

The Canadian Jewish News

JESSICA RODA
on researching
CYBERFRUMENISM
in the ultra-Orthodox world

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Ronen Hoffman— Israel's ambassador to Canada—wants out amidst protests against Netanyahu government

/ Ellin Bessner

Israel's new Ambassador to Canada has become the latest Israeli diplomat to resign amidst growing protest against the policies of the newly installed, right-wing government of Benjamin Netanyahu.

Ronen Hoffman made the announcement via Twitter late Saturday, Jan. 21. He was in Austin, Texas attending an American-Israel conference, according to an embassy spokesperson—who also told The CJN that Hoffman was not giving exit interviews.

Nevertheless, the ambassador's political broadside on social media speaks for itself.

"With the transition to the new government and to different policy in Israel, my personal and professional integrity has compelled me to request to shorten my post and return to Israel this summer," Hoffman wrote in the tweet.

Hoffman's announcement came on the same day as large crowds of protesters gathered—including over 100,000 in Tel Aviv—to rally against the Netanyahu government.

Hoffman, 59, is a former Member of the Knesset for the centrist Yesh Atid party, founded by outgoing prime minister Yair Lapid. Hoffman first ran for office successfully under Lapid's Yesh Atid banner in the 2013 election, then served with that party as part of the Netanyahu coalition government for two years.

When Yesh Atid withdrew its support for Netanyahu in the 2015 election and ran in opposition, Hoffman did not win a seat for a second term.

The Israeli-born son of a farmer was an assistant to Israeli leader Yitzhak Rabin, and worked on peace negotiation efforts with Syria until Rabin's assassination in 1995. After completing a PhD in war studies in the UK, Hoffman founded a think tank on counter-terrorism at Reichman University (formerly known as IDC) in Herzliya, Israel, where he has been a lecturer.

Yesh Atid came back into power as a key member of Israel's short-lived left-centrist coalition government in 2021, under a power sharing agreement with Naftali Bennett taking his turn as prime minister first.

In his tweet, Hoffman thanked his former political boss for selecting him to his first-ever diplomatic post.

"I am honoured to have been appointed by previous Prime Minister @yairlapid to represent and serve the State of Israel as Ambassador to Canada over a year ago," he wrote.

(Under the agreement with Bennett, Lapid would become Israel's prime minister after the government coalition collapsed. Lapid held the job for six months until December 2022, ending with Netanyahu's comeback victory in Israel's 25th election.)

Hoffman's resignation notice was sent to the new Foreign Affairs

minister Eli Cohen, before he went public with his decision, according to reports.

Hoffman is the second opposition party diplomatic appointee to give his notice from Israel's foreign service soon after the Netanyahu government swore in its cabinet in late December.

Israel's ambassador to France, Yael German, handed in her notice three weeks ago, in a similar fashion.

She also released a letter addressed to Netanyahu, where she slammed some of the far-right ultra-Orthodox cabinet members in the new cabinet, although she didn't name them directly.

"Sadly, the government you founded and lead—including representatives of parties whose extreme positions are expressed in the fundamental positions of the government, its policies and its statements on legislation—are invalid in my eyes," she wrote.

Public security minister Itamar Ben Gvir has been previously convicted of inciting violence by threatening Arabs, while Aryeh Deri, Israel's new interior and health minister, has served time in prison for financial crimes and breach of trust.

Media reports Sunday from Israel suggest Deri has been booted from cabinet, after a ruling by Israel's High Court of Justice last week that his criminal background makes him ineligible to serve.

While Hoffman's salvo didn't specifically mention the policies which prompted his request for an early departure, the timing of his announcement comes as protests continued Saturday in Israel and Canada.

Some Jewish organizations, including in Canada, have expressed deep concerns about several campaign promises from Israel's new government leaders that could signal, among other things: potential rollbacks for LGBTQ rights, expanded settlements and annexation in the West Bank, giving the public security minister Ben Gvir more say over the police's rules of engagement with terrorists, and changes to Israel's Law of Return which would make immigration slower and more difficult for non-Orthodox Jews.

However, it is the new legislation aimed at curbing the authority of the Israeli Supreme Court that has raised alarms about Israel's evolution away from being a beacon of democracy in the Middle East.

A coalition of seven Canadian Jewish groups held what they called "a vigil for democracy" in Toronto on Jan. 21. An estimated 250 people turned out in-person outside the downtown building which houses the Israeli consulate. Another 125 participated virtually, according to Joe Roberts, chair of JSpace Canada, which helped organize the Saturday night vigil.

"This resignation [of Hoffman] should send a clear message across the Canadian Jewish community. If Israel's ambassador to Canada cannot stand by while this government carries out its extreme anti-democratic agenda, how can we stand silently by?" Roberts wrote on Twitter.

Hoffman took up his new duties in Ottawa on Dec. 7, 2021 with a list of priorities that included expanding Israel's business relationship with Canada, fighting terrorism and antisemitism, and forging research joint-ventures in the fields of food tech, health tech, environment, energy and climate security.

A personal priority has been to connect with Canada's Indigenous leaders.

Hoffman told The CJN in January 2022 that he wore an orange ribbon on his lapel the day he presented his official credentials to the Governor General, to show solidarity with Canada's First Nations.

The embassy has been negotiating with Saskatchewan reserves to bring Israeli expertise to help solve their clean drinking water prob-

lems, and arranging a pilot project to bring some Indigenous leaders to Israel.

Hoffman does not intend to pack up and leave Canada immediately, he said, although he wrote that he hopes to be recalled by the summer.

"I will continue serving the State of Israel here in Canada with the same passion and pleasure until a replacement is appointed later this year. I look forward to continue working with all my colleagues and friends until then."

Hoffman moved to Ottawa with his partner, a professor at a university in Israel, and the couple's then-four-year-old son. His two older children from his first marriage were attending university in the United States.

During his first year, he attended the Calgary Stampede, visited Jewish summer camps including Moshava and B'nai Brith of Ottawa, and held the first-ever Canadian Summit of Israeli-Jewish Affairs, a two-day conference in Ottawa in May 2022.

It is unclear whether Hoffman came to the decision to step down on his own, or whether he may have been told to resign as part of a wider political strategy directive from the Yesh Atid camp. He did not explain the timing of his announcement.

The resignation follows just weeks after an upbeat video message which he released for Canadians, ahead of the New Year. In it, Hoffman hinted that he would still be working as ambassador while Israel marks a milestone anniversary in April 2023.

"With 75 years of Israeli independence on the horizon in 2023, I have no doubt that the next year will provide many more opportunities to meet with passionate Canadians to showcase all that Israel has to offer, and to see more of this beautiful country," he said. ■

Jewish groups elated by conviction in the Montreal antisemitic hate speech trial of Gabriel Chaput

/ Janice Arnold

Gabriel Sohier Chaput, 36, was convicted by Quebec Court judge Manlio Del Negro on Jan. 23 on the single hate speech charge brought against him for a 2017 article the reportedly prominent neo-Nazi wrote in the far-right U.S.-based website *The Daily Stormer*.

Most egregiously, Chaput called for "non-stop Nazism everywhere." The defence argued that the article was intended as satire.

B'nai Brith Canada filed a complaint against Chaput in 2018 after *The Montreal Gazette* published a series of investigative articles that exposed him as a prominent neo-Nazi recruiter and the author of hundreds of hate-filled pieces in *The Daily Stormer* under the pseudonym Zeiger.

"We are encouraged that the courts are recognizing that hate

crimes are serious offences," said Sam Goldstein, B'nai Brith's director of legal affairs. "B'nai Brith brought Chaput to the Crown's attention and we will continue following this case to the sentencing stage."

The sentence is expected to be handed down in May. Chaput faces a maximum penalty of two years in prison.

He was ordered into custody following the verdict on the grounds he poses a danger to the public, the judge said. His bail conditions are scheduled to be set on Jan. 25.

The judge wrote in his 72-page decision that Chaput "intentionally promoted hatred, through the *Daily Stormer* platform, against people of Jewish faith," which could lead readers to act violently.

Del Negro did not accept the accused's "hodge-podge of explanations" about his antisemitic posts.

"(The court) rejects his entire account because his explanations leave no doubt," he wrote. "The court finds that the explanations provided are specious, insincere, opportunistic, deceptive, far-fetched, implausible, concealers of the truth and were cobbled together to conceal the true intention of the accused."

He added: "The victims of the Holocaust and also the victims of other genocides perpetrated throughout history, as well as their families, deserve to be left in peace. The suffering they have been put through is inexpressible and defies the meaning of humanity."

In the article in question, Chaput wrote, "We need to make sure no (social justice warrior) or Jew can remain safely untriggered. Non-stop Nazism, everywhere, until the very streets are flooded with the tears of our enemies."

B'nai Brith CEO Michael Mostyn stated he hopes this judgment will serve as a deterrent against those who seek to spread hate.

"Sohier Chaput is a coward who, behind the veil of the internet, thought he could rile up other haters to his disgusting cause," said Mostyn. "Today's decision shows that Canadians and our legal system will not accept such harmful, dangerous and genocidal drivel, all of which aim to resurrect the most vile ideology in world history."

Eta Yudin, Quebec vice-president of the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs, said, "I think it's a powerful message that we don't stand for this and as a society we won't stand for the banalization of the Holocaust and the normalization of hate or antisemitism."

She added that the case points to the need for mandatory Holocaust education in Quebec.

The trial saw defence lawyer Helene Poussard argued that the prosecution had not proven a direct link between the ideology of Nazism and the Holocaust, an argument thoroughly rejected by Del Negro.

Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Centre for Holocaust Studies also hailed the judgment.

The organization's president and CEO Michael Levitt noted that Chaput used antisemitic memes in the article and mocked a Holocaust survivor referring to him as an "oven-dodger."

"Following a long trial that included some troubling statements from the defense that minimized and distorted the Holocaust, the court has given the appropriate verdict for this case," said Levitt.

"Gabriel Sohier Chaput clearly intended to incite hate and violence against Jewish people when he wrote his article and must finally face the consequences for his hateful actions."

Levitt commended the Crown and the judge for their strong statements against Chaput's defense that the article was intend-

ed to be humorous and no serious person would take it literally. Del Negro wrote, "There is nothing ironic in the fact that millions of Jewish people and others were exterminated during the Holocaust orchestrated by the Nazis... it is one of the saddest events in the history of humanity."

He affirmed that the connection between Nazism and the murder of millions of Jewish people during the Second World War is an incontestable fact and not open to debate among reasonable people. ■

Jewish groups disappointed by acquittal in a 2022 Israel Day assault in Montreal

/ Janice Arnold

A youth who was charged in connection with the assault of a man carrying an Israeli flag following an outdoor Yom ha-Atzmaut celebration in Montreal last year has been acquitted on an apparent technicality.

The accused was 15 years old at the time.

The May 2022 incident on a Westmount street was captured by a private citizen on video that was widely circulated on social media.

Both Federation CJA and B'nai Brith Canada expressed disappointment with the decision, but commended Montreal police for the seriousness with which they handled the matter that led to the arrest of the boy two months later.

In a Jan. 19 statement, the federation and its advocacy agency, the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs, said that a youth court judge earlier that week "highlighted the unacceptable nature of the incident and reaffirmed that those who commit violent and hateful acts should face consequences. The individual was acquitted due to discrepancies concerning the formal identification of the accused during the trial."

Marvin Rotrand, national director of B'nai Brith's League for Human Rights, who had vigorously denounced the incident as a hate crime and met with the alleged victim who is Jewish, told The CJN on Jan. 20 that he was not aware a judgment had been made in the case.

He said B'nai Brith might consider an appeal if after reading the decision in its entirety it finds grounds. What is meant by discrepancies regarding the identification of the accused is unclear to Rotrand. It might indicate the defense raised doubts about whether the minor was actually the perpetrator, he said.

Until then, he said B'nai Brith would reserve judgment on the decision.

The federation is urging the Crown to pursue other possible means of bringing the accused to justice.

Spokesperson Glenn Nashen said the federation could not discuss any further details on the judgment because it is in youth court.

The Jewish groups concur that the police acted admirably in their investigation, indicating recognition that antisemitism is a growing problem.

The actual charges against the accused were never made public. A second young person was also seen in the video taking part in the altercation, but police said they would not be looking for any other suspects.

"This antisemitic crime was rightly investigated and brought before the court," the federation stated. "Accountability and recognition of the rise of antisemitism our community is facing is important. We will continue to work with authorities to ensure antisemitic crimes are taken seriously and appropriately dealt with within the legal system..."

"The (police) and Crown understood the severity of this criminal offense; this hateful attack should not go unpunished."

Rotrand noted that the incident caused "a great deal of angst in the Jewish community, and the decision will leave the impression someone has gotten away with something."

The incident occurred on May 5 at around 1:15 p.m. at the corner of St. Catherine Street West and Wood Avenue, about 15 blocks from where the annual Israel Day Rally had been held downtown shortly before.

An arrest was made in July.

In June, the police hate crimes unit released part of the amateur video in an appeal to the public for any information on what it termed an "armed assault and robbery following a hate crime."

Two young males are seen approaching an older man, later described as in his 50s, who was carrying a rolled-up Israeli flag.

He was walking back from the large rally, which had taken place without incident at Place du Canada.

At Ste. Catherine Street and Wood Avenue, two black-clad males accosted the man and ordered him to give them the flag, police stated.

"Faced with the victim's refusal, the suspects grabbed the flag and rushed at the man, and an altercation ensued. One of the suspects struck the victim's head with a branch. A citizen wanting to help him was also hit several times in the face. The suspects fled on Wood Street in a blue Infiniti QX56 vehicle."

Police at the time thought the two males were approximately 18 years old.

Dan Goldstein, the lawyer who took the video with his wife Liat, was looking out his third-floor office window when he saw the altercation begin.

He chased the assailants who ran away on foot, and then helped the victim who he said was bleeding. The couple was disturbed that no passersby, except the young man who intervened and was struck, did anything as the incident unfolded, as could be seen on the video. ■

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Jessica Roda has researched a new wave of ultra-Orthodox women performers raising the ire of certain rabbis

/ Ellin Bessner

It's been eight years since Jessica Roda started studying the relatively secret world of female artists performing for ultra-Orthodox communities.

And while she wasn't brought up that way—she comes from a Sephardi family with French and Spanish origins—her access came from teaching piano and the French language to families in Montreal who may have otherwise viewed her intentions with suspicion.

As a result, Roda found herself invited to lavish all-female theatre and dance productions held in religious schools. She discovered many were performed entirely in Yiddish.

The audience was also restricted to women and girls only—a policy that aligns with the prohibition in ultra-Orthodox communities of men hearing women singing, known as Kol Isha. It remains formally enforced due to the rules of modesty, known as tzniut.

But technology has transformed how the performers are reaching new audiences.

Roda's research has included tracking the popularity of a new generation of frum celebrities, like American singers Bracha Jaffe and Devorah Schwartz, and Israel-based Chaya Kogan.

They each have tens of thousands of followers on Instagram, and on other social media, which they turned to—especially during the pandemic, when concerts were held online.

"It's a very complicated story of how it started, and who started first, but this is the idea: that this is in the hands of the men," Roda explained in an interview with The CJN Daily. (These days, Roda is a professor of Jewish studies at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.)

What that looks like, in practical terms, is the honour system: while men are never directly invited—and advertising for shows is clearly for women only—anyone can access the material.

"So those women acknowledge that they wanted to make it available for other girls, for other women, but this is the responsibility of men" not to watch, she said.

Still, the workaround isn't welcomed by every haredi community.

The recent sold-out Jan. 15 concert by Jaffe and Kogan in London, England, did run afoul of some haredi schools and the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations.

The rabbis ordered that school girls should not attend on the grounds that doing so would cause what they called "spiritual harm."

Reports said the Hackney Empire Theatre's 700 seats were filled despite the ban. The box office said it had no ticket cancellations or refund requests.

What's more accepted, Roda has discovered, is that rabbis

will approve of women performing in public if it is for charitable or fundraising activities, or to earn a living, such as by providing singing lessons.

And yet, Roda has found cases where segregating the viewership doesn't work, despite the artists' best laid plans.

"I would say the irony is that even if it's not accepted, they [the men] will sometimes participate or they will watch, they will listen and they will also attend those concerts."

Bracha Jaffe maintains that she's glad to be living an ultra-Orthodox religious Jewish lifestyle and her songs and lyrics celebrate her choices. The mother of five works as a nurse, and comes from a cantorial family background in New York, but her recording sessions have involved male engineers or musicians.

Professor Roda is fascinated by the fact that the women's dedication to their community remains intact, even as some performers also now use their platforms to initiate conversations about challenges facing haredi women—from equal pay to puberty to how to deal with nosy neighbours.

Watching these boundaries shift is a phenomenon that Roda has dubbed "cyberfrumenism."

American comic Leah Foster used her social media accounts to support the struggle of agunot, the Hebrew term for Jewish women whose husbands will not grant them a divorce, leaving them in limbo for years, stigmatized and unable to remarry. Foster composed new lyrics to Amy Winehouse's hit song "Rehab," then performed it from her car with the hashtag #FreeChava.

"You tried to get a *get* (Jewish divorce decree by a rabbinical court) but your husband said 'No no no,'" Foster sings.

While she came from the ultra-Orthodox world, Foster is now divorced—and married to a woman—for which she felt she had to leave her community behind. But she still practises a her own brand of Orthodox Judaism while modifying her performances when necessary, which includes covering her tattoos.

Comedian Zehavit Rosenbloom Vaknin of Montreal has about 25,000 followers on her Instagram, who laugh at relatable characters like Rebbetzin Gshmack—for which she uses an Instagram filter that distorts her face and blacks out one of her front teeth.

A recent post included a tongue-in-cheek scolding of some ultra-Orthodox mothers who take their daughters shopping for clothes, but then berate them loudly in the changing room when the dresses aren't modest enough.

Roda notes that, unlike in New York, there are few cafes or restaurants in the Outremont neighbourhood of Montreal where women can put on shows. Some owners don't want to risk offending the modesty police.

Instead, the artistic action takes place in private homes during the intermediate days of religious holidays like Passover or Sukkoth, or sometimes in synagogues, and at summer camps. Global connectivity has led to more demand for visiting performers from the United States and Israel.

Next year, Roda's research into cyberfrumenism will be published in book form by New York University Press. The title is *For Women And Girls Only*. But she hopes her work gets everyone talking about another way in which Jewish observances are being redefined for the digital age. ■

Ellin Bessner is chief correspondent of The CJN Daily.

KlezKanada is returning to full programming—including its annual summer retreat—with a new executive director

/Janice Arnold

KlezKanada, a Montreal centre devoted to promoting Yiddish arts and culture, was hard-hit after having to cancel its popular summer retreat for two years because of the pandemic, but is nevertheless confident about the future, says its new executive director, David Moss.

A native of Montreal, Moss has spent three decades as an arts administrator at the local and national levels. As KlezKanada returns to full operation, Moss rejoices in getting back to his community roots.

He succeeds Sebastian Schulman, who became KlezKanada's first full-time executive director in 2018. Now in its 28th year, KlezKanada's flagship is its weeklong program in the Laurentians which drew upwards of 400 participants before COVID, about half from outside Canada.

Schulman, a literary translator who came to KlezKanada from the Yiddish Book Center in Massachusetts, said he stepped down reluctantly for family reasons. The challenges of the past couple of years had the positive effect of forcing the organization to examine "what was important to us and how we do it," he said.

"I don't want to downplay the hardship of the pandemic, but in many respects, it accelerated our development. Really bold decisions had to be made... And we succeeded in keeping together and even expanding our community going online."

The retreat, held at Camp B'nai Brith, will be fully in person this August, said Moss, and once again will feature some of the world's leading klezmer musicians and other performers and scholars.

This past summer KlezKanada was hybrid: online programming before a run at the camp limited to about 200 people.

Moss said KlezKanada, under Schulman's leadership, proved it could adapt through skillful use of technology.

KlezKanada is more than a single yearly event, he stressed; it is a global community that became broader and stronger through digital connection.

And despite the loss of registration fees in 2020 and 2021, KlezKanada is on a solid financial footing, Moss said. Revenue mainly comes from private donors, supplemented by project grants from the Canada Council for the Arts and its Quebec and Montreal equivalents.

Not having any bricks-and-mortar to maintain has allowed KlezKanada to avoid the devastation many other live performance institutions have suffered, he added.

Moss wants KlezKanada to have a year-round presence again, such as concerts in Montreal and educational activities,



as well as master classes and mentoring young artists, whether virtual or real.

A Bialik High School graduate and trained musician, Moss began his administrative career in 1994 as director of the Saidye Bronfman Centre's School of Fine Arts, and became executive director of the Saidye (now the Segal Centre for Performing Arts) two years later serving until 2003.

During that time, he championed the Dora Wasserman Yiddish Theatre, for which he shared a special affection with his Yiddish-speaking grandmothers.

Through the Saidye, Moss was familiar with KlezKanada from its inception in 1996, and knew its founder, Hy Goldman, who with his wife Sandy, largely ran the organization themselves, and who remain on the board of directors.

Moss then moved into the broader sphere, serving as general manager of l'Opéra de Montréal for four years before going on to consult with a myriad of arts and nonprofit organizations in Quebec and Canada, and to promote cultural entrepreneurship.

He spent 10 years exporting to the rest of Canada the model of Quebec's Journées de la culture, an annual event throughout the province when the public can sample an array of cultural activities, for free.

Moss helped bring the concept to over 700 communities across Canada, which meant he spent a lot of time away from Montreal, although it remained his home.

"David brings a deep understanding of the Montreal, Quebec, Canadian and international cultural landscape, an impressive track record and a great balance of vision, leadership and seasoned management abilities," stated board chair Bob Blacksberg of Philadelphia, a Harvard law graduate, tech executive and clarinetist.

"We are confident that David's leadership will set the stage for a renewed chapter of growth and sustained impact for KlezKanada and the diverse and growing global community that engages with klezmer music, Yiddishkeit, and Jewish arts and culture."

Moss will be working with artistic director Avia Moore who is starting her second year with KlezKanada, the first Canadian and woman in the role. The Vancouver native, now living in Montreal, is a teacher of Yiddish dance and is completing a PhD in theatre and performance studies at York University.

In addition to continuing to expand its international reputation as a Jewish cultural hub, Moss sees the potential for greater connection with the Quebec folklore scene. He should be able to make that happen.

"I am married to a Québécoise and we are fully bilingual and bicultural, even trilingual. I know that when my five-year-old son, asks, 'Papa, où est mon shmatta?'" ■

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