

# The Canadian Jewish News



**RALPH BENMERGUI**  
on becoming not that kind of rabbi

**...plus highlights from his podcast**

/ page 5



CANDLE LIGHTING TIMES	
SAINT JOHN	4:28
QUEBEC CITY	3:43
MONTREAL	3:57
OTTAWA	4:06
TORONTO	4:26
WINNIPEG	4:15
REGINA	4:43
VANCOUVER	4:01

- |  |               |
|--|---------------|
| Foodbenders discrimination charge dismissed      | <b>page 2</b> |
| Alberta retracts the pro-Nazi education advice   | <b>page 3</b> |
| A Jewish view from the climate disaster in B.C.  | <b>page 4</b> |
| 'Hava Nagila' comes to life in a children's book | <b>page 8</b> |

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# Court dismisses charge that Foodbenders discriminated against a Jewish customer in Toronto

/ Ron Csillag

A court has dismissed a charge that the owner of Foodbenders contravened anti-discrimination bylaws when she encountered a Jewish doctor and his son last year at her store.

Kimberley Hawkins, who gained notoriety for posting anti-Zionist messages to social media, was charged for violating a provision of the Municipal Code that forbids a licensed business in Toronto from discriminating on the basis of “race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, marital status, family status, or disability.”

In an oral decision on Nov. 15, a provincial offenses court dismissed the charge. In effect, that means Hawkins can keep her business license, even though Foodbenders is closed and Hawkins has said she’s declaring bankruptcy.

The case stemmed from an incident in July 2020 at the former Bloor Street West eatery and catering company.

After seeing Hawkins’ many anti-Zionist posts on Instagram, which included “#zionistsnotwelcome;” comparing Zionists to Nazis, and accusing Israel of committing “systematic genocide,” Gordon Arbess and his son Josh decided to go to the shop and talk to Hawkins.

On July 5, 2020, “we decided together to go down and have a discussion with her,” Arbess, a Toronto family doctor, told The CJN. “We weren’t going down to cause trouble. We just really wanted to have a discussion. My son’s very peaceful. I’m a pretty peaceful guy.”

When they arrived, they asked to speak to Hawkins. Told she wasn’t available, Arbess said he told an employee: “We’re Jewish. We support the state of Israel. Would we be able to purchase something here? Are we welcome here as customers?”

According to Arbess, Hawkins then charged out from behind the counter, uttered profanities, and told the two to get outside. From there, “things got bad very quickly,” Arbess recalled.

When he and his son went outside, Arbess said he looked over his shoulder and saw Hawkins coming at him with a bucket. She then allegedly threw a bucket of water on him.

“I said, ‘what did you do that for?’ I was sopping wet.”

He said his son was “quite shaken,” and called police.

Arbess said the police told him that Hawkins had apologized for the incident and asked whether he wanted to press charges.

“I was in a rush to get to work,” Arbess said. “I said, ‘I don’t really want to press charges. I don’t want trouble.’”

An assault charge against Hawkins was not laid.

Looking back, “perhaps we were a bit naive to think that we would have a frank discussion,” Arbess noted.

The CJN was unable to reach Hawkins for comment.

Arbess was later asked by the Crown’s office to testify at the hearing on the possible Municipal Code infraction relating to discrimination. That took place via Zoom before a justice of the peace in late September.

Arbess said that at the hearing, Hawkins didn’t apologize to him for the bucket incident. “She said, ‘it was wrong for me to do that.’ It wasn’t really an apology.”

Reasons for the court’s dismissal of the charge were not immediately available. Hawkins’ lawyer, Stephen Ellis, told The CJN it happened “because the Crown did not prove that Mr. Arbess suffered any discrimination on the day in question.”

Ellis applauded the court finding, saying Hawkins “has been the victim of harassment, vandalism, physical threats and defamation by the Israel lobby since she began to openly show support to the Palestinian people in November 2019.”

In past interviews, Hawkins maintained the social media posts and signs at her shop were intended as criticism of Israel, not of Jews.

In one Instagram post, she wrote: “The first thing I will say is that I love Jewish people and they are welcome in my store. I have never said anything about Jewish people.”

Arbess said he’s “obviously disappointed” by the court’s decision.

“I’m worried that it sets a precedent whereby people will be emboldened to have these questionable, anti-Jewish views.”

Foodbenders generated wide attention in the summer of 2020 with social media postings that included denouncing Prime Minister Justin Trudeau as a “Zionist puppet,” and glorifying a Palestinian terrorist.

Other posts accused Jewish groups of controlling the media and elected officials, and justified terrorism against Israelis.

A sandwich board outside the store once proclaimed, “F—k Mossad, IDF, Bibi” A large sign in her window read, “I (heart) Gaza.”

Amid the ensuing controversy, several food ordering and payment apps, including Uber Eats, Doordash, Ritual, and Square, broke ties with Foodbenders. The store’s window was vandalized in protests.

Hawkins still faces other legal woes, including a defamation lawsuit from Shai DeLuca, a Toronto interior designer with Canadian and Israeli citizenship, and two complaints before the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal. One is from the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs, and the other on behalf of GTA resident Elena Aschkenasi, who claims Hawkins discriminated against Jews when she posted that Zionists weren’t welcome at her store.

In a recent social media post, Hawkins said Foodbenders has come to an end.

“Foodbenders was my entire life. But it has to be over now. My heart is broken.”

She said that since November 2019, she has been fighting the “Israel lobby” to keep her business going. Now, “the lobby took my business and career, my life savings.”

B’nai Brith Canada, which urged a review of Hawkins’ business license, said it was “disappointed and very concerned” about the court’s decision to dismiss the charge against her.

B’nai Brith said it is analyzing the decision “so that we can understand next steps available to the community.”

A spokesperson said the city’s legal services “is in the process of carefully reviewing the court’s decision.” ■

Ron Csillag has been reporting for The CJN since 1984.

# **Alberta retracted an education document which advocated provincial teachers portray the positive attributes of Nazism**

/ Jeremy Appel

**A**lberta is often regarded as the Texas of the North for their mutual conservative political cultures, as well as dependence on oil and gas revenues.

But recent controversies in each jurisdiction over how educators should approach teaching about the Holocaust also provide a point of comparison.

Gina Peddy, an administrator with the Carroll Independent School Division in Southlake, Texas—a Fort Worth suburb—elicited outrage in October when she told educators that if they are to teach about the horrors of the Holocaust, they must also provide an “opposing” perspective, NBC News reported.

The intention was to align the school board’s teaching practices with a new Texas law—House Bill 3979—that mandates teachers present “diverse and contending perspectives without giving deference to any one perspective” when discussing “widely debated and currently controversial issues.”

Clay Robinson, a spokesperson for the Texas State Teachers Association, told NBC this was an “overreaction” and “misinterpretation” of the legislation.

“We find it reprehensible for an educator to require a Holocaust denier to get equal treatment with the facts of history,” Robinson said. “That’s absurd. It’s worse than absurd. And this law does not require it.”

More recently in Alberta, the government retracted an official Alberta education document that advocated teachers portray positive aspects of Nazism, in addition to Canada’s treatment of Indigenous peoples.

The ministry’s Guidelines for Recognizing Diversity and Promoting Respect, which has been deleted from its website but is still accessible on the Wayback Machine, suggests students hear “both the positive and negative behaviours and attitudes of the various groups portrayed” in their studies.

For example, it recommends that materials depicting Nazi atrocities in the Second World War be balanced with the perspective that before the war, the “German government’s policies substantially strengthened the country’s economy.”

As well, the same section suggests resources that “dwell on the mistreatment of FNMI (First Nations, Métis and Inuit) people by Caucasians” should also include examples of settler Canadians who opposed these policies.

“Without omitting or glossing over the many instances when members of one group have cruelly wronged persons of another group, the resource should attempt to provide some balance

by presenting factors causing the behaviour or portraying positive qualities exhibited by members of the group that have acted inappropriately,” the document says.

On Nov. 12, the Friends of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, wrote to Education Minister Adriana LaGrange, requesting the content be removed and for the ministry to review how it ended up online.

“It is shocking that the Alberta Ministry of Education would consider the genocidal Nazi regime as a good example of a group that had positive behaviours, given Nazis murdered six million Jews and millions of others, in addition to completely destroying their country because they initiated a war,” FSWC president Michael Levitt, a former Liberal MP, said in a statement.

In response, LaGrange acknowledged on Twitter that the document “contains extremely disturbing and completely unacceptable views,” but denied she, nor anyone at the ministry, had seen the document, despite it being an official Alberta Education document with a copyright from last year.

“To be clear, this document has nothing to do with the curriculum process and the content dates back to some years ago. Under no circumstances would my office approve horrendous content like this being taught to Alberta students,” she added, thanking FSWC, as well as the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs, and B’nai Brith Canada, for bringing the issue to her attention.

In a statement, LaGrange elaborated, explaining that the document itself dates back to 1984, but with the government replacing the former School Act with its Education Act in 2019, the document was updated to replace references to the former with the latter.

“A general review of the document content was not done at that time and at no point did this document come to the Ministers Office for approval. As soon as it was brought to our attention, we took immediate action to remove it,” she said.

Carla Peck, an education professor at the University of Alberta whose field of research is curriculum, told The CJN that this wasn’t the only time the document was updated, expressing skepticism of the minister’s claims.

She noted the document references other Alberta Education resources from 2011, 2012 and 2015, and that it uses the term ‘FNMI,’ which was not present in the original.

“I think somebody’s telling tales out of school,” said Peck. ■

**Jeremy Appel is a Calgary-based freelance journalist.**

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# Vancouver's Jewish community responded to a fundraising appeal for flood relief by donating \$248K in one week

**A**n appeal from Vancouver's Jewish Federation for funds to help people affected by unprecedented flooding and destruction in British Columbia has raised \$248,000 in just one week, with donations continuing to arrive.

The Jewish Federation of Greater Vancouver launched the fund on Nov. 17, after British Columbia declared a state of emergency.

Federation seeded the appeal with a disbursement of \$10,000 from its contingency fund and the rest has come from private donations.

Last week, Federation CEO Ezra Shanken said the organization was in touch with about 84 families in the affected areas to see if they need assistance.

Vancouver federation is considering both urgent needs as well as long-term plans for rebuilding, as it examines where to donate the funds, a federation spokesperson said.

Some money has already been disbursed to hard-hit areas, but a decision will be made later this week about how further funds will be allocated. ■

**To donate to the fund, visit:**  
[www.jewishvancouver.com/bcflood](http://www.jewishvancouver.com/bcflood)

# The view from the climate disaster in B.C.: 'We have departed from the shores of the safe and predictable world we imagined for ourselves and our children'

/ Maayan Kreitzman

**I**n the fall of 2019, I was arrested for peacefully sitting on the Burrard Bridge in Vancouver in an action protesting government culpability in the climate and ecological crisis. On Monday evening, Nov. 15, 2021, that same bridge was shut down because of the climate emergency itself.

Following a weekend of record-breaking rain from the "atmospheric river" event that lashed B.C., a barge had broken loose in Vancouver's English Bay and rammed itself up against the beach. The barge was so dangerously close to the bridge that the city closed it off, fearing a disastrous collision. On the seawall next to the barge, waves from the storm surge drowned the usually busy benches and lawns in over a foot of seawater, completing a surreal tableau.

This was only one of the strange scenes unfolding across the province in the last few days. Vancouver is now cut off from the rest of Canada by road because all our east-west highways have been broken apart, gouged by water and mudslides pouring off adjacent clear-cuts. Only yesterday, forest protectors were in court, facing Canada's justice system for standing in the way of old growth logging on Vancouver Island—protecting the very ecosystems that hold carbon and stabilize soils.

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These are only two examples of the absurdity of living in a civilization that is still at the peak of decadent climate and ecological corruption, even as things begin to crumble.

I have more: for the last year and a half, my friends and fellow activists have been living in the treetops of a Burnaby forest, and getting periodically arrested, in an prolonged act of civil disobedience obstructing the direct path of the Trans Mountain Pipeline expansion. On Nov. 15, construction on the pipeline expansion halted and the existing pipeline (which carries 300,000 barrels of oil a day) was turned off.

Its route, like B.C.'s highways, is now gutted by erosion and covered in debris. The pipeline project that the Trudeau government bought and stands to lose billions on has been halted—this time not by protesters, but by a climate disaster the likes of which its expansion would make even worse in the future.

Canada's leaders have tried to plead that they need the pipeline to make money to fund an energy transition, but even this seems futile. The pipeline itself is on the verge of being swept into river canyons as its construction hemorrhages money.

The irony doesn't stop there. Sumas Prairie, a part of the Fraser Valley that used to be a shallow inland lake, has now turned itself back into one as water pours into it from the Nooksack River in Washington State. Once a rich freshwater lake and vast wetland, the lifeblood of the Sto:lo nation, Sumas Lake was stolen by the Crown and drained in the 1920s. The lakebed was turned into some of the province's richest farmland, which now supports tens of thousands of dairy cows and hundreds of thousands of chickens—decimating the Sto:lo way of life, for which they are seeking compensation.

On Tuesday night, farmers were told to abandon their livestock and get out. The Barrowtown pump station, the only thing standing between them and an additional three-metre rise in the water levels, was about to fail. If it did, water would start pouring in from the Fraser River as well. Thankfully the pump station survived the night, but thousands of animals have already perished.

The entire town of Merritt, which was evacuated only three months ago due to wildfires, was evacuated again as their flooded sanitation system failed. Highway 1 near the town of Lytton, which was entirely razed by fire after the record-breaking heat dome this summer, was literally broken in two, dumping a massive slide of mud and debris into the Thompson River below.

Hundreds of travellers were plucked off highways in helicopters after spending nights in cold vehicles in between dangerous mudslides. Private choppers are being booked by Sikh Gurdwaras delivering thousands of meals from Vancouver to stranded evacuees in Hope because roads are impassable.

Meanwhile, Public Safety Minister Mike Farnworth has been busy—get this—deploying RCMP up to Wet'suwet'en territory in northern B.C., where the Gidimt'en clan are bracing for another round of standoffs with Coastal Gaslink construction crews and police in full tactical gear who protect them on the Wet'suwet'en's traditional territories. Crews have been evicted time and time again by the hereditary leaders of the nation, but no agreement seems forthcoming.

In summary: the very people, many of whom are Indigenous, who are protecting Canada and the world from the build-out of fossil fuel infrastructure (which everyone up to and including the International Energy Agency says is incompatible with con-

taining global warming to 1.5 degrees) are getting their asses kicked by the state, even as our province's major infrastructure has just been decimated by a climate disaster.

In British Columbia, it may feel like a year of disasters, and it has been: a heat dome that killed 600 people, massive wildfires and now floods. But statistically speaking, this is the easiest year we are likely to experience for the rest of our lives. We cannot just build it all back—it will happen again, but worse, before we can.

We have departed from the shores of the safe and predictable world we imagined for ourselves and our children. What's left is, first, to grieve for that world. Second, to make a series of ethical choices about how to live in a world that, while dying, is still very much alive: how much do we care about each other? What are we willing to do as citizens together to avoid the worst, adapt to the inevitable and create a better world while we do it?

As Jews, we know that when the forces of illiberality and fear strike, we usually suffer. It is imperative that we take on the climate and ecological crisis in our Jewish communal life as a central social and ethical challenge. This challenge is sadly something we will never be able to declare "won". At the same time, our collective choices as part of political and social movements matter profoundly to dial the trajectory toward the still dangerous, but less extreme, outcomes we know are possible. ■

**Dr. Maayan Kreitzman is an agricultural sustainability researcher and activist on unceded Coast Salish territory in Vancouver.**

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## How Ralph Benmergui became not that kind of rabbi

/An excerpt from *I Thought He Was Dead: A Spiritual Memoir*

/ Ralph Benmergui

Over the years, I had often researched pathways to becoming a rabbi. I wasn't ever able to convince myself that with my poor command—as in almost none—of the Hebrew language I would be accepted by any institutions. I realized that I had been looking at these websites for more than 20 years. And every time I reasoned that I couldn't take the five years off it required, or that I wouldn't be able to bear the weight of rabbinical obligations. But here I was again, taking one more look.

There is an ebb and flow to my spirituality. When the tide is in, I am awash with feelings of unity and find that the doorway to my compassion opens just enough to let in the beauty and sorrow of this existence. The triggers vary for this open heartedness. Sometimes it's the approach of our highest holidays and the call to reflection, repentance and service. Other times it's my own sadness or despair for the plight of so many for so few reasons.

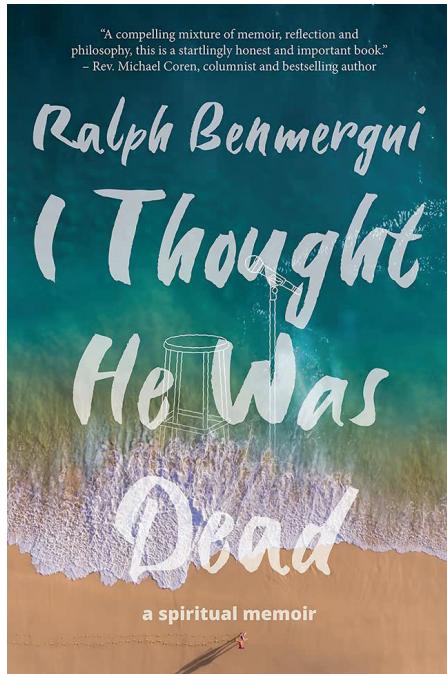
I, for instance, find myself occasionally crying for the earth that sustains us. The hardened heart of our every man, and I do mean man, for himself culture. Ironically, we prop up billionaires not because they understand us but because we hope that through them we can ourselves become rich, powerful, immune. Upton Sinclair, the American writer, said it well: "It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on him not understanding it." John Steinbeck, another American dissident writer, said so eloquently, "Socialism never took root in America because the poor see themselves not as exploited proletariat but as temporarily embarrassed millionaires."

My soul wanderings are not the kind that will make me a religious scholar. I don't know how many angels dance on the head of a pin. So, what was I doing staring at a screen and wondering if I should take one last poke at the rabbinical piñata? I returned to the form of Judaism that has always been aligned with my disposition, Jewish Renewal. A movement that was born of the hippie days of West Coast America. Its founders were well grounded in orthodoxy and yet had found a way to infuse the cosmic gut punch of psychedelia and the mystic traditions of the Hasidic movement into a new-age Judaism that spoke to those that yearned for more mystery and less certitude.

From that form of Judaism emerged rabbis like Shlomo Carlebach, "the Singing Rabbi"; Arthur Waskow, the leading proponent of an Earth-based Judaism that reconnected Jewish teachings with stewardship of the planet; and most impactful of them all, Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. With books Like Paradigm Shift and From Age-ing to Sage-ing, Reb Zalman brought a magical synthesis of classical and profound Jewish practice and tradition into the twentieth century and now beyond. He asked questions like, "How do you get it on with God?" He launched a dialogue with the Dalai Lama that was captured in Rodger Kamenetz's wonderful book, The Jew in the Lotus.

I was hooked. As a teenager, I was a tail-end baby boomer. That meant I could only see the Earth-based and communal experiment of the hippie generation from a distance. I was too young to participate actively but old enough to attach myself to the utopian ideals that were launched in the face of a dour and war-addicted western world rife with cruel "isms."

God as mystery, people as beings—all beings—infused with a spark of the divine that could be activated by the connection of one heart to another. The teachings, seen through the lens of unity, took on a rich meaning for me that never truly left. So here I was, scrolling down the course curriculum for a place called the ALEPH Ordination Program. There were choices: rabbi, rabbinic pastor—never heard of that before—and finally, Hashpa'ah, or Jewish spiritual direction. I gravitated toward that, the one I could do while still providing for my family. I applied only to realize later that I had missed the last line where they said that you had to be enrolled in the rabbinic stream to apply. I wrote a second note saying that I had missed the fine



print and thanking them anyway.

The next day I got a reply asking me to hold that thought. A decision had been made that this year they would accept people who were not rabbinic candidates. I would be interviewed. I was excited but also felt like I would get laughed out of the virtual room. We spoke—actually I spoke, a lot, to two different rabbis. I waited. And, eventually, I was accepted.

How was this going to mesh with my home life in a new city? I was going to be the only Canadian in the program and would have to travel to Colorado every six months. What would my president over at Sheridan say? He was, by his own admission, not the kind that pursued such spiritual paths.

So, what is a spiritual director? That has always been a tough question to answer, especially in the Jewish world. A spiritual director, or SD as it's called, has a much

more robust community in the Christian world. Accessing the wholeness of the human narrative through story and tradition with a spiritual guide or companion can ground a person in a way that allows them to open up to universal questions with a focus on reflection, contemplation and increased skillfulness. Note that I don't include the word "answers" in the process. It's refining the questions that draws my attention: Why am I here? What purpose could and even should my life have? How do I wrestle with transition, grief and inner peace?

At its core, the process of Hashpa'ah is about holy listening. Hearing with your heart and responding to theirs. We yearn for spiritual connection through the often-broken heart; we yearn to be heard. As I moved through the three-year course, I found a rich cohort of fellow travellers and a growing appreciation, through Reb Zalman's emphasis on deep ecumenism, of all spiritual paths—religious or otherwise.

I do remember how I started on that journey. It was to be a week of face-to-face workshops in Colorado, just outside Boulder. I arrived at the airport in Toronto ready for the flight out. Trouble was, the plane I was expecting to take very early that morning didn't exist. No flight number on the departures board, nada. I approached the desk. It should be noted that I had made a conscious decision to wear my kippah for that whole week. I wanted the world to see that we can all carry faith, and a reminder for myself that whoever saw me and how I behaved would think that I must be what a Jew is. I approached one of the service people and asked where my flight had disappeared to. She informed me that the flight had been cancelled a month ago. Part of me was confused, part of me was relieved. Hey, this could be a sign not to go, even though I don't believe in that sort of thing. I thought, you were just going to embarrass yourself in front of all those people who know way more than you will ever know about being a Jew. Turns out the travel agent had either sent a note that I did not see or just didn't notify me. I asked what I was supposed to do now. Turns out, there was another flight, with connections, that was set to leave in eight hours. I was in a good space by this point,

spiritually. I made the choice to be present to what Eckhart Tolle calls “the isness” of my situation. I sat cross-legged in a hallway and brought out a book to read. Time melted away, but my reverie was shaken by an announcement over the PA system. Ladies and gentlemen, we are experiencing extremely cold temperatures out on the tarmac right now and because of that we are declaring a ground stop. No planes will be departing until further notice.

OK, so maybe there is such a thing as a sign. I had every reason now to back out. I was supposed to arrive for an opening circle ceremony by 6 p.m. Mountain Time. This was just not going to happen. Yet somehow, I was settling into my kippah-clad serene disposition. Whatever happened was not necessarily meant to be but I still had a choice as to how I would receive it. By the time I got to the airport in Denver, 15 hours had passed. As I was standing there, waiting for the shuttle, a woman walked up to me and said, “Rabbi, you look tired, is there anything I can do for you?” I smiled. “Oh, thank you, I’m OK” I loved that moment, but I also knew that I had been misidentified. I began to say, “I’m not a rabbi,” but she interrupted and said, “I’m Christian, but I just wanted to say that it’s good to see someone like you today. It’s been a hard day for me. God bless you.” “God bless you, too.” For that moment, I had been what that kind woman needed. For that moment, I had been what I needed, too.

I finally arrived at the hotel having missed all of the ceremony. I headed to my room exhausted but somehow peaceful. The trip took 17 hours. It was worth it, though. A new chapter had begun. ■

Ralph Benmergui hosts the podcast *Not That Kind of Rabbi* along with *Yehupetzville* for The CJN Podcast Network.

## Some recent journeys to Yehupetzville

/ Ralph Benmergui

### The perfect storm: How one New Yorker found her way to Newfoundland—and never left (Nov. 18)

Fifteen years ago, Elizabeth Loder moved to Newfoundland from New York for what was meant to be a short meteorology assignment. Fast-forward to 2021: Loder, now married and raising three children in St. John’s, is a lynchpin of the local Jewish community—a baal tefillah—while still working as meteorologist and engineer.

What has she observed as an outsider welcomed in? How has she brought her knowledge of Judaism to such a small community? How does she handle raising her children Jewishly, when they’re surrounded by non-Jews? Loder answered all these questions in this deep dive into Jewish life on the Rock.

### The last Yiddish speaker from Saint John, New Brunswick, reflects on the Jewish Maritime exodus (Nov. 3)

Before Robert Brym became an esteemed sociology professor at the University of Toronto, he was the only kid in Saint John, whose first language was Yiddish.

Born to a religious mother and atheist socialist father, Brym had to navigate cultural and religious different Judaism while figuring out how Jews assimilated (or didn’t) in a small Maritime society. From the 1970s, Saint John’s Jewish population has dwindled, as Brym—and other Jewish kids from the Atlantic region—moved to bigger cities for school and work.

### Why Joel Axler loves being one of two Jews living in Walkerton (Sept. 16)

Many years ago, when Joel Axler first moved to Walkerton, Ont., he was sitting in a diner when a postal worker walked in and asked him a question: “Are you in the witness protection program?”

People from the big cities, she explained, don’t usually move to the town of fewer than 5,000 people, which sits about halfway between Toronto and Tobermory. Axler explained he was not being hunted by criminals—he just liked the place.

### Reflections on the once-thriving Jewish community of Glace Bay, Nova Scotia (Aug. 13)

Few Canadian Jewish communities have experienced such tumultuous changes as Glace Bay. In 1902, the coal mining town on the eastern edge of Cape Breton became the site of the first synagogue constructed in the Atlantic provinces. Over the years, Jewish workers shifted into retail and business, growing to several hundred families by the mid-20th century.

These trends held strong for decades, until the overall population began to decline in the 1970s. The island’s oldest synagogue closed down in 2010, and many of its Jews ended up moving away.

### Living the rural life in Uxbridge, Ont. (Oct. 20)

It had long been a dream for Charles Karstadt to own a piece of land. And not just a suburban house, but a real plot of earth, where he could farm honey from bees and take hikes in the nearby woods with his partner, Shari Hirschberg.

They spent a long time looking for the right place, ultimately landing on a rural home in Uxbridge, Ont. With few public amenities and plenty of natural surroundings, it seemed perfect, even though it was far from their former Jewish community in Toronto. Then the pandemic hit—and, suddenly, their decision was vindicated. ■

Listen to these episodes and more at [thecjn.ca/yehupetzville](http://thecjn.ca/yehupetzville)



# The beloved song 'Hava Nagila' has come to life in a children's book by an author from Montreal

/ Janice Arnold

**S**he is a Jewish woman who wears a traditional Indian sari, but was born in a Ukrainian shtetl. And although she is now almost two centuries old, she still dances across the globe bringing the same delight she always has to Jewish people, whether they are celebrating or enduring hardship.

Her name is Hava Nagila and this super-heroine is the creation of Freda Lewkowicz, author of the new children's picture book *I Am Hava: A Song's Story of Love, Hope & Joy*, illustrated by Siona Benjamin.

Like the song, Hava spreads happiness wherever she goes.

"I hope I have brought the song's history and meaning to life," said Lewkowicz, who recently retired after 39 years as an English teacher at Rosemere High School, north of Montreal. "'Hava Nagila' is the soundtrack to Jewish lives, the most famous Jewish song in the world, a Jewish anthem, yet its melody floats across borders, religions and cultures. Today, it embraces everyone."

She found the perfect partner for her poetic text in Benjamin, an Indian-Jewish artist living in the New York City area, who sees the character's blue skin tone as a way to instil appreciation of diversity. As a member of the ancient Bene Israel community, Benjamin knows what it is like to be viewed as different, even among fellow Jews.

Hava's sari and the tallit that billows cape-like behind her symbolize these two identities.

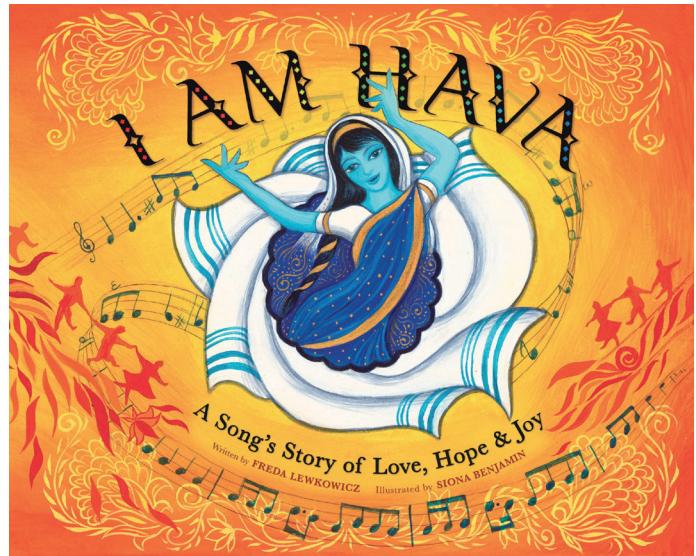
Lewkowicz dedicates the book to her Holocaust survivor parents, Mara and Marek Lewkowicz, who danced to "Hava Nagila" while living in the Hasenhecke displaced persons camp in Germany after the war. It lifted their spirits as they looked toward rebuilding their lives in a new world.

"Their resilience and courage showed me that there is light even in darkness," she says.

Why blue? Obviously, it's the "Jewish" colour, associated with the Israeli flag. But Benjamin gave more thought to her choice.

"Blue is the colour of the sky and the ocean, it is everywhere," she said at the book's launch during Jewish Book Month, sponsored by the Jewish Public Library. "Hava belongs everywhere and nowhere at the same time. This is a universal story."

Benjamin knows that feeling having been born in Mumbai in a predominantly Hindu and Muslim country, attended Catholic and Zoroastrian schools, and immigrated to the United States. A seasoned artist, she had, however, never illustrated a children's



book before and this was a commission that required careful research.

The two women were matched by the book's publisher, Seattle-based Intergalactic Afikoman, which was founded two years ago by Brianna Caplan Sayres, a Jewish educator and author.

Her vision was to start a small independent house that would publish the type of books for Jewish children that she feels are lacking. She is on the lookout, in particular, for stories that have fantasy, adventure and maybe zany humour, while still conveying Jewish wisdom.

Suitable for kids aged 5 to 8, *I Am Hava*, as narrated by the eponymous protagonist, begins in the tiny village of Sadagora, Ukraine where a niggun, or wordless melody, is hummed by the Hasidim on Shabbat, dispelling the gloom and danger of their lives.

Early in the 20th century, the melody, now personified as the flying Hava, accompanies these pious Jews on their miserable voyage to Jerusalem.

In the Holy Land, musicologist Abraham Zvi Idelsohn is captivated by these newcomers' melody and writes Hebrew lyrics for it entitling the song "Hava Nagila," or come and rejoice—or maybe one of his students did.

The song was first performed publicly in Jerusalem in 1918 at the First World War's end. It soon swept the nation, which danced the hora to it. At independence in 1948, "Hava Nagila" echoed through a rapturous land.

By 1930 "Hava Nagila" was becoming popular in North America, and not only in the Jewish community. In 1959, singer Harry Belafonte recorded a version, just one of the hundreds that have been made.

What greater proof that Hava's spirit lives on today, notes Lewkowicz, than U.S. gymnast Aly Raisman selecting the melody for her gold medal-winning floor routine at the 2012 Olympics. ■

Janice Arnold has covered Montreal for The CJN since 1976.

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