being persecuted for it?”

The sentiment echoes in the U.S. as well as Canada, as some feel American Jewish institutions still struggle to move past the feeling that they were jilted by the newcomers. In the Jewish Daily Forward last year, Benjamin Goldschmidt, an assistant rabbi at Park East Synagogue in New York who is the son of Pinchas Goldschmidt, the Chief Rabbi of Moscow and spiritual leader at Moscow’s Choral Synagogue, took a harsh, condemnatory line against American Jews for continuing to condescend to Jews from the former Soviet Union.

“Generally speaking, Russian Jews fulfilled more or less what is expected of American immigrants,” Shternshis said. “They learned English, they found jobs, they did all these things that they were supposed to do. But they did not become ‘American Jews.’ They integrated fully into American society, but they cre-

“All my life I’ve been hearing comments: Were we grateful enough? Were we Jewish enough, even though we spent our lives in the Soviet Union being persecuted for it?”

...
ated their own mode of Russian Jewish culture” — one that is primarily ethnic and not religious, generally uninterested in religious observance, culturally Soviet, and politically conservative.

For them Jewishness meant difference — but not in a good way. Why nurture it in the new world?

Things are changing, though, for younger generations of Russian-speaking Jews who grew up outside the Soviet Union. Their identities are caught somewhere between their past and their present, complicated even further by their encounters with Russian-Jewish culture and American-Jewish culture. “We constantly have this tug-and-pull of whether we’re Russian or American or Jewish,” said Olga Barskaya, 28, a Brooklyn resident who emigrated from Zhitomir, Ukraine, with her family in 1994. “People in my age group — we have one foot over there and one foot in the U.S. We’re very Americanized, but we hold onto our Russian roots very strongly. Being Jewish circles through both.”

In response to this multiplicity of identities, a spate of tailored programs has cropped up in recent years. The initiatives serve to bring Russian speakers into the wider Jewish community while emphasizing the uniqueness of Russian-Jewish identity. The immensely popular Limmud FSU festivals, which are held in cities across North America, Europe, Israel and the former Soviet Union, are but one example. In New York, where about half the total population of Russian-speaking Jews in the U.S. are thought to reside, the 15-year-old Council of Jewish Emigre Community Organizations oversees more than 30 immigrant aid, religious and youth organizations.

When I asked Barskaya why Russian-speaking Jews need their own targeted programs she laughed, then exclaimed incredulously, “Have you met a Russian Jew?” She has attended Limmud FSU in the New York area for the past seven years. For her it’s a place where “you can be Jewish, but not too Jewish,” where you can study Tanach in the Russian language or hear a lecture by Sasha Senderovich, a scholar of Russian Jewish literature at the University of Colorado, or sing classic Soviet songs.

In an email, Ilia Salita, Chief Executive Officer of Genesis Philanthropy Group, insisted that the children of Russian-speaking Jewish parents will continue to “see their Jewishness through a post-Soviet cultural lens”—even if there does “come a point in the future when the younger generations of those who immigrated from the FSU will either think of themselves as American Jews or ‘just Americans.’”

But whether the Russian-Jewish experience in America will ultimately lead to integration—as many hope it will—remains uncertain. As Sarna notes, it was at least three or four decades before the multitudes of Yiddish-speaking, Eastern-European Jews that arrived in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries felt fully integrated into the American Jewish community. “I think the same will be true of Russian-speaking Jews,” he said. “We haven’t reached 40 years for most of them.”

Sarna, for one, believes that education is the key to integration and pointed to Genesis — which funds a center for the study of Russian Jewry at his university — and Limmud FSU as forces working to imbue Russian-speaking Jews with a positive sense of Jewish identity. “The more Russian-speaking Jews understand what it means to be a Russian-speaking Jew, paradoxically, it will be easier for them to make their way proudly in the larger Jewish community.”

Shternshis, however, suggested that the inculcation of Russian-Jewish heritage and identity by increasingly assertive funding organizations, such as Genesis, might actually preclude integration, driving Russian-speaking and mainstream American Jews further apart. She is skeptical the divisions will ever wear down. “Americans Jews live in a very different world than Russian Jews,” she said. “It’s not two people of the same community.”

Younger generations’ identities are caught somewhere between their past and their present, complicated even further by their encounters with Russian-Jewish culture and American-Jewish culture.
RUSSIAN, AMERICAN, JEWISH: NOT SO FAST

by BORIS FISHMAN

My first novel, A Replacement Life (HarperCollins, 2014), was about a failed writer who starts foraging Holocaust-restitution claims for old Russian Jews in Brooklyn. I wrote it as a goad to a moral reckoning, but also a love letter, a provocation, but also an exegesis. The moral reckoning was for my fellow ex-Soviet Jews — I immigrated in 1988 at age nine — whose occasionally flexible relationship to the law is well-known. I aimed to expose and exhort, not vilify and harangue. The explication was for American Jews. The other side enjoys the self-sufficient numbers that American-speaking Jewish audiences which were almost never integrated between Russian-speaking and American Jews. (Ironically, it was in the smaller and supposedly less vibrant — in comparison to mighty New York — communities where I came across better integration: In Minneapolis and St. Paul, neither side enjoys the self-sufficient numbers that Russian-speaking and American Jews in the New York area do.) I’m no social scientist, but anecdotally, this observation keeps bearing out — even those Russian-speaking Jewish acquaintances who’ve found a place for observance in their lives tend to manifest it in specifically Russian contexts, even if they came to America very young.

National cultural shifts seem to explain this in part; we no longer live in a country that, a century ago, saw Jews far more skeptically. Back then, if you wanted to belong, your best chance was with your own. Today’s multi-culturalism also means you don’t have to conform to some elite notion of America to feel at home: you can stay in south Brooklyn, avoid learning English, and still somehow feel like a full-fledged American. A century ago, Gentiles from Eastern Europe couldn’t wait to assimilate. Not today.

But even these cultural obstructions seem powerless against the great swell of American culture. Within two generations if not one, three if not two, my descendants will seem exactly like other American Jews; is there much difference today between descendants of German Jews and the Eastern European Jews who followed later? Not really. In this scenario, the worry about Russian-speaking Jews’ relationship to religion morphs into concern about observance among American Jews, period. I see my descendants acting like very American Jews, indeed, in their preference for Jewishness over Judaism — if that. Unlike many secular Jews, however, I worry about how meaningfully culture alone can sustain an identity that, after all, derives from a religion.

Because of this, I’ve tried to engage with observance and ritual. Here, too, I’ve failed, due to my encounter with what has felt like an unbearable emphasis on conformity: This is how you do it, and no questions. I’ll never forget a Shabbat dinner for Russian Jews at a religious home in south Brooklyn where, stumped by the uncommented monologue issuing from the sage at the head of the room, I started poking my styrofoam plate with a plastic fork and was reprimanded for doing work on Shabbat. Such literal rigidity does nothing to inspire a novice; such voluntary self-restriction, in a world already more than restrictive enough, feels like a parody of self-abuse when it hasn’t been preceded by a slow steep in Judaism as a historical and, more important, an intellectual experience. And by intellectual, I mean: Questions, doubts and argument are welcome; the spirit matters more than the letter; and there are no easy answers. (Passover may be the story of our enslavement in Egypt, but it began with one Jew’s abandonment by his own brothers.) It’s not a safe time for Jews in the world, but the rise of uniformity and xenophobia I see among many observant Jews in America and Israel feels like an equal tragedy.

My family fled the Soviet Union because it wanted to save me from the industrial oppression of a place where no questions were allowed, and I’ve made good on their aspiration by choosing a profession where questions, not answers, are the point, and a life where I enjoy the extreme privilege of often being able to ask myself what I think. And if America has rewarded me for this, American Judaism — in the admittedly limited forms I’ve encountered it — has not. I’ve felt more invitation to insert myself — my experience, my questions, my doubts, my exasperation, my disagreements — at a church service in rural Virginia, where no one present felt entitled to imagine who I was before I spoke up. (This is rare in church environments, too, I know.) It’s a shame because as I’ve become older, my craving for community — and for refuge from a world that is more and more intolerant and xenophobic — has increased. But until this changes en masse, I think American Jewish communities will have a harder time inspiring new congregants, Russian or not, and we will, with regret, continue to look for our sense of community elsewhere.
The second annual Hagigah Ivrit of metropolitan New York, March 6-20, 2016 concluded with a sense of a new tradition in the making. Hagigah Ivrit (חגיית עברית), “Festival of Hebrew,” is a two-week celebration of local events and activities aimed at celebrating the Hebrew language and its culture. The festival in New York was part of an annual national Hebrew language celebration that took place in March in cities throughout North America.

Once considered a cornerstone of culture and civilization, for centuries Hebrew was removed from active conversational use and relegated to religious study. The process of revival of Hebrew began in the 19th Century and expanded rapidly with the establishment of the State of Israel. Hebrew was renewed as an old-new language fusing the energy, creativity and unique cultural achievement of modern Israel with the language’s rich biblical, rabbinic and oral historical language traditions and genres. Now Hebrew is ready for its next incarnation: a global language that links cultures and communities across the world. One step in this approach involves initiatives like Hebrew Language Charter Schools, teaching Hebrew to students of diverse religious and socioeconomic backgrounds using the gold standard in language acquisition, the Proficiency approach. Another step is public festivals that engage participants in the Hebrew language as a living, breathing organism in a wide range of social, cultural and academic media. Hagigah Ivrit is one such endeavor.

Hagigah Ivrit 2016 in metropolitan New York featured a broad range of events for scholars, students, culture vultures, and families that included film, food, songs, and fun. Building on its successful debut last year, the festival doubled its events and participating organizations to include 40 events in Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, Long Island and New Jersey. Events were for enthusiasts of all backgrounds and levels of familiarity with Hebrew, from seniors to young children and their families and from fluent speakers to those with no prior Hebrew knowledge. All offerings engaged the audience in the beauty and history of the Hebrew language and provided opportunities to connect with Israeli culture and talent.

The opening event of this year’s Hagigah Ivrit in metropolitan New York honored the legendary Israeli writer, playwright, and Oscar-nominated movie director Ephraim Kishon (1924-2005) in commemoration of ten years since his passing. Another featured event was the second annual Hebrew Song Celebration, which brought together children’s choirs from nine local schools to perform Hebrew songs celebrating the early years of Israel’s history.

Throughout the Hagigah, community-building events coordinated by the Israeli-American Council, such as the Friday night IAC Shishi Israeli, were available across the boroughs of Brooklyn, Manhattan and Queens.

Hagigah Ivrit has brought together individuals who are deeply passionate about the Hebrew language and eager to share their passion with others in synagogues, schools, JCCs, senior centers, camps and youth groups. Their excitement about Hebrew is contagious.

The Hagigah has taken a grassroots approach, seeking to engage organizations and individuals for whom Hebrew and/or an audience passionate about Hebrew are already a central concern, and encouraging them to create opportunities to engage others. Organizations utilized their own resources, sometimes charging entrance fees for events, sometimes steering existing events toward a focus on Hebrew.

Sponsors have been very pleased with the positive momentum and significant growth potential of Hagigah Ivrit over the past two years.

In order to participate in Hagigah Ivrit in
metropolitan New York, each organization completed an application that was carefully reviewed by the festival's organizers to ensure each event met the criteria for high-quality, Hebrew-language programming. All accepted events were promoted as featured events of the festival through an extensive marketing campaign that included online and print advertising and social media. Thus, Hagigah Ivrit amplified the work of individuals and organizations by connecting them to each other to create a community passionate about Hebrew that is greater than the sum of its parts. The Hagigah of metropolitan New York’s website (www.ivritny.org) includes a list of local Hebrew-language and cultural resources as well as lists of events from the past two years that can serve as resources and inspiration for organizations to plan future events.

The Hagigah Ivrit festival is an important opportunity for both full-time and part-time schools to raise the profile of their commitment to Hebrew by calling attention to programs for students and teachers such as Hebrew-language choirs, Hebrew-language celebration weeks, Hebrew-language pen-pal programs, the study of Israeli literature, Hebrew-language school plays or teacher professional development. Promoting these activities allows parents and school supporters as well as other schools and students to see the importance and fun associated with the Hebrew language.

This year Hagigah Ivrit was also celebrated in Miami, Atlanta, San Diego, San Francisco and the Bay Area (Palo Alto, Los Gatos and Berkeley) as well as in Los Angeles and Chicago. Hagigah events in each of the cities were designed and produced by local leading organizations and in some places, in collaboration with members of the newly established National Association of Teachers of Hebrew, who brought Hagigah Ivrit into schools.

Hagigah Ivrit is a national initiative of The Council for Hebrew Language and Culture in North America. The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life, the New York Israeli-American Council and the World Zionist Organization sponsored Hagigah Ivrit in metropolitan New York the past two years. This year strategic partners including the Jewish Education Project, RAJSK, The Schechter Day School Network and the Solomon Schechter School of Manhattan helped recruit hosts and participants for Hagigah Ivrit events.

Hagigah Ivrit is an exciting new initiative to promote literacy in the Hebrew language on a local level and to build interest and support for Hebrew from the ground up. In metropolitan New York, the festival aspires to expand in coming years, increasing the number of events, host organizations and participants. On the national level, it continues to spread to other metropolitan areas across North America, engaging local donors and strategic partners in each community as it has done in New York. In this way, Hagigah Ivrit can play a part in engaging people throughout North America in the love and appreciation for the Hebrew language and its culture.
In this issue we visit three people whose journeys towards Jewish expression and involvement — whether through food, spirituality or language — took unexpected and exciting turns.

by BATYA UNGAR-SARGON

LEAH KOENIG
The Story Behind the Food

For Leah Koenig, food and cookbook writer, Jewish food is a global cuisine, “because there are Jews everywhere,” she said recently at a Brooklyn café. “Historically, Jews were indigenous, tribal, nomadic and then agricultural,” she explained, citing the multitude of Talmudic laws about agriculture. “It’s not a leap to think of Jews as a land driven people, even though we’re a diasporic people.”

Koenig grew up in Oak Park, Chicago, in a multi-faith household — her mother is Jewish, and her father, who recently passed away, was not. It was a pluralistic upbringing — Koenig was bat-mitzvahed, but spent Christmas with an older sister. It was also a family in which faith and social justice were intertwined. Her father’s side are United Church of Christ — “like the Reform movement of the Christians — very social-justice oriented,” Koenig said.

As a girl, Jewish life was less compelling to her; Koenig was much more focused on being an environmentalist. Her “aha moment” would come in college, first at University of Oregon and then at Middlebury, where she took classes on Judaism and Ecology. “That was the beginning of my being interested in Jewish life on a personal as well as an academic level,” she remembered.

Sustainability is a Jewish value, Koenig said. “For me, when I was studying it academically, I was always really focused on how there’s two different creation stories at the beginning of Bereishit,” she explained. “One is very much about God creating the world for humans, and one is creating humans in partnership with the world.” Of the two competing narratives, one held significant sway for Koenig: “humans put on this earth to till and to tend, rather than to have dominion over it, that’s where it starts for me.”

Koenig got a job working at Hazon and moved to New York. “Then I was living in Brooklyn, doing the Shabbat dinner thing, starting to build this community of young environmentally minded or Jewishly minded folks,” she said. She met her husband, Yoshie Fruter, a professional musician, who came from an Orthodox background, and together, through negotiations, the couple came to an agreement about the level of religious observance that would suit them. “It was sort of like, I want to be with you, you want to be with me, how can we make it work,” Koenig recalled. Today, they have a “Shabbat practice” and a son.

In 2009, Koenig left Hazon to pursue freelance writing fulltime. “I didn’t think I’d focus on Jewish food, but it turns out, that’s what I’m most passionate about,” she said. “Whenever I would think about story ideas, that is where my expertise lies.” This passion and expertise led to cookbooks, first the Hadassah Everyday Cookbook (Rizzoli/Universe, 2011) and then Modern Jewish Cooking (Chronicle Books, 2015). “I’m definitely a home cook,” Koenig says. “And more to the point, I’m a food writer who cooks. My interest is the story behind the food. My starting point is the story — always.”

Koenig’s hope is for Modern Jewish Cooking to represent a historical snapshot of “how the Jewish community eats today, and how we celebrate, and how we bring ourselves to the table,” she said. Today’s Jewish culinary experience has an eye towards sustainability and an eye towards the global world in terms of flavor influences. “There’s a delicate balance between tradition and innovation that I seek in my daily life as a cook, and I’m just one of many people doing that.”

That balance is all over the cookbook, with updated traditional recipes, some of which have a surprising, playful, even perverse twist, like a savory babka, or sweet matzoh balls, for example. Of course, it’s possible to go too far, Koenig says, citing bacon-laced matzoh balls, for example, which are going in for the shock factor. It’s about having respect for the tradition, and an authenticity in your choices when you experiment.

“Now is one of the most exciting times to eat Jewish food,” Koenig said.
Rabbi David Ingber was voted “most likely to frum out” in high school. His journey did indeed lead him through an ultra-Orthodox phase, and then through a completely secular one, before he founded Romemu, a “post-denominational, post-modern, Hassidic, fully egalitarian, embodied, politically progressive” community on the Upper West Side.

Ingber grew up on Long Island, a twin and the youngest son of “classically Ashkenazi Jews,” as he put it. “It was a very suburban, typically American, Jewish experience,” Ingber says. But the young Ingber didn’t exactly fit in. “I was extremely intense about everything,” he remembers. The goalie in hockey and in soccer, Ingber would self-impose “speech fasts for two days before the game,” he recalled. “I would carry a puck and stare at it for an hour every day.” In high school he got into body-building, for an hour every day. “much to the chagrin of my totally secular Israeli girlfriend.” In 2004, he met Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, the then-94-year-old founder of the Jewish Renewal movement, and it was then that his path became clear.

He stayed that way for five years, returning to New York and studying at an ultra-Orthodox Yeshiva. “I was in love with God, in a way that was intense and nourishing but also scary,” he remembered. And then, one day, he looked in a mirror and saw his long payos and big black hat, and instead of himself, he saw a caricature. It was the beginning of major philosophical doubts. “I felt that I was depressed, and I believed my depression was because of Judaism,” he said. “In order to heal myself, I needed to go back to the place of being alive, dynamic, myself at 18.”

Ingber started listening to the radio again and watching TV. He went dancing again. He moved in with his brother and started working in restaurants in Manhattan, which he loved for the freedom it afforded him and the personal interactions. Meanwhile, “I had an allergic reaction to Judaism in those years,” Ingber says. “I would see people walking to shul on Friday night when I was serving spaghetti ragù.” But something in him remained unrealized in those years. “I felt very called, and I didn’t know the way back. I didn’t know how to move forward,” he says. “I was waiting tables, surrounded by people who didn’t have the gifts I was given.”

Ingber moved to Israel, and spent a year there teaching Pilates. It was beautiful, he says, but suddenly, he was miserable again. He would constantly think, “Is this what you want me to do, God? Crack people’s backs?” He started keeping kosher again and putting on tefilin every day, “much to the chagrin of my totally secular Israeli girlfriend.” In 2004, he met Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, the then-94-year-old founder of the Jewish Renewal movement, and it was then that his path became clear.

“The things that felt to me like questions weren’t questions within [Schachter-Shalomi] anymore,” he recalled. “They were residing comfortably within him. He was observing Judaism because he loved Judaism. He would say it doesn’t matter if it’s true, it’s beautiful, it’s transformative, and it’s ours.”

Schachter-Shalomi gave Ingber smicha, and in March 2006, Ingber started Romemu, which he calls an “upgraded” and “evolved” Judaism, an American form of Hassidic expression for the 21st Century, and “part of a solution to a problem our traditions have partly created. It’s a renewal of Judaism that unaffiliated Jews and others are yearning for.” If anyone would know, it’s David Ingber.
ROSS PERLIN
Towards a Multilingual Future

ike many Jewish visionaries, Ross Perlin came to appreciate his tribal culture from afar. The Assistant Director of the Endangered Language Alliance, Perlin grew up Reform in New York, attended boarding school in Massachusetts and went on to Stanford in California. “I wasn’t engaged with Jewish studies or Jewish life, though I felt myself to be Jewish, culturally and historically,” he recalled recently.

After college, he moved to China to study comparative ancient philosophy and Chinese, in the hopes of being able to communicate with a billion people. It was there that Perlin attended a talk by an eminent Chinese linguist, who told the audience and a surprised Perlin that of the 200 languages spoken across China, most would disappear in our lifetime. “I had no idea that across the world, there were some 7,000 languages,” Perlin said, “and half will disappear within the next century. As a lover of languages and as somebody who cared about culture and minority cultures and history, I got into this whole issue of endangered languages.”

He spent the next three years working as a field linguist on a cluster of endangered languages spoken on the Chinese-Burmese border. He would sit with the elders of these communities and ask them to sing their songs so he could record them, and sometimes they would ask Perlin, “What are your songs?” “I was forced to ask myself that question and think about the question of my own ethno-linguistic tradition and heritage. So I became involved with Yiddish.”

Perlin moved back to New York, and in 2010, the Endangered Language Alliance was formed. He came to realize that Yiddish, while in certain ways endangered, does have a strong future, both through the Hassidic communities for whom it is mother tongue and through a small core of Yiddishists, academics and enthusiasts. Plus, it has a huge written heritage that’s been preserved. “What I hadn’t understood until I got here was that there were all these other Jewish languages that were fast disappearing and in much worse shape than Yiddish has ever been,” Perlin said.

New York alone has several dozen Jewish languages, like Jihuri, a Jewish language spoken by the mountain Jews of Daghestan and Azerbaijan, and which is still spoken in a synagogue on Ocean Parkway; and Bukhari, spoken by the Bukharian Jews, and the Judeo Median languages of Iranian Jews who never moved to Tehran where they would have traded their dialect for Persian. It’s not just Jews, either. There are up to 800 languages spoken in the New York area alone.

At the Endangered Language Alliance, a non-profit operating on a shoestring budget that relies on donated space and a lot of volunteer work, Perlin documents these and other languages. “We create and present a rich record of these languages while we can,” Perlin said.

It’s important work, Perlin explained. “When a language disappears, an entire worldview goes under, an entire repository of history, culture, knowledge, local knowledge of a place,” he explained. Plus, languages don’t die natural deaths. “It’s generally the outcome of power struggles and massive shifts that are taking place,” he went on. Take Jewish history for instance. “The Jewish communities we’ve worked with, while very deeply grateful that they have landed in the U.S. or Israel, have experienced a profound sense of dislocation nonetheless and have basically been uprooted, in some cases multiple times throughout the 20th Century, because of anti-Semitism, war, genocide and various forms of dispossession,” Perlin explained.

But Perlin is interested in going beyond pathos. In the beginning of the 20th Century, Jews spoke dozens of languages, with ties to many cultures and numerous ways of expressing themselves. Now, Jewish life is converging on English and Hebrew and a few other languages. “But what if we could have a much more multilingual future?” Perlin wonders.

To that end, the Endangered Language Alliance tries to bring its work to a wider Jewish public through talks and a tour of Brooklyn’s Jewish languages. “Most Jewish languages are represented to some extent in the five boroughs,” Perlin says. “There still is this diversity that’s hard to appreciate just walking around. You have to know about it and listen for it and it is unfortunately vanishing.”

“When a language disappears, an entire worldview goes under, an entire repository of history, culture, knowledge, local knowledge of a place.”
Philanthropists are not the most likely subjects for film documentaries. Their lives might well be full of merit and virtue, but their stories often lack the drama that make for riveting movies.

But Aviva Kempner has done something unusual — and compelling — in her new film *Rosenwald*, a 95-minute documentary about the life and work of Julius Rosenwald, the son of a Jewish immigrant peddler who never finished high school but rose to become president of Sears, Roebuck and Company.

Kempner, best known for *The Life and times of Hank Greenberg*, accomplishes this by not telling only Rosenwald’s history, but also the story of the era in which he lived and the thousands that he touched through his philanthropy. Rosenwald, who died at the age of 69 in 1932, gave away $62 million in his lifetime, the equivalent of roughly $1 billion today.

Rosenwald was deeply touched by the plight of African-Americans in the Jim Crow South (and later in the North) and it was to that community that he directed most of his generosity. At a time when there were few opportunities for black children to get a decent education, Rosenwald partnered with African-American communities to build more than 5,300 schools, especially in the South. These were known as “Rosenwald Schools.” He also helped build dozens of YMCAs for African-Americans to address the pressing needs of the Great Migration. And, through the Rosenwald Fund, he helped nurture the talents of hundreds of black artists, writers and performers.

The list of African-Americans he helped reads like a Who’s Who of Black America. They include the artists Jacob Lawrence, the singer Marian Anderson, the photographer Gordon Parks, the writer Maya Angelou, Congressman John Lewis and the Nobel Prize winner Ralph Bunche.

Rosenwald, a member of the Chicago Sinai Congregation, was inspired by Dr. Emil G. Hirsch, a politically progressive Reform rabbi who helped establish the NAACP in 1909. From the rabbi he learned the principle of tik-kun olam, repairing the world, and spent his life pursuing that goal.

Rosenwald funded agricultural programs in pre-state Palestine and was a major supporter of Jewish causes in Chicago, but his legacy was his outreach to a race other than his own. “The Rosenwald Fund was the single most important funding agency for African-American culture in the 20th century,” the poet Rita Dove says in the film.

Kempner, who interviewed dozens of people, including Rosenwald’s descendants, said that she knew little about his life until she heard the civil rights activist Julian Bond speak about him in 2003. “Julius Rosenwald was someone who 100 years ago did what he did because it was the right thing to do,” Kempner said in an interview. “I didn’t expect it would take me 12 years to make the film, but the issues it addresses are more relevant than ever.

In today’s world we continue to struggle with racism and income inequality, especially in our major cities.”

Kempner said she was drawn to the story because it goes against the stereotype of the Jew as hostile or uncaring to minorities, especially in the years before and after the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, when there was a brief but strong alliance between Blacks and Jews. *Rosenwald* demonstrates that the alliance had deep roots — and suggests that perhaps it can be revived.

Kempner’s earlier films also explore non-stereotypical images of Jews. Her documentary *Partisans of Vilna* goes against the notion that Jews didn’t resist Nazi occupation. The film is the story of the heroic endeavors of Jewish resistance fighters. Kempner’s film about Hank Greenberg shatters the stereotype that Jewish men are nebbishy weaklings who are bad at sports. Greenberg was a Baseball Hall of Famer, one of the game’s greatest sluggers, who fought anti-Semitism in the 1930s and 1940s. And her film *Yoo-Hoo, Mrs. Goldberg* is about a strong Jewish woman, both on screen and off. That woman, Gertrude Berg, fought against the McCarthy-era blacklist and paved the way for women in the entertainment industry. Shows like *I Love Lucy*, the *Honeymooners*, *Seinfeld* and *Friends* were in many ways descendants of *The Goldbergs*.

The new film on Rosenwald has been shown at more than 100 venues, including theaters, film festivals and community centers, and has won considerable praise. Kempner hopes that it can inspire greater cooperation between blacks and Jews. “The film resonates in the philanthropic community,” she added. “At one screening of Rosenwald, a young man asked me, ‘How did he know to do this?’”

She added: “Not everyone can give away $62 million, but everyone can find the Rosenwald within them.”

---

Ari L. Goldman, a professor at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, is an editorial consultant for CONTACT. He is the author of four books, including *The Search for God at Harvard* and *The Late Starters Orchestra*.

Above: Julius Rosenwald and Booker T. Washington, Tuskegee Institute, 1915. Below: Julius Rosenwald with students from a Rosenwald school.
At the rate of one page a day, it takes just over seven years to finish learning the entire Talmud. For the last three and a half years, London-based artist Jacqueline Nicholls not only studied a page of Talmud each day, but also created a drawing in response to what she learned.

As Nicholls notes, “the Talmud seems to contain everything, shifting from lore to law as the text twists and turns.” But even as it includes everything, it does not include everyone. “It is a conversation between male scholars, assuming that the reader is an able-bodied, heterosexual male.”

Nicholls, who is both a visual artist and a Jewish educator, explores traditional Jewish ideas in untraditional ways. She disrupts the Talmud’s male hegemony by injecting many different perspectives. Her drawings, especially regarding Seder Nashim, the sections about women that discuss marriage and divorce, highlight a woman’s vulnerability in the face of male power that decides her fate.

One page of Talmud that discusses the three ways that a woman is “acquired” — through sex, money or a contract — inspired Nicholls to draw a currency with a picture of a woman with a gag around her mouth. “And even though she is willing,” Nicholls writes in a free hand, “there’s not talking, no giving, just silent, and receiving.

Another one of her drawings, this one about the laws of drinking wine on the Sabbath, shows a neighborhood awash in liquor, where even the buildings are in a tipsy state. In yet another, this one about the laws of saying the Shema prayer, someone peeks from behind a covered face. “I want to be open-eyed,” she explains, “and to keep an open mind.”

At just over halfway through the seven-year cycle, Nicholls has produced more than 2,000 drawings. “I don’t want to think about how many I’ve done, or how many to go,” she says. “A page a day, I’ll get there in the end.”

For more about Jacqueline Nicholls, visit www.drawyomi.blogspot.com.
neighbors that don't want to mix on me

INSIDE: Drawings by Jacqueline Nicholls