

JTA

# Jewish life in 2021: Predictions about the future of politics, culture and anti-Semitism

BY SHIRA FEDER DECEMBER 31, 2020



An Orthodox Jewish man wearing a surgical mask rides by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, April 22, 2020. (Erica Price/Getty Images)



**Ben Sales covers anti-Semitism and is based in New York City.**

**What's your takeaway from 2020?** I learned a lot about the staying power of hateful ideas like QAnon, the influential conspiracy theory that is a modern version of the age-old ideas that Jews are conspiring to control the world and harvest the blood of children. These smears were in vogue as far back as the Middle Ages, but millions of people still believe them today – just in a new form.

**What's on your radar for 2021?** I'm trying to never predict the news because I'm always wrong, but it's sadly safe to say that some people are still going to hate Jews in 2021. I'll be looking out for what shape that will take. If and when COVID fades, will street attacks on Orthodox Jews pick back up from 2019? Will anti-Semitic claims that Jews spread the virus fuel a new wave of attacks? Will far-right groups, embittered by Trump's loss, act on their extremism? Will the progressive Democrats who are critical of Israel become more prominent under a new political administration? And what will that new administration do to combat the rising threat of white supremacist groups?



**Shira Hanau covers Orthodox communities and is based in New York City.**

**What's your takeaway from 2020?** Something I learned from my beat this year is how easily seemingly small decisions by elected officials can harm long-term relationships with communities. We saw this when New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio tweeted at "the Jewish community" after a large funeral in Williamsburg didn't adhere to social distancing guidelines, and we saw it again when protesters for racial justice were allowed to gather to march (even if they were attacked by police) at the same time that synagogues could not gather in large numbers for prayer services. Those incidents contributed to anger at the government and, in one case, to the burning of masks in the streets. These kinds of small acts led to months-long resentments that may well outlast the pandemic.

**What's on your radar for 2021?** The most controversial issue that I think will play out in the Orthodox world is vaccination. There's long been a strong anti-vax element in parts of the Orthodox community, one that has even contributed to some recent outbreaks of measles. The big question in 2021 is whether that element drowns out efforts to encourage vaccination, which is needed to return safely to pre-pandemic life.

The effect that the pandemic has had on synagogues also can't be understated. Will people who have chosen to attend services online keep doing so? What will be the economic fallout for synagogues? And will anyone ever want to sit through a long sermon again?



**Ron Kampeas is the Washington, D.C., bureau chief.**

**What's your takeaway from 2020?** Like a lot of professional Jews, I'm aware of how easily vicious and toxic myths can take hold. You don't get through studying Jews and the 20th century without an awareness of how deep a capacity for irrational thought runs among men and women. That said, living it in real time this year and watching reasonable people buy into myths about QAnon, the pandemic and Black Lives Matter, among others, was eye opening. Truth is not as powerful as I believed, and that is sobering for a news person.

**What's on your radar for 2021?** I'm paying close attention to what the Biden administration does when it comes to foreign policy. President-elect Joe Biden has said he will rush to reenter the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. Iran's regime, so far, has indicated that it would welcome reentry and return to the terms that limited uranium enrichment, which it abandoned after President Donald Trump pulled out in 2018. Will Iran be as accommodating in February as it is promising now? The regime is unpredictable, hard-liners reportedly have the upper hand and there are no guarantees. Biden moreover wants to negotiate, after reentering the deal, the areas that critics said were neglected in 2015, including Iran's missile program and its adventurism in the region. Would Iran agree to negotiating those differences? Would that help calm Israel and Sunni Arab states, which oppose the deal? Other questions on foreign policy: Does Biden press Israel into talks with the Palestinians? Will there be more normalization agreements announced with regional Arab countries?

**Cnaan Liphshiz covers Europe and is based in Amsterdam.**

**What's your takeaway from 2020?** I learned that some people's responses to a pandemic accelerated by large gatherings is to hold large gatherings to protest.

**What's on your radar for 2021?** We ended the year with a dramatic court ruling that effectively bars kosher slaughter in Belgium. I predict that advocates of those bans will push for more countries to adopt them — and that other efforts to limit aspects of religious practice for Jews and Muslims will be emboldened. We could see progress in the movement to ban circumcision of boys — like animal slaughter, it's an issue that unites the far right and the far left in Europe in a way that makes life for Jews here difficult.

We're also going to continue to grapple with the ongoing loss of Holocaust survivors, which the COVID-19 crisis has accelerated, and ultimately their disappearance. New initiatives will continue to try to capture survivors' stories before it is too late, while at the same time, how the Holocaust is memorialized will continue to be a political issue, especially as Hungary and Poland plan to open state Holocaust museums for the first time.

**Marcus Gilban is a Latin America correspondent based in Brazil.**

**What's your takeaway from 2020?** More Brazilian Jews than ever are making aliyah, and Brazil's Jewish leaders must address this phenomenon or risk the community shrinking further. One thing I've observed in 2020 is that opportunity can arise if the communities in Rio and São Paulo, which traditionally have operated separately, work together.

**What's on your radar for 2021?** Like other Brazilians, Jews have been divided politically for years — a split worsened after then-presidential candidate Jair Bolsonaro visited Rio's Hebraica club in 2017, and several other divisive episodes that followed. New leaders are taking over in several Jewish institutions at the regional, national and local levels. I'll be watching to see whether they are able to unite Brazil's divided Jews.

**Jacob Judah is a United Kingdom correspondent based in London.**

**What's your takeaway from 2020?** This year has not been easy for Britain's Jews: The community has been badly hit by COVID-19, and worries about finances, friends and family are omnipresent. Yet I watched proudly as the community showed that it had not lost the fighting spirit and campaigning courage that it has built up fighting anti-Semitism at home, as it adopted the plight of Xinjiang's Uyghurs and Muslim minorities as its own. Across the board — from communal newspapers to rabbis and national organizations — the Jewish community has become one of Britain's most consistently outspoken champions for the rights and survival of Xinjiang's oppressed.

**What's on your radar for 2021?** Britain, trying to tie up the final strands of the Brexit process and now battling a new more transmissible strain of COVID-19, looks set for a bumpy start to 2021. But I think that Britain's Jews will be among the first in Europe to return to a semblance of normality: As COVID vaccines are rolled out across the country, a glimmer of light suggests that perhaps — if we hold our breath — things will be returning to normal by the summer.

**Sam Sokol reports about Israel and is based in Beit Shemesh.**

**What's your takeaway from 2020?** Covering a pandemic and conducting repeated interviews with the families of victims drove home just how difficult, and important, it is to retain journalistic objectivity even while tempering it with sympathy for those about whom we are writing. Dealing with harassment and personal threats as a result of my coverage, as well as having to report on attacks against fellow journalists (including some who are personal friends), reminded me that while we in the press are required to be detached, outside observers, we can all too easily become the story if something goes wrong.

**What's on your radar for 2021?** Like last year, 2021 is beginning in Israel with an election looming that could determine whether the country's longest-serving prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, stays in power. Netanyahu is facing what looks like his most formidable political threat with the formation of a new party led by a former ally, Gideon Saar, as well as serious legal troubles and deep public anger over his handling of the pandemic.

If Netanyahu loses power, the religious right in Israel could see its power blunted and the religious status quo in the country may be shattered in an unprecedented way. The haredi community will also have to reckon with its handling of the pandemic, which many saw as a failure, as well as the rabbinic leadership's growing fears of young people defecting from the community.



**Gabe Friedman is deputy managing editor and covers arts and culture.**

**What's your takeaway from 2020?** It's going to be a weird and windy road back to normal in the arts, culture and food worlds in 2021 and beyond. The Warner Bros. move to stream all of its 2021 movie releases at the same time they debut in theaters provoked outrage, but it was also a sobering reminder of how long companies expect the effects of the pandemic to linger throughout the upcoming year. So if you still don't enjoy experiencing your favorite Jewish artists' work at home, or ordering from your favorite Israeli restaurant as takeout, there is plenty of time to get used to it.

In terms of specific works, there isn't a ton of big-ticket content to preview for now — such as a Nicole Krauss novel that takes place in Israel or a Hanukkah album from Haim — but in our new world of pandemic delays and shifts, surprise releases are almost ensured. For pop and rap fans, there should be new Bleachers (Jack Antonoff) and Drake albums. Actor Timothee Chalamet should become more of a household name through his star turn in the sci-fi epic "Dune." Same for Ansel Elgort, who will star in Steven Spielberg's big-screen remake of "West Side Story." I'm looking forward to "Red Notice," a comedic thriller starring my favorite Israeli Gal Gadot, alongside Ryan Reynolds and Dwayne Johnson.

**What's on your radar for 2021?** I think we all learned that online programming works incredibly well in some areas and fails completely in others. For example, thousands of people have engaged in new areas of Jewish learning and explored institutions they didn't have access to before, like Jewish museums in foreign countries. But live performances — especially those of the most engaging, theatrical kind — don't translate well through pixels.

That said, something fun that did emerge this year and should continue into 2021 is the celebrity-studded online Jewish event, often for fundraising purposes. For example, I was able to easily watch a cooking lesson from Michael Solomonov, hear Amar'e Stoudemire tell his inspiring story and listen to Jason Alexander talk about Jewishness with Rachel Brosnahan. Look for this type of thing to become even more common.



**Laura Adkins is the opinion editor.**

**What's your takeaway from 2020?** Happy stories don't sell papers, but I've been inspired and amazed at how quickly this pandemic has brought to light "the helpers," as Mr. Rogers would say, in science, health care, philanthropy, feeding the hungry, local acts of kindness and even government.

It's also exposed trolls and plenty of bad actors. But this year reminded me of how much goodness there is in the Jewish community and world at large, and how many people truly do engage with the world in good faith. You just have to know how to spot them.

**What's on your radar for 2021?** I recently predicted on Twitter — a bit tongue in cheek — that Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump would make aliyah in 2021. It was lighthearted and acknowledged that they have purchased a home in Florida, but generated a lot of discussion, as all things Trump-adjacent do. The family still enthralls and captivates our attention and imagination, and I don't see that changing next year.



**Philissa Cramer is the editor in chief.**

**What's your takeaway from 2020?** I've learned just how much JTA readers have to add to the excellent journalism this news organization has done for more than a century. Our efforts to engage our audience in new ways have included readership surveys, our Bonds of Life project, commemorating Jews who died of COVID-19 and content (like this!) that gives readers insight into how we report the news. I'm excited to deepen our relationship with our loyal and attentive readers in the coming year.

This was my first year in Jewish journalism, and I've learned so much from our reporters all over the world — about people like Zsolt Balla, a Hungarian-born rabbi praying alone in Germany; about ideas like the Kranjec Test, which seeks to elevate women's voice in Torah study; and about how we reinvent traditions, even in the midst of crisis, as community after community after community did this year, when everything changed.

Those are just a few of the stories that stuck with me this year; I could have chosen so many more. None of them would gain the recognition they deserve without a robust and independent Jewish press, powered by curious and compassionate reporters making another call and asking another question to get the story right.

**What's on your radar for 2021?** Unfortunately, the crisis in journalism is not abating. Even with many promising experiments underway, local news remains under pressure, something we unfortunately saw this year as multiple Jewish newspapers folded, closed print editions or interrupted publication. At the same time, the polarization of debate and spread of misinformation has eroded confidence in journalism at a time when setting the record straight is more important than ever. Jewish media has not escaped this dynamic.

But I am optimistic about JTA and believe we can play an important role in bringing Jewish readers together. At a time when we are divided in so many ways and also cannot come together physically, the Jewish media can play a unique role in convening conversations that otherwise would be unlikely. In 2021, I am looking forward to expanding our reporting team, playing a role in serving local readers who might get lost in emerging news deserts and involving our readers in our storytelling in innovative ways.

<https://www.jta.org/2020/12/31/culture/jewish-life-in-2021-predictions-about-the-future-of-politics-culture-and-anti-semitism>