



## Letter From Our Rabbi

### That Was The Jewish Year That Was: 2010 – Part II

March 2011

Dear Haverim,

Last month, I described Jewish political, economic and religious achievements and challenges that faced Jews and Judaism in 2010. Now it's time to focus on culture.

The San Francisco Contemporary Jewish Museum opened "From Verse To Universe: Reading The People's Torah," an exhibit that encouraged people to scan an image of their hand that then became reconstituted, as a series of dots, into a Hebrew letter of the Torah, fulfilling the mitzvah of everyone, in their lifetime, writing a letter of Torah.

In literary news, The Jewish Review of Books was launched as a quarterly literary and political journal, joining a whole array of Jewish publications ranging from Commentary and The Forward to Tablet and Zeek. Described as "jazzy, sassy and incisive, with the "cojones" to publish cutting edge stuff that no other Jewish 'zine' wants to touch," the journal "Zeek" partnered with JewishDailyForward.com to attract young Jews, especially in their 20's and 30's, back to Judaism.

The National Museum of American Jewish History opened near Independence Hall in Philadelphia with exhibits that ranged from Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan to Bob Dylan and Albert Einstein to Sandy Koufax. Barbra Streisand, Jerry Seinfeld and Bette Midler were among the stars who gathered for the gala celebrating the museum. In New York, Mah-Jongg became the focus of an exhibit at the Museum of the Jewish Heritage.

A new documentary, "Jews and Baseball," focused on Sandy Koufax, Hank Greenberg, Al Rosen, and Moe Berg ("he spoke 7 languages and couldn't hit in any of them") as well as lesser known players Barney Peltz ("The Yiddish Curver") and Moe Solomon ("The Rabbi of Swat).

In additional sports news, the World Cup of Soccer in South Africa featured two Jewish Southern California players on the United States' team, Jonathan Bornstein and Benny Feilhaber (from Irvine), and one from Chicago, Jonathan Spector. Top ranked non-Jewish tennis pro Andy Roddick won the hearts of Jews around the world when he refused to play in a Dubai tournament that boycotted Israeli tennis player Shahar Peer. In easier sports, Yeshiva University students entered the Guinness Book of Records for the most dreidels spun simultaneously – 618 – at their "Dreidel-Palooza."

In college news, in a study of 246 campuses, Israel Studies were flourishing on University campuses, up 70% from the last study three years ago. As a culture, society, political system and historical entity, lots of non-Jewish students were interested in Israel and the Middle East and were filling these courses.

Colleges with historically small Jewish populations have recently invested in Hillel and Jewish studies in order to attract more Jewish students and, in a survey last year, discovered that they were succeeding. Vanderbilt, for instance, increased its Jewish population from 3% to 15% over the last 8 years "in the hope of attracting better students, increasing diversity on campus and promoting activism and leadership," according to an administrator.

In entertainment news, probably the most influential Jew on television, especially with young people, was Jon Stewart (Liebowitz). In reply to Bill O'Reilly's question about whether Stewart bought "the Messiah thing" when Obama was campaigning, Stewart replied: "Look, I don't buy the Messiah thing with the

Messiah thing, let alone with a politician.” Stewart and Stephen Colbert also convened the “Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear” in Washington where well over 200,000 people gathered (although Colbert estimated the crowd at “6 billion”).

The animated Simpson family visited Jerusalem, led by a surly Israeli guide, voiced by Sasha Baron Cohen, where Homer comes to believe he’s the Messiah. On another episode, Krusty the Clown (Herschel Shmoikel Pinchas Yerucham Krustofski) was about to marry when the synagogue ceremony was interrupted by Bart. On a more serious note, in support of Israeli actors who refused to perform in the Jewish city of Ariel on the West Bank because they considered settlements to be an obstacle to peace, 150 American theater artists joined in support of their cause including Harold Prince, Theo Bikel, Mandy Patinkin, Tony Kushner and Stephen Sondheim. In addition, Broadway composer extraordinaire Stephen Sondheim was honored, throughout 2010, for his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, as, among other titles, a “Jewish American legend.”

The very popular “Glee” added a fourth central Jewish character – probably a record in TV history – and Didi (Vered) Benami, daughter of Israelis, became an American Idol finalist, following in the footsteps of Elliott Yamin. “From Date To Mate” became the new faux reality show on cable’s “Shalom TV” about 20-something Jewish New Yorkers. Perhaps the show with the strongest Jewish character was “NCIS” where former Mossad agent Ziva David (whose father is head of the Mossad) battled foreign terrorists and domestic murderers.

Comedienne Joan Rivers was refused boarding on a flight because of TSA rules that questioned the difference between her stage name and legal name. Her response: “Does a terrorist order a kosher meal on a flight?”

Paramount Pictures was developing an Avatar-like 3-D movie, “In The Beginning,” based on the Book of Genesis, and one of the first graphic novels, Will Eisner’s “A Contract With God and Other Tenement Stories,” was optioned for a movie. Kevin Spacey portrayed disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff in “Casino Jack” and James Franco (yes, he’s Jewish) was everywhere on screen with films on Allen Ginsberg, “Eat, Pray, Love,” “127 Hours” and more.

The three stars of “Black Swan” (and director Darren Aronofsky) were all Jewish – Natalie Portman, Mila Kunis and Winona Ryder (who recently revealed that Mel Gibson once called her an “oven dodger”!)

Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg, played by Jesse Eisenberg in the film “The Social Network,” became Time magazine’s “Person of the Year.” Half a billion people became connected through Facebook and, along with Google’s Sergei Brin and Larry Page, young Jews – and others – in their 20’s and 30’s have reinvented communication and education throughout the world. Not only did Zuckerberg give \$100 million to the Newark School system, but he joined the Giving Pledge, created by Warren Buffett and Bill Gates, to give away at least half of their fortunes. Twenty percent of those who have signed up thus far are Jews, including Michael Bloomberg, Eli Broad and Diane Von Furstenberg.

The National Day of Unplugging was held in March from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday, sponsored by Reboot (rebooters.net), a hip, media savvy Jewish group. It also issued a “Sabbath Manifesto – ten core principles (for Jews and non-Jews) “to avoid technology, find silence, drink wine and connect with loved ones.” “Old Jews Telling Jokes” became a new website, with contributors such as former New York Mayor Ed Koch and Alan Dershowitz.

The best Jewish smartphone apps of the past year included: Keeping kosher at Disneyworld, Pocket iSiddur, iParashah, Tanach for All, Mila-4-phone, iBlessing, iZkor, iTalmud, Kitzur Shulhanaruch, Hebrew/English translator, Hebrew calendar, iMenorah, lulav wizard and grogger. In addition, Google and the Israel Antiquities Authority began collaborating in order to put the entire Dead Sea Scrolls online; heretofore they were restricted to certain scholars.

Johnny Mathis, who has recorded more than 130 albums, was honored by the Idelsohn Society for Jewish music for his contributions to Jewish music, including his memorable 1958 recording of “Kol Nidre,” “Eli, Eli,” and the Yiddish “Where Can I Go?” His choice of those melodies was influenced by his relationship with two famous Jewish bandleaders – Mitch Miller and Percy Faith. Lincoln Center honored Larry Harlow (born Lawrence Ira Kahn), known in the salsa world as “El Judio Maravilloso” (the marvelous Jew). After almost 50 years, Allan Sherman’s humorous song albums were re-released as a boxed set. Who can forget “Hello Muddah, Hello Faddah” or “Harvey and Sheila”?

Beastie Boys rap group singer “MCA” (Adam Yauch) purchased the rights, at Sundance, to the Holocaust documentary “A Life Unfinished” and actively promoted it. Singer Daryl Hall (Hall and Oates), who became a Jew by choice 40 years ago, headlined a concert for the UJA – Federation of New York, exhorting the crowd to “give back to the Jewish community.” Singer-songwriter Clare Burson produced and sang on her CD “Silver And Ash,” the first American album of original songs on the Holocaust, based on letters written by her great-grandparents, who were murdered in Latvia.

The newest star in rap music is black Jewish rapper Drake. He attended Jewish day schools, had a Bar Mitzvah and now has two Grammy nominations. Other new and successful Jewish rappers last year were Mike Posner and Canadian Jewish singer, rapper, and performance artist Peaches, who recently performed “Peaches Christ Superstar.”

As always, the Jewish year was full of joy and humor, challenges and successes, greater inclusivity and diversity and the sublime along with the trivial. May we work hard in 2011 to make Judaism more interesting and expansive, enjoying the narrishkeit along with the profound, for the future of Jews and Judaism lies in our hands and in our hearts.

***B’shalom,***

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Arnold Rachlis". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the text "B'shalom,".

Rabbi Arnold Rachlis