

The Canadian Jewish News



SAMANTHA BAILEY
on telling tales of
psychological suspense
(and maternal anxiety)

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The New Blue Party attracts Jewish candidates fed up with how Doug Ford and the Tories handled the pandemic

/ Alex Rose

A number of Jewish candidates are running for a new right-wing party in Ontario's upcoming provincial election. The New Blue Party is positioning itself as an alternative for people that have historically voted Conservative but are dissatisfied with Premier Doug Ford's government.

According to the party's mission statement, it believes Ontario's established political parties are all "entrenched in radical left-wing ideology that seeks to socially re-engineer our province through tax-and-spend economics, government over-reach, and crony capitalism."

One of its biggest gripes with the current Ford government is how it has managed the pandemic, especially the repeated lockdowns and implementation of vaccine passports.

Joanne Csillag (no relation to The CJN's reporter emeritus Ron Csillag), New Blue's candidate in Toronto's Willowdale riding, said the government's mishandling of the pandemic was one of the main reasons she has lost faith in the Conservative party.

"It's the flip-flopping, the back and forth. I know with the pandemic, the past year has been very difficult for everybody. It's a tricky situation because everybody is navigating through a new situation. So first of all, I want to acknowledge that," Csillag said. "But I think there was a lot of flip-flop back and forth, like, 'we're not going to go this direction,' and 'we are going to go this direction.' So those things kind of concern me."

Yakov Zarkhine, who will represent the New Blue Party in Thornhill, also has misgivings about Ford's pandemic response, and especially the way he reacted to dissenting voices within the Conservative party.

"With regards to the PC leadership, my realization started to occur around the time of the pandemic, when certain members of Doug Ford's caucus began raising concerns over cer-

tain emergency measures, and Doug Ford had a history of expelling some of his caucus members," Zarkhine said. "As a free speech advocate and somebody that believes that free speech is central to functioning parliamentary democracy, that raised some red flags for me... that was the one issue that I really didn't like seeing from the PC government."

The New Blue Party, which has nominees in all 124 ridings in Ontario, promises to neutralize all COVID mandates by repealing emergency measures, ending vaccine passports and granting restitution to people who were fired because they chose not to get vaccinated.

"I do feel that we have come to almost what I call a two-tier system where it's become discriminatory. You have people that can go in certain places and people that can't based on a medical choice," said Csillag. "To me, that's a big deal."

Zarkhine and Csillag both also said they were attracted by New Blue's economic policies including defunding the taxpayer subsidy for established political parties and a reduction of three per cent on the harmonized sales tax.

For Zarkhine, who is a 19-year-old property manager and commerce student at York University, it is significant that he is running as a Jew in Thornhill, the only riding in the country that has a plurality of Jewish people.

"I think that my Jewish identity really helps me relate to many of our constituents. At the same time, obviously, I recognize that so many of our constituents in Thornhill are not Jewish, and many of those who are Jewish do not identify as Orthodox. So I am committed to standing for all the constituents while I myself am an Orthodox Jew," he said.

While Zarkhine has his own personal values about how he lives his life, he made it clear that he does not see it as his place to try to bring those to his role as a government official, should he be elected.

"I think that's really where more of the libertarian perspective of our party comes in, in terms of that limited government and limited encroachment on people's personal freedoms and how they choose to practice religion and live their lives," he said.

Csillag also spoke to how her Jewish identity informed her decision to run for office.

"If there's something that I see that's important, I feel like I have to stand behind it. And I guess where I stand with Jewish values is that... go back to our matriarchs and patriarchs. It's not always a popular thing, but it's just standing behind what you think is right," she said.

The CJN also reached out to riding associations for Toronto-St. Paul's where Yehuda Goldberg is a candidate and Don Valley North where Jay Sobel is running but did not hear back by deadline. ■

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Elisha Wiesel visits Montreal where he remembered his aunt and his father Elie's commitment to justice

/ Janice Arnold

Elisha Wiesel is the son, the only child, of the most illustrious voice of Holocaust remembrance, yet on a visit to Montreal he insisted on memorializing another survivor few have heard of.

His Aunt Batia, Elie Wiesel's sister, lived quietly for many years in Montreal after the war, settling in the suburb of Côte St. Luc where she and her husband, Dr. Leonard Jackson, raised two children.

She died in 1974, at just 49, from cancer. The family moved soon after to Israel, where her children Steve and Sara still live today.

Last week, Elisha was joined by Côte St. Luc officials, Rabbi Reuben Poupko, survivors and others for the dedication of a plaque for Batia in Elie Wiesel Park. The green space at the corner of Kildare Road and Cavendish Boulevard was created in 2017, a year after Wiesel died.

The new plaque affixed to the central bench reads: Beatrice Wiesel Jackson z"l 1925-1974/May her memory be a blessing."

Elisha Wiesel, who turns 50 next month, is too young to remember his aunt. But her kindness was never forgotten in the family.

"Her home was always overflowing with people who had nowhere to go. Refugees were welcome for a Shabbat dinner, a change of clothes," he said.

Mayor Mitchell Brownstein, 61, does have a vivid memory of Batia Jackson. The family lived on the same street as his, Borden Avenue, and he was close friends with Steve.

The Jackson door indeed was always open – for the neighbourhood kids to come and go, even raid the refrigerator. "She was a nice lady...We were at her house all the time," said Brownstein.

He distinctly remembers Elie at the house for the shivah.

Elie Wiesel had three sisters. They, along with their parents, were deported in May 1944 to Auschwitz, where his mother and younger sister immediately perished in the gas chambers. Elie and his father, who died during the Holocaust, were sent to the Buchenwald camp.

Beatrice and Hilda, the eldest daughter, were selected for forced labour and both survived.

Elisha was in Montreal to speak at a fundraiser for the Foundation for Genocide Education, held at Rabbi Poupko's synagogue, Congregation Beth Israel Beth Aaron, where Elie spoke more than once.

In late 2019 he left a successful 25-year Wall Street career with

Goldman Sachs to devote himself more fully to carrying out his father's legacy, and chair the Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity.

It's not a mantle he assumed easily; he found following in his famous father's footsteps daunting for a long time.

"I wanted to get as far as possible from the topic (of the Holocaust)," he said in conversation with Rabbi Poupko. "I wanted nothing more than to not live my life with tragedy hanging over me, informing everything I did."

He first visited Auschwitz with his father and cousin Steve in 1995. He admits that he did not find that as traumatic as visiting his father's birthplace of Sighet, Romania. The home of over 10,000 Jews before the Second World War, the town held only their "ghosts," he said.

"It was the first time I saw my father as a vulnerable young person."

The elder Wiesel believed a good Jew was both well versed in Judaism and grounded in the universal. His son reads a little Talmud every day and speaks out against injustice to other people. He has notably been critical of the treatment of the Uyghur people by the Chinese regime.

Uyghur representatives, he said, told him they wanted to learn from Jews how to preserve their threatened culture. "One leader said to me the odds are China will extinguish our people, either (physically) or by assimilation. We have a great admiration for Jews, he said, who were exiled for 2,000 years, but kept their culture alive."

Elisha revealed what kept his father going. "My father had what you might call a quaint, or profound, belief in the coming of Mashiach and the redemptive age when there would be no war," Wiesel said. He was optimistic by nature, but did not rely on hope alone.

Aspiration, he believed, had to go hand in hand with activism. "He was there for any oppressed community that he could be of use to."

Wiesel speaks at colleges and is enraged by how "social justice causes are getting lumped together" to target Israel.

"Lies are being spread, the more simple and provocative the lie the easier it is swallowed on U.S. campuses, and I hope it doesn't come to Canada: the Jews are white, the Palestinians are black. This is the big lie."

The Foundation for Genocide Education, is led by another child of survivors, Heidi Berger, who is the driving force behind the development of Quebec's first high school teachers' guide to teaching about genocide. Launched last month by the education ministry, this optional pedagogical package was written by university researchers in collaboration with communities affected by the nine 20th-century genocides dealt with in the guide.

The evening, the foundation's first major benefit, raised over \$300,000, said board member Dean Mendel, which goes toward the video materials in the package. Another board member, Irwin Cotler commended the "indefatigable" Berger, whose goal is to have genocide included the curriculum of all high schools in Canada. ■

Janice Arnold has been reporting for The CJN from Montreal since 1976.

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Canadian ruling on West Bank wine labels leaves door open for ‘clarifying information’

/ Ron Csillag

Both sides in a long-running case are tasting positive notes after a federal agency ruling on how wines from West Bank settlements should be labeled.

In a statement on May 13, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) said two wines made in Jewish settlements on the West Bank, both labeled as “Product of Israel” without “clarifying information,” are considered “false” under consumer protection statutes.

The parties say much hinges on the words “clarifying information” and its possible inclusion in future labelling.

Those advocating for Israel welcomed the decision, saying it means the wineries at the centre of the case may keep the “Product of Israel” label on their bottles so long as they add information indicating that the contents are produced in an area of the West Bank administered by Israel.

Those on the other side of the debate also welcomed the statement from the CFIA, saying it means that “Product of Israel” labels violate consumer protection laws. But, cautioned one, matters are far from settled.

The ruling’s references to “clarifying information” could leave the door open for labels to keep the “Made in Israel” designation in addition to other identifiers about their origin, says a lawyer for one of the wineries at the centre of the dispute.

“We are pleased that the (CFIA) has permitted our client to keep the ‘Product of Israel’ label on its wines along with clarifying information, rather than following the utterly misguided European decision to ban the ‘Israel’ label altogether,” said David Elmaleh, a Toronto-based lawyer for the Psagot winery, located in an Israeli settlement north of Jerusalem.

Elmaleh told The CJN that he and the winery’s international legal team “are examining this decision closely and look forward to incorporating additional context to ensure that Israeli businesses operating in the West Bank continue to proudly and prominently display their ‘Product of Israel’ labels.”

He said the CFIA ruling “appears to leave open the possibility” that Psagot products can be labeled, for example, as “Product of Israel: Made in the Indigenous Jewish homeland in the Israeli-administered West Bank” or “Product of Israel: Made in the Shomron on land administered by the State of Israel.”

“Psagot winery will have no trouble adding this context to its labels,” Elmaleh said.

Dimitri Lascaris, a lawyer representing the complainant in the case, wrote that he and his client were pleased with the CFIA decision that Product of Israel labels on wines made in Israel’s “illegal West Bank settlements violate Canadian consumer protection law.”

However, the decision’s wording “leaves considerable room

for more chicanery,” Lascaris warned on his website on May 14.

He noted that the CFIA did not declare explicitly what label it would consider to be appropriate. Rather, it simply stated that the wines were not produced within Israel’s internationally recognized boundaries, and that there is nothing on the labels to inform a consumer that they were made in the West Bank.

“As a result of this unfortunate formulation, we can easily imagine that the producers of West Bank settlement products will now employ labels on which the phrase, ‘Product of Israel’ is prominently displayed, but which is accompanied by the phrase (in small print) ‘Territory administered by Israel,’” Lascaris wrote.

Going forward, he said these products must disclose explicitly that they were produced in an Israeli settlement that is situated on “Occupied Palestinian Territory.” The phrase “territory administered by Israel” would be “grossly inadequate,” Lascaris said.

He said this legal odyssey could continue based on the ruling’s wording or whether Psagot seeks a judicial review of it.

The wines at the centre of the case were from the Psagot and Shiloh wineries, both kosher and both manufactured in post-1967 Jewish settlements.

The CFIA stressed that its ruling relates only to these two labels and that it is not its role “to suggest accurate labels or to approve labels.”

The statement is the latest chapter in a drawn-out saga that began in 2017, when Jewish pro-Palestinian activist David Kattenburg of Winnipeg complained to Ontario’s Liquor Control Board (LCBO) that products from the two wineries originated in “unlawful” Jewish settlements on the West Bank and were mislabeled as “Product of Israel.”

Hearing nothing from the LCBO, he took the case to the CFIA, which sided with him and ordered the liquor board to remove the wines from shelves.

But when Jewish advocacy groups erupted in protest and a member of Parliament got involved, the agency abruptly reversed course and said the wines could be sold under the Canada-Israel Free Trade Agreement, which it had not previously considered. The CFIA said it regretted its earlier decision to pull the wines.

Kattenburg appealed to the CFIA’s Complaints and Appeals Office, which upheld the reversal.

He then sought a judicial review at the Federal Court, which reversed course in 2019, ruling that “Product of Israel” labels on wines made in settlements in the West Bank and Golan Heights were “false, misleading and deceptive” because territories conquered by Israel in 1967 are not recognized in international law, including by Canada, as part of Israel proper.

The Federal Court also ruled that identifying settlement wines “incorrectly” as produced in Israel inhibits consumers from expressing their “political views through their purchasing choices, thereby limiting their Charter-protected right to freedom of expression.”

The government appealed, and a year ago, the Federal Court of Appeal sent the case back to the CFIA, saying the agency was not bound by the lower court’s finding and may arrive at any outcome, provided it was reasonable.

In its most recent statement, the CFIA said its redetermination is not focused on whether a country of origin needs to be in-

cluded on the labels in question. Rather, the agency must determine whether “Product of Israel” on the label of the two wines in question is “false, misleading or deceptive, or likely to create an erroneous impression related to its origin, given the totality of the information provided on the label.”

The CFIA said it was told by Global Affairs that Canada’s policy is that “there is no recognized country where the two wines in question were produced, although these wines were produced in an area administered by the State of Israel.”

The CFIA also found that the Charter of Rights had no application in its decision. “With respect to freedom of conscience, consumer choice in selecting a wine remains unrestricted by the government, allowing consumers to continue to act in line with their conscience,” the agency stated.

In its ruling last May, the Federal Court of Appeal asked the parties to provide written submissions to the CFIA. According to Lascaris, Kattenburg’s filing included land deeds issued by Israeli authorities showing that the Psagot winery was situated “entirely on land stolen from its Palestinian owners.”

The submission to the CFIA by Psagot was similarly blunt.

Psagot wines “are produced by Israelis under the auspices of an Israeli company in an Israeli community subject to Israeli law in Israeli territory. Put simply, Psagot Winery proudly produces wines that are products of Israel,” its brief stated.

The two wines at the centre of the dispute were available at the time of Kattenburg’s complaint. A year ago, the LCBO said the last wines from Shiloh were sold in October 2016 and February 2017 for wines from Psagot. At the time, the board also provided The CJN with a list of 56 wines and liqueurs it sells that are “sourced from Israel,” without specifying whether some are in post-1967 territories.

In late 2019, Europe’s highest court ruled in a case involving Psagot that foodstuffs originating “in territories occupied by the State of Israel must bear the indication of their territory of origin.”

While the CFIA’s decision “is not perfectly reasoned, the result puts Canada in line with almost all the nations of the world, which allow the ‘Product of Israel’ label for such goods,” said legal scholar Prof. Eugene Kontorovich, who was engaged by the U.S.-based Lawfare Project, which acted as co-counsel in the Canadian court cases, to submit an expert opinion on behalf of Psagot.

In a statement on May 16, Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East, which supports the international boycott campaign against Israel, hailed the CFIA ruling, saying it “deals a huge blow to those seeking to normalize Israel’s illegal settlement enterprise through trade.”

The Montreal-based group said it “insists” that future labels must identify their products’ origin in “illegal settlements, rather than use generic labels such as ‘West Bank’ or ‘Israeli-controlled territory.’”

The CFIA said that later this year, it intends to engage in a consultation process in which input will be sought from stakeholders “on policy relating to what might be acceptable origin declarations in this and similar circumstances.”

Said Elmaleh: “Our client will continue to unapologetically advocate—and if necessary, litigate—to protect and advance the truth.”

The Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA) pointed out

that the CFIA decision did not say that “Product of Israel” labels violate Canadian consumer protection law, or that a country-of-origin label was even necessary for the wines in question. “Such labelling is purely voluntary,” and wines could be labelled as “Product of Israel” provided the producer added more context, Richard Marceau, CIJA’s vice-president, external affairs and general counsel, told The CJN.

As for the status of the locations in question, Marceau said the food agency’s ruling was “clear: This is not a matter to be determined by the CFIA.”

The agency’s statement that there is no recognized country where the two wines in question were produced reflects “long-standing” Canadian policy on the issue. The territories are “disputed, and that dispute can only be resolved through direct negotiations between the parties to the conflict, a position CIJA has long held,” Marceau stated.

“The complainant’s attempt to use Canada’s legal system to dictate a position on the status of the territories outside (Israel’s founding) 1948 lines has failed.” ■

Ron Csillag is the reporter emeritus for The CJN.

How far should a Jewish mother go to protect her family? Samantha Bailey tackles themes of obsession and dark secrets in her new thriller

/ Ellin Bessner

Samantha Bailey knows what to blame for turning her generation into incredibly nervous parents: social media.

It’s a subject that’s been on the best-selling Canadian suspense novelist’s mind as she promotes her second book, *Watch Out For Her*. Published in April, it explores the issue of how far a Jewish mother will go to keep her family safe.

And that includes stalking the babysitter, using nanny cams, and even spying on her neighbours.

Bailey, 48, worries about the safety of her own two teens more than she thinks was common while growing up in Toronto herself.

“I had no cellphone. If you got yourself somewhere, you got yourself home,” Bailey said, during an interview at her virtual Canadian book launch held April 26, 2022 by the Prosserman and Schwartz/Reisman JCCs in Toronto. “I went the opposite way.”

She feels that social media has been a blessing, but also a curse that have given Gen-X parents quite a bit of fear.

Fear because today’s teens are putting themselves out there

into the public sphere on TikTok and other social media platforms—where even people who they don't know are watching them, and know where they are.

"I think it causes us to want to protect them more," Bailey said.

Published by Simon and Schuster in both Canada and the U.S., *Watch Out For Her* explores themes like these. It also looks at how motherhood can challenge a woman's sense of identity.

This was familiar ground, since Bailey wrote her latest novel during the pandemic—on deadline to deliver the manuscript while in lockdown with her family.

The book's main character, Sarah Goldman, undergoes psychological angst after she abandons her burgeoning passion for photography to focus solely on raising children.

Bailey didn't start off with this outline for Sarah. But everything morphed because of the pandemic, when the author could no longer juggle her own career running an editing company and writing novels, with volunteering on the parent council at her kids' school.

"I lost all of the space and time of my own. Everything began to meld together. I didn't know when I was a writer, when I was a mother—or when I am supposed to find time for me at all?"

Woman on The Edge, published in 2019, was a *USA Today* bestseller that Bailey sold to publishers in 11 countries. Set in Chicago, that book delved into women's issues like postpartum depression, infidelity, and the wellness industry.

The new novel is different because it is her first to present a Canadian Jewish family at its centre, something that Bailey felt was very important to do as a way of letting certain readers see themselves represented in fiction.

"For Sarah, it's a part of her identity, like being a mother, like being a photographer," Bailey explained, referring to another editorial decision that evolved over time.

"She just was Jewish. It's just how she came to me. And my characters do come to me. I can see them in my mind. I can hear their voices. I know who they are."

But she didn't make the Goldman family's Judaism a key part of the plot. Bailey wanted to avoid having to be an ambassador for her community and explaining the definition of what being Jewish means.

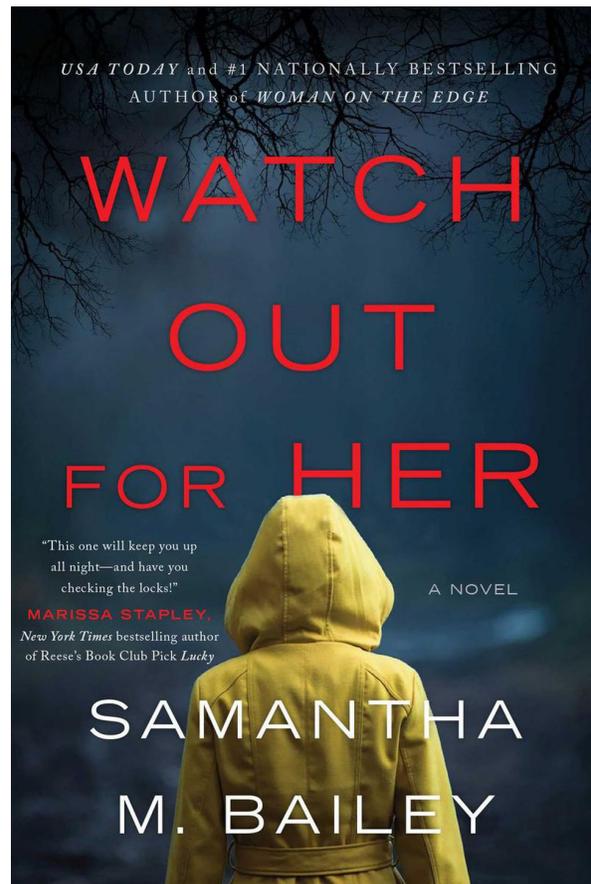
Also, her own Jewish upbringing was relatively unique. Bailey's father is Rabbi Michael Stroh of Temple Har Zion, on Bayview Avenue in Thornhill, north of Toronto. Her mother Celia was a publicist, but is now retired.

And while Bailey can now boast that her work is widely read, it came after several unpublished earlier manuscripts, which she keeps somewhere in a drawer.

Finding Lucas, her first book, came out a decade ago. Promotion included doing a talk to a small audience at her father's synagogue. But with a "chick-lit" style that now reads as dated, she's glad that it's no longer on the market, except on Amazon.

Back then, she billed herself as Samantha Stroh Bailey, but she's now published only with the surname shared with her husband. It's a way to feel a separation between her public and private life.

Being a published author also means not wading into controversial topics on social media—like, say, the Israel-Palestine conflict: "It doesn't feel safe for me to do it."



Instead, she sticks to enthusiastically celebrating the success of other female writer friends, including Torontonians Rebecca Eckler and Marissa Stapley. Bailey also makes a point of acknowledging any book clubs discussing her work, or readers who talk about the books online.

She's even had a fan create a set of press-on nails for Bailey to wear—whose designs draw from the book covers.

But readers also wonder how this bubbly writer can turn out novels with such dark and twisted plots about paranoid murderers, mental illness and betrayal. Bailey says the process helps hash out her own troubling thoughts—describing herself as a true Gemini.

"Since I was young, I have been fascinated by the dark and gritty. I don't want to live it myself, but I love to find out why people want to live it, what draws them to this darkness."

Writing about Canadian locations in a time of restricted access—even within her own hometown—was a different challenge altogether. She'd take drives to suburbia, or go on long walks with her rescue dog, Jasper. (She also Googled a lot, becoming an expert in navigating the photographic maps and images.)

Bailey's follow-up to *Watch Out For Her* will be about women seeking a different life than what they currently have—and the risks and dangers that come along with that.

For contractual reasons, she can't reveal more. But she can promise at least one thing about this next thriller.

"It is dark and twisted." ■

Ellin Bessner is chief correspondent of *The CJN Daily*.

Oscar Louis' new EP 'Ghost in the Apartment' grapples with the very Jewish fear of being forgotten

/ Alex Rose

When Oren Lefkowitz first started writing music as a solo artist in 2019, he wanted to pay homage to the Jewish artists before him who had felt pressure to change their names to better fit into mainstream society.

As a thought experiment, he considered what name he might have used as an actor in 1940s Hollywood—a la Issur Danielovitch going by Kirk Douglas.

Lefkowitz ultimately settled on the name Oscar Lewis. And then he searched to see if any other artists had already laid claim to it.

“What came up was this anthropologist named Oscar Lewis who died in 1970, and the first thing it said in his Wikipedia article was that his birth name was Lefkowitz. He had the same last name as me. And there’s not that many Lefkowitzes. So when I saw that, I was pretty tripped out, and I thought that this was potentially a destiny thing.

“It just made me feel like I was on the right track of thought and that the things that I’m drawn to talk about as a person and in my music is what I should be talking about. It almost felt like the universe winking at me, like, ‘keep going, brother.’”

After this discovery, he went on a pilgrimage with some friends to the original Oscar Lewis’s grave in West Babylon, N.Y., and paid his respects by placing on rock on Lewis’s tombstone and asked for his blessing to use his name.

But then, he ultimately decided to change the spelling of his stage name to Oscar Louis out of respect—and also to avoid crowding out the search results for Lewis.

Lefkowitz was clear that he wasn’t changing his name to hide his Jewishness. He is proud of his heritage, but also concerned by discussions around antisemitism that have seemed to devolve into a stalemate of late.

“I think Jews are in an interesting place where maybe we don’t feel the rest of the world wants to talk about antisemitism, or by talking about antisemitism, we’re somehow marginalizing other marginalized groups. I think that we’re uncomfortable about it and don’t really know how to talk about it amongst anyone other than Jewish people.

“And I think that it is uncomfortable, but I think that that in itself is a problem.”

He hopes that using a stage name that is based on a relatively recent period of antisemitism can energize a discourse that has recently felt very closed and confused.

“A name like this, I think it sounds cool, but also I think that it can open up a conversation where we can talk about antisemitism. Because I think that Jews are not in some kind of vacu-

um. Antisemitism plays to all kinds of other things, like other forms of racism.”

Lefkowitz takes a similar approach with Jewish themes in his music. He does not discuss them explicitly in his lyrics, but he sees them as inspiring his projects. Look no further than his EP set for release on June 29: all the songs on *Ghost in the Apartment* touch on the fear of being forgotten. This is a deeply Jewish fear that resonates throughout his whole life, and therefore can’t help but influence his art.

“I feel like, in some sense, it’s a subtle way of talking about Jewishness. I am Jewish, and I think a lot about being Jewish, and I read a lot about it. It’s very much shaped who I am,” he said. “Sometimes I do this on purpose, and sometimes it just happens subconsciously, but I’ll write about something that has nothing to do with Judaism, and I’ll look back and see that it’s actually this subtle retelling of very tried and true, almost tragic, Jewish themes.”

Perhaps the best example from the album is the title track, in which a recently deceased ghost grieves as he watches his friends learn to be happy again without him. For many listeners, the story might most obviously reflect an actual death of a loved one, or perhaps a breakup or move to a new city – all circumstances in which people fear being forgotten by those they care about. But that’s not all the story reflects.

Three of Lefkowitz’s four grandparents were Holocaust survivors, meaning both of his parents were raised by Holocaust survivors, and the intergenerational trauma has worked its way down to him.

“(My song) is actually also about the idea that Jewish people have this subconscious and conscious fear that one day we will be wiped out because of some kind of wave of antisemitic violence, and the world will just forget about us and move on without us.

“I think that there’s a lot of other communities that have similar fears, but as a Jewish person I can only tell, from a place of authenticity, my story.” ■

‘Big Brother Canada’ winner Kevin Jacobs drew on his experiences at Jewish summer camp for reality show strategies

/ Alex Rose

The first Jewish person to ever win a North American season of the global franchise *Big Brother* did it in his home city of Toronto.

Kevin Jacobs, 28, won the 10th season of *Big Brother Canada* on May 5, beating out 15 other competitors to claim the \$100,000 prize.

Contestants on the serialized show are placed in a house at the beginning of the competition without any access to the outside world—although the outside world has complete access to them. Beyond the three hour-long episodes aired in primetime each week, footage from the house is broadcast for fans to follow at all times.

Over 70 days, the contestants have to make use of their physical, social and political skills to win challenges, make friends, and decide who to vote out.

Jacobs did not end up being a particularly strong competitor in the physical components of the competition—but he excelled at both the social and political aspects.

In the season finale, which came down to a vote from eliminated houseguests, Jacobs won due to both the genuine relationships he formed and his strategic maneuvering. Casual fans and professional commentators alike described him as one of the most entertaining and most deserving winners ever.

A long-time reality show fan, Jacobs, whose day job is in tech sales, put a lot of work into preparing for his appearance. But he also had a unique experience in his past that he was able to draw on: Jewish summer camp.

“Living in a cabin with 14 or 15 other people is the closest thing that I’ve done to living in this house with 15 other people... you’re with people every second of the day. You can’t really escape. There’s no time alone. You’re going to have interpersonal issues. Things are going to come up, and you have to find a way to navigate them.”

“Also, from a fun perspective, I found a lot of parallels there, too. At camp, you’re free to do what you want, within reason. Sing, dance, play, be a character. And I think the same thing was true in the house... I think my joy that I took in summer camp also was the same joy I took in the house.”

While his Jewish identity was not featured in the weekly episodes, it made appearances in the livestreams that were available around the clock. Jacobs was the first Jewish person that many of the contestants had met, so he spoke about Judaism a lot—which included explaining his bar mitzvah and hosting a Passover seder.

When one contestant found out that Jacobs had told a few small lies about his life in the house—which is a common tactic on the show—they asked him if he had made up Passover, too.

Jacobs, who attended TanenbaumCHAT for high school and was president of the student council in Grade 12, said his Jewish background also helped him build his strongest relationship in the game, which was with fellow contestant Haleena Gill. Although the specifics of their heritage were different, he felt many of the underlying principles were the same.

“One of the biggest reasons I worked so closely with Haleena was we both came from traditional backgrounds—Jewish for me, Punjabi for her. I figured if we had any arguments throughout the season, we could always fall back on the family values



that we shared,” he said in a text message. “It would help us focus on the task at hand, not the little things that come up in the intense environment.”

Perhaps the strongest advantage Jacobs gleaned from growing up Jewish were his communication skills. He felt strong communication helped him to escape difficult situations and also genuinely empathize with people—both of which were necessary for eventual victory.

“I think one of the things that helped from my Jewish background was just having tough conversations. I think we’re a people who like to debate things, and sometimes it’s better to talk about things openly than to be in the shadows.”

“And as much as I did the lying and manipulation side of things, I did a lot of direct conversation and just trying to navigate how people are feeling, listening (to them), and then trying to work together from there.” ■

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