

2010-2019

Looking Back...

...Looking Ahead

Taking the LONG view...

ג וַיֹּאמֶר, אֲנֹכִי הָאֵל אֱלֹהֵי אֲבִיךָ; אֶל-תִּירָא מִרָדָה מִצְרַיִמָּה, כִּי-לִגְוִי גָדוֹל אֲשִׁימָךְ שָׁם. Gen. 46:3 And He said: 'I am God, the God of thy father; **fear not** to go down into Egypt; for I will there make of thee a great nation.

ד אֲנֹכִי, אֵרֵד עִמָּךְ מִצְרַיִמָּה, וְאֲנֹכִי, אֶעֱלֶיךָ גַּם-עֹלָה; וַיֹּסֶף, יָשִׁית יָדוֹ עַל-עֵינֶיךָ. 4 I will go down with thee into Egypt; and **I will also surely bring thee up again**; and Joseph shall put his hand upon thine eyes.'

כז וַיֵּשֶׁב יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, בְּאֶרֶץ גֹּשֶׁן; וַיֵּאָחֲזוּ בָהּ, וַיִּכְרוּ וַיִּרְבּוּ מְאֹד. 47:27 And Israel dwelt in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen; and they got them possessions therein, and were fruitful, and multiplied exceedingly.

- Was this a good career move for Jacob?
 - For his family? For the fledgling nation?
- Did God renege in the promise to bring Jacob back to the land?
- How does the picture change, given the perspective of history?
- Is it too soon to look back at the events of this decade and evaluate them?
- What do the commentaries of the Sforno (15th century commentator) on the next page say about the short vs. the long view, and the Jewish condition in Israel and America today?

²⁵ They went up from Egypt and came to the land of Canaan to Jacob their father. ²⁶ And they told him, saying, "Joseph is still alive," also that he is ruler over all the land of Egypt; but his heart rejected it, for he could not believe them. ²⁷ However, when they related to him all the words that Joseph had spoken to them, and he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to transport him, then the spirit of their father Jacob was revived.

²⁸ And Israel said, "How great! My son Joseph still lives! I shall go and see him before I die."

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¹ So Israel set out with all that he had and he came to Beer-sheba where he slaughtered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac.

² God spoke to Israel in night visions and He said, "Jacob, Jacob."

And he said, "Here I am."

³ And He said, "I am the God — God of your father. Have no fear of descending to Egypt, for I shall establish you as a great nation there. ⁴ I shall descend with you to Egypt, and I shall also surely bring you up; and Joseph shall place his hand on your eyes."

אל תירא מירדה מצרימה, כי לגוי גדול אשימך שם — Fear not to go down into Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there. If you remain here your children will intermarry and become absorbed by the Caananites, but in Egypt they will not be able to do so, because the Egyptians may not eat bread with the Hebrews (43:32); therefore they will be a separate, distinct people, as our Sages state, "The verse, ויהי שם לגוי, 'And he became there a nation' (Deut. 26:5), teaches us that they were distinctive there" (Sifri).

4. אעלה גם עליה — And I will also surely bring you up. After I bring you up from there, I will raise you even higher than you were before going down there, as it is written, ויגלה עליהם מן הארץ הזאת אל ארץ טובה, And to bring them up out of that land unto a good land (Exodus 3:8).

וישית ידו על עיניך — Shall put his hand upon your eyes. You will not have to concern yourself with your affairs, for Joseph will look after everything you need, and you will

NOTES

XLVI.

1. לאלהי אביו ויחזק — To the God of his father Isaac. The question is obvious. Why didn't Jacob offer sacrifices to the God of his grandfather Abraham as well as his father Isaac? The commentators give a variety of answers. The Sforno ties together verses 1 and 3, explaining that since Jacob was mindful of Isaac's prohibition by God to leave Israel for Egypt, he had to be reassured by God that he was permitted to do so, and to placate his father, he brought a sacrifice to the God of his father Isaac.

2-5. ויאמר אלהים לישראל... וישאו בני ישראל — And God said to Israel... And the sons of Israel carried. These verses (2 and 5) present a strange mixture of the two names — Israel and Jacob. God spoke to Israel, but called him Jacob (v. 2). Jacob rose up from Beer-sheba, but the children of Israel carried their father Jacob (v. 5). The Sforno explains: Israel implies the power to confront one's enemies and prevail. Jacob represents both submission and ultimate victory over adversity, since עקב

means heel or the end (of time). Hence the names are used with great care. God spoke to Israel, to reassure him of his ability to deal with his adversities as he went into exile, even though he would be enslaved there (i.e., Jacob). The sons had to appreciate their role as champions of Israel, strong and resolute, as they accompanied their father to Egypt, even though he was a Jacob in Eretz Yisrael — a luxury which he could afford in exile! And finally, the Sforno explains the use of the name Jacob (v. 5) to indicate that just as the joy of reuniting father and son would be complete — untouched by subsequent sorrow — so shall it beat the end of time for his descendants.

4. אעלה גם עליה — And I will also surely bring you up. The word עליה, to bring up, is repeated twice (עלה — אעלה) to teach us that first the children of Israel would be "brought up" from Egypt at the time of their deliverance, and secondly they would be brought up to Eretz Yisrael, which is a spiritual as well as a physical elevation.

Today's Torah Portion: Va Yigash

Summary and Issues

This week we read the climactic section of the Joseph story. Judah begs Joseph to allow him to become a slave in place of Benjamin. The brothers are fearful for Jacob's life since he is so close to Benjamin. Joseph, unable to conceal his identity any longer, reveals himself to his brothers. They are astounded. Pharaoh learns that Joseph's brothers are in Egypt. He directs Joseph to invite Jacob and his entire household to live in Egypt, and Joseph extends the invitation, sending along gifts and provisions for his father's journey.

Joseph and Jacob have a tearful reunion. The family continues to work as shepherds in Egypt, in the region of Goshen. The famine continues, and Joseph sells grain to the people. Eventually, the people sell all their land to Pharaoh in exchange for food and Pharaoh comes to own all the land in Egypt.

Issues for Discussion

- 1) Judah's eloquent and impassioned plea for Benjamin's freedom shows that the brothers have sincerely changed since the time they allowed their jealousy to drive them to hating another of their brothers – Joseph. Joseph no longer has need to test his brothers, so he reveals his true identity. Yet he then proceeds to test them again, more subtly this time, by giving Benjamin a larger gift than he gave the others. The brothers show no reaction.

Is the text saying that Jacob (and Joseph) were not in fact wrong to show preferential treatment to one child over the others, and that the only sin was the brothers' jealousy?

Do you agree? Is it possible for a parent or sibling not to show preferential treatment? Is it unfair to hide one's true feelings?

- 2) Joseph first sends all the Egyptians out of the room, and then reveals himself to his brothers with the immortal words, "I am your brother Joseph." (These same words were used by Pope John XXIII when he greeted a group of 130 Jews in October 1960 – Joseph being his baptismal name.)

Some commentators say that Joseph sent the Egyptians from the room so as not to shame his brothers, who would be understandably shocked and confused when they heard the news. The apologies and recriminations that might follow the revelation would best be kept "in the family." According to this line of thinking, any matters of intimate concern within the larger family of Jacob's children (the Jewish people) should also best be kept "within the family," in other words, out of the general press, away from the general public. "Keep our differences among ourselves," is a cry we often hear, especially in regard to Israel. Do you agree?

- 3) Jacob's family is invited down to Egypt to settle. This invitation is not without parallel. A 13th century BCE document records a similar event, probably under

Pharaoh Merneptah and probably in the region of Goshen: Some Edomite Beduin were permitted to settle in order “to keep them alive and to keep their cattle alive.”

- 4) In 46:34 we read that “All shepherds were abhorrent to the Egyptians, yet Joseph seems to want his brothers to inform Pharaoh that they are shepherds. Why? One explanation: Joseph wants to show Pharaoh that his brothers will be useful subjects, ready to do unpopular labor and therefore that they can be entrusted to reside in the sensitive border province of Goshen. Later commentators praise Joseph for showing pride in his family’s heritage, even though it was one looked down upon by his hosts.

The sojourn of Jacob’s family in Egypt is called by some “the first diaspora.” How does their experience foreshadow future Jewish experiences in other host nations? There are many cases where Jews were welcomed into a country because they were willing to do essential work (e.g. money lending) that the hosts considered distasteful.

- 5) The commentator-philosopher Bachya states that by herding sheep in an isolated area, the Israelites could maintain their distinct identity and not assimilate into a culture that worshipped sheep, as the Egyptians did. He said that sheep would continue to be so familiar to the Israelites that they would never be tempted to worship them.

Do you agree with the notion that we tend to be most in awe of what is unfamiliar to us? Can the familiar also be held sacred?

Joseph himself was hardly the model of isolationism – he had an Egyptian name (Zaphenat Peneah) and Egyptian wife and Egyptian children. Yet here he shows a great desire to return to his long-lost “roots,” and to keep his heritage distinct from Egyptian culture (while at the same time bringing his family down to Egypt.) Compare Joseph’s life to the experience of American Jewry. How do we balance our need for a distinct heritage with a desire to be part of the American mainstream?

- 6) When, in 46:26, Jacob’s sons tell him that Joseph is still alive, “his heart went numb, for he did not believe them.” Rabbi Hiyya taught, “This is the liar’s fate. When he tells the truth he is not believed.” Deception is an important motif of the entire book of Genesis, from the Garden of Eden until the end. Jacob, a deceiver in his youth, is so often deceived himself that he’s never sure whom to believe, even at a crucial time such as this. And the brothers, who had lied to Jacob all along about Joseph (and never did tell him the entire truth), have lost their integrity. In some real sense, this one verse is the most telling statement about the human condition of the entire book. In our world, have we become so accustomed to deception that we too are reluctant to take any statement at face value?

The Jewish Decade: 2010 - 2019

2010

- ◆ Rabbi Sholom Rubashkin is sentenced to 27 years in prison in connection with multiple charges at the now-defunct Agriprocessors kosher slaughtering plant.
- ◆ The expanded National Museum of American Jewish History opens in Philadelphia.
- ◆ Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz completes his massive translation of the Babylonian Talmud into modern Hebrew.
- ◆ Elana Kagan becomes the third Jewish justice on the current Supreme Court.

2011

- ◆ Gilad Shalit, is released after being held captive by Hamas in Gaza for five years in exchange for releasing 1,027 prisoners in what is the largest prisoner exchange agreement Israel ever made.
- ◆ Lieby Kletzky, an 8-year-old chasidic boy, is murdered by an emotionally disturbed Orthodox man in Borough Park.
- ◆ Debbie Friedman, Jewish singing superstar, dies at 59.
- ◆ A fire destroys the building of Kehilath Jeshurun, a landmark Orthodox congregation on the Upper East Side.
- ◆ Matisyahu, one-time Chasidic reggae singer and rapper, posts a beardless picture of himself, igniting discussions about his religious metamorphosis.
- ◆ Former Israeli President Moshe Katsav begins a prison sentence for rape.

2012

- ◆ Gymnast Aly Raisman wins two gold medals at the Summer Olympics in London.
- ◆ Superstorm Sandy floods Greater New York, inflicting countless damage on institutions in the Jewish community.
- ◆ Major fighting breaks out in Gaza between Israel and Hamas forces.
- ◆ The 12th Siyum HaShas completion of the Talmud-reading cycle takes place throughout the world.

2013

- ◆ Gal Mekel becomes the second Israeli basketball player signed by an NBA team, the Dallas Mavericks, but his pro career in the States is short.
- ◆ Production starts at the massive Tamar natural gas field off of Israel's Mediterranean coast.
- ◆ A Pew Research Center study finds that a growing number of Jews in this country define themselves as "nones," without a religious belief or affiliation.
- ◆ U.S. and other world powers reach an interim deal to curb Iran's nuclear program.
- ◆ Pope Francis declares that a true Christian "cannot be anti-Semitic."

2014

- ◆ Following the kidnap-murder of three Israeli teenagers, serious fighting flares up between Israel and Hamas forces in Gaza.
- ◆ Six men - including five Jewish worshippers and a Druze officer - are killed during a terrorist attack at a synagogue in the Har Nof section of Jerusalem.
- ◆ David Blatt, a veteran of pro basketball in Israel, is named head coach of the NBA's Cleveland Cavaliers.
- ◆ Former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg awarded first Genesis Prize.
- ◆ Former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is sentenced to prison on bribery charges.

2015

- ◆ Convicted spy Jonathan Pollard is released from federal prison.
- ◆ Benjamin Netanyahu is re-elected prime minister of Israel.
- ◆ Power broker Sheldon Silver, a longtime member of the New York State Assembly, is arrested on federal corruption charges.
- ◆ A revival of "Fiddler on the Roof" on Broadway, stars Danny Burstein as Tevye.

- ◆ A biography of Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg cements her reputation as "The Notorious R.B.G."
- ◆ The controversial Iran nuclear deal goes into effect, widening the divide between the Obama administration and parts of the US Jewish community.
- ◆ Abe Foxman ends a 50-year run at the Anti-Defamation League, 27 of which were as national director.

2016

- ◆ Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel dies at 87.
- ◆ Israeli elder statesman Shimon Peres dies at 93.
- ◆ The political chasm among Jews in the U.S. widens when Donald Trump is elected president. Seven in 10 Jews vote for Hillary Clinton.
- ◆ Vermont Sen. (and native Brooklynite) Bernie Sanders becomes the first Jewish candidate in history to win a major party presidential primary when he wins in New Hampshire.

2017

- ◆ Film producer Harvey Weinstein becomes the public face of the #MeToo sex abuse movement.
- ◆ Israeli actress Gal Gadot achieves superstardom as "Wonder Woman."
- ◆ Yona Metzger, former chief Ashkenazic rabbi of Israel, enters prison on a corruption charge.
- ◆ Bowing to Orthodox pressure, Netanyahu freezes an agreement to allow non-Orthodox worship at the Western Wall.
- ◆ Shouting "Jews will not replace us," white nationalists rally in Charlottesville, Va.
- ◆ Marking a return to the Manhattan neighborhood, the JCC Harlem opens.

2018

- ◆ The Orthodox Union announces that it will enforce its ban against woman rabbis in member congregations.
- ◆ Eleven people are killed during a terrorist shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh.
- ◆ The Mossad steals a half-ton of nuclear files from an Iran nuclear facility.
- ◆ Keeping a campaign promise, President Trump moves the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.
- ◆ Actress Natalie Portman declines to attend the Genesis Prize award ceremony in Jerusalem, as a protest against Israeli political actions.
- ◆ Serious fighting between Israel and Hamas forces flares up in Gaza.
- ◆ Israeli singer Netta Barzilai wins the Eurovision Song Contest.

2019

- ◆ "Shtisel," the Netflix series about a charedi family in Israel, becomes a hit in the United States.
- ◆ A Yiddish revival of "Fiddler on the Roof" opens Off Broadway.
- ◆ National elections in Israel twice fail to elect a party that can form a government coalition. Another vote is set for March 2020.
- ◆ Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is indicted on corruption charges.
- ◆ J. Levine Books and Judaica, the century-old firm with Lower East Side roots, closes its midtown location.
- ◆ After a decade in the National Basketball Association, Omri Casspi, the NBA's first Israeli player, returns to Maccabi Tel Aviv.

- From the list above, what do you think are the top three events that occurred this past decade, with the strongest consideration given to their *long-term* impact on the future?
- Based on this list, make three predictions of what will happen in the upcoming year and decade in the areas of Israel, American Jewish Life and Jewish Culture.

10 ways American Jewish life changed in the 2010s

From apps that democratize Bible study to kosher cheeseburgers, the largest community outside of Israel has grown, evolved, and modernized over the last decade By JTA1 January 2020, JTA)

All of the gloom and doom that many in the Jewish community have felt toward the end of this decade should not obscure the fact that the 2010s were full of innovation. Yes, there was an alarming rise in anti-Semitism across the US and the world, which culminated in several violent attacks on Jews and Jewish institutions. But that didn't stop the community from growing, evolving and adapting to modern life.

Here's a look back at 10 huge developments from the past 10 years that have changed the makeup and lifestyles of Jewish Americans.

With the advent of the smartphone, we modern folks have grown accustomed to having any piece of information available anywhere, anytime, at the push of a button. But it wasn't until the launch of Sefaria in 2011 that this was true of Jewish texts. In a stroke, Sefaria put thousands of years of Jewish literature in everybody's pocket. The Bible, the Talmud, medieval Jewish philosophers and commentators, the classic Jewish legal codes — all of it available in Hebrew (and often English, too) and completely searchable. Seemingly overnight, the site became an invaluable resource for Jewish learning. And much like Google and Facebook before it, Sefaria made many people wonder how they had ever lived without it.

The site also helped democratize Jewish study — not only by making English translations of canonical texts instantly available anywhere, but by making it possible for anyone to create source sheets that gathered sacred texts on a given topic and share them with the world. The site currently hosts thousands of such sheets on topics as diverse as Jewish business ethics, discrimination, civil rights, hunger and environmentalism.

Sefaria is not the only example of technology being harnessed to broaden the Jewish tent. Synagogues now stream services for free online and Jewish educational websites bring a bottomless wealth of Jewish information to the far-flung masses. But it may be the most ambitious of the lot. — *Ben Harris*

A new kosher cheeseburger becomes possible

The 2010s have seen the emergence of plant-based products that taste eerily like burgers but do not contain an iota of meat. Their purveyors — Impossible Foods and Beyond Meat chief among them — hope to launch a vegetarian revolution that will take down America's massive factory farming industry. Impossible says that the protein heme gives their offerings the juicy, meaty quality missing from previous veggie burger attempts.

For Jews, the new meatless burgers have meant that dishes once Jewishly verboten have finally become accessible. Observant Jews can slap a slice of cheddar on an Impossible burger and enjoy a 100 percent kosher cheeseburger. At Dunkin' Donuts, patrons can have an egg with Beyond Bacon.

For kosher-keeping Jews, trying to imitate forbidden foods is a tradition as old as time. Meatless burgers have ushered in a new era of that struggle. For while the rabbis of the Talmud outlawed the eating of milk and meat together, they said nothing about milk and heme.— *Ben Sales*

Female Orthodox clergy make their mark

When the decade began, there were almost no American Orthodox clergywomen. When it ended, there were some three dozen.

The 2010s saw a revolution in the Modern Orthodox world, as a seminary for Orthodox women, Yeshivat Maharat, turned out ordained graduates year after year starting in 2013. The last graduating class was the largest with eight members. The graduates — some of whom take on variations of the title “rabbi” — have made a splash. Nine work in synagogues, many in pulpit positions. The others work in leadership roles throughout the Jewish world. They’ve also sparked a backlash, with two umbrella Orthodox groups — the Orthodox Union and the Rabbinical Council of America — issuing bans on female clergy. But the bans have not stopped the growing ranks of American Orthodox women receiving ordination, joining the ranks of Conservative and Reform women who have been rabbis for decades. Just months before the decade ended, a graduate of Yeshivat Maharat founded the first-ever American Orthodox synagogue led by a woman. — *Ben Sales*

In 2013, the Anti-Defamation League reported the lowest levels of anti-Semitism since it started tracking the phenomenon in 1979. By 2018, the trend had fully reversed: There were 1,879 anti-Semitic incidents, the third-highest total ever recorded by the ADL. The incidents included the killing by a white nationalist of 11 worshipers at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh — the deadliest anti-Semitic attack in US history. Not even a year later, on April 27, 2019, a woman was killed and three others were injured at a Chabad synagogue in Poway, California. And on December 10, four people were killed in an attack that ended at a kosher supermarket in Jersey City, New Jersey. On December 29, a man entered a rabbi’s house in Monsey, New York, with a machete and stabbed five people.

The spike included a dramatic increase in attacks on predominantly Hasidic men in Brooklyn, who are more easily targeted by would-be assailants than other Jews because of their distinctive dress. Jewish Americans are afraid of this becoming the new normal: Some 31% of respondents to a recent survey by the American Jewish Committee agreed that they “avoided publicly wearing, carrying, or displaying things that might help people identify you as a Jew,” and 25% “avoid certain places, events, or situations out of concern for your safety or comfort as a Jew.” — *Laura E. Adkins*

The Pew study counts American Jews

The Jewish organizational world was rocked in 2013 by the release of a study by the Pew Research Center on American Jewish demographics. The study counted how many of us there were, whether we were marrying other Jews, what denominations we identified with and how we observed Jewish ritual. It found that the rate of intermarriage was sharply rising, the number of Conservative Jews was falling and nearly a third of Jews were unaffiliated.

Since its publication, the study has been used by Jewish journalists, activists and leaders to guide their decisions and justify their opinions. It has also helped push Jewish organizations to shift from trying to prevent intermarriage to trying to engage interfaith families.

The study additionally found that many define their Judaism around remembering the Holocaust, leading an ethical life and working toward justice. It showed that most Jewish Americans feel some attachment to Israel. And it found that nearly all Jewish Americans — 94% — are proud to be Jewish. — *Ben Sales*

The rise of Jewy and Israeli TV

Jews have long found success in Hollywood, and for decades television has been fertile ground for Jewish cultural references (see: *Seinfeld*, *Jerry*). But the 2010s saw the rise of a number of celebrated television shows and movies that are either explicitly centered on Jewish themes or imported directly from the Jewish state.

The Golden Age of Streaming brought a deluge of parochially Jewish shows that still found a mass audience: “The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel,” which won a raft of awards portraying a Jewish 1950s housewife turned comedian; “Broad City,” the comedy about two Jewish millennial women in Brooklyn; “Crazy Ex-Girlfriend,” in which protagonist Rebecca Bunch engages in a “JAP Battle”; and “Transparent,” about a Jewish family in Los Angeles struggling with gender identity and which filmed a season mostly in Israel.

While “Transparent” went to Israel, a number of Israeli shows came to the US. Americans binge-watched “Srugim,” about Modern Orthodox singles in Jerusalem; “Shtisel,” about ultra-Orthodox singles (and marrieds) in Jerusalem; “Our Boys,” about the murders of children in and around Jerusalem; and “Fauda,” about Israeli commandos in the West Bank. There were also a bunch of forgettable movie dramas about Israel, at least three of them starring Ben Kingsley. All of it added up to viewers across America watching and enjoying a range of Jewish characters, foibles and stories. — *Ben Sales*

Haredi women have their say

On December 22, 2016, Rachel “Ruchie” Freier was sworn in as a civil court judge in Kings County, New York: She was the first Hasidic woman ever elected to public office in the United States.

Unlike some other segments of the wider Orthodox world, Hasidic Jews largely reject engagement with the secular world unless necessary. Both men and women follow restrictive dress codes, and women in particular are not encouraged to hold public leadership positions.

Raised in a Hasidic enclave in Brooklyn, Freier in recent years has become a symbol of female Orthodox women who want to assume more public roles without compromising traditional values or severing ties to their cloistered communities. In 2011, Freier founded an all-female volunteer EMT service, Ezras Nashim, after the Jewish EMT service Hatzolah refused to allow women to serve. The group’s fight for an ambulance has become politicized and their full acceptance in the ultra-Orthodox world is a long way off, but there’s little question that Freier and women like her have carved out space for haredi women to take on positions of greater influence and visibility in their communities.

— *Laura E. Adkins*

The Passover kitniyot revolution comes to America

The year 2016 saw an important if obscure change in American Jewish life: The Conservative movement officially declared *kitniyot*, or legumes, acceptable for Ashkenazi Jews to eat on Passover.

The ruling gave an imprimatur to what already was a quiet revolution taking place in a growing number of liberal observant homes. For centuries, traditional Ashkenazi Jews have abstained from peanuts, beans, rice, lentils, chickpeas and other foods that, according to the rabbis, could be misconstrued as *hametz*, or leavened food that is anathema on the holiday.

According to Sephardic Jewish practice, those foods have always been fine to eat on Passover. In Israel, where many Jews are of Sephardi heritage, kitniyot are widely available on Passover. A significant portion of Israeli Ashkenazim eat them even as they observe the holiday’s other dietary laws. Many Israeli families are mixed Ashkenazi-Sephardi, blurring the lines even further.

The past decade has seen the Israeli kitniyot trend cross over to America, as parts of America’s largely Ashkenazic Jewish population adopted the Sephardic custom. With a major Jewish movement approving the practice, the stacks of hummus on kosher-for-Passover grocery store shelves could grow. — *Ben Sales*

Spain and Portugal invite their expelled Jews home

In 2015, Spain and Portugal offered citizenship to descendants of Sephardic Jews who had been persecuted and expelled more than 500 years before. The laws were intended as atonement for the historic wrong of the Inquisition, which destroyed one of the most accomplished Jewish communities in the world. At a time of rising anti-Semitism around the world, the laws were cheered by Jewish leaders.

“Spain is roots, beloved and painful memories,” Israeli President Reuven Rivlin said in a 2017 visit, adding that it’s “not just nostalgia but an actual home: a place where Jews need not be told to feel at home.”

In practice, the application process was anything but simple. Spain’s law, whose window for applications ended in October, required applicants demonstrate an affinity with Spanish culture and have their family trees vetted. In Portugal, where the law is open ended, one of the two Jewish communities that the government tasked with vetting applications approves only people who are currently Jewish.

Despite millions of potential applicants, the laws resulted in only about 132,000 applications in Spain and another 50,000 in Portugal. The low response owes to multiple factors.

Most Sephardim live in affluent economies, which may limit their appetite for a second citizenship. Non-Jewish descendants of Sephardim often have no proof of their lineage. About 50,000 citizenship applications have been approved, two-thirds of them by Spain.

— *Cnaan Liphshiz*

Jews of color gain greater exposure

Abigail Pogrebin took this photo of Central Synagogue’s Rabbi Angela Buchdahl with president Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama at the White House Hanukkah party, 2014. (Courtesy)

Jews of color have long pushed the wider community to better acknowledge its racial and ethnic diversity, but a number of high-profile Jews of color made that fact much harder to ignore in the 2010s.

In 2014, Angela Buchdahl became one of the most prominent Jews of color in the world when she was named senior rabbi of Central Synagogue in New York, one of the largest synagogues in the country. The daughter of a Buddhist mother and Jewish-American father, Buchdahl was born in Korea and became the first Asian-American rabbi in 2001 when she was ordained by the Reform movement’s Hebrew Union College. She was far from alone in drawing public attention to Jewish diversity.

Barack Obama’s election in 2008 helped raise the profile of Rabbi Capers Funnye, an African-American rabbi in Chicago who also happened to be first lady Michelle Obama’s cousin. Amar’e Stoudemire, the former NBA star who told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency in 2013 that he believed he had “Hebrew” roots, would eventually convert to Judaism and play in Israel. Tiffany Haddish, the actress and comedian who only learned at 27 that her father was an Eritrean Jew, threw herself a star-studded bat-mitzvah at age 40 presided over by Sarah Silverman’s sister, Rabbi Susan Silverman. In 2019, the American Sephardi Federation and the Morocco-based Association Mimouna hosted the first conference focusing on Jews in Africa that was not exclusively for academics — a step Funnye said represented a major step forward.

“It means a great deal to the African-American Jewish community [and] the Jewish community of West Africa because we’ve been a long time in saying we’re here,” Funnye told JTA.

— *Ben Harris*