

Thank you to our own Jill Tanney for giving me an article from the New York Times International section entitled, “With Israeli Superhero, Marvel Attracts Critics.” It is about how Marvel Studios has cast Israeli actress Shira Haas to play a character called ‘Sabra.’ In case you are not familiar, as I was not, Sabra is a character that was created by Bill Mantlo and Sal Buscema in 1980. Sabra, the alter-ego of Ruth bat Seraph, is a mutant superhero who has all sorts of amazing superhuman abilities and who works for the Mossad. She first appeared in Incredible Hulk #250, and she is Israeli through and through from being born near Jerusalem to being raised on a kibbutz.

Sadly, as happens in the world of the New York Times, everything is intersectional. Rather than simply tell the story of the casting of an Israeli actress known for her work on the Netflix series Unorthodox, they take a different approach. The future appearance of Sabra in the next Captain America movie has to be discussed, examined, and dissected through the lens of Arab outrage. This is because anything and everything that involves Israel must somehow always involve the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict, no matter the circumstance, which is problematic to say the least.

It is not as if they ran a series of articles about the fantastic series Ms. Marvel which is about a Pakistani teenager who discovers that she has amazing abilities she inherited from her grandmother. There were no articles about how India felt about this depiction or their depiction in the series. They did not interview victims of terror from Pakistan. And please do not misunderstand, I am glad they didn't. But it is curious that the rules that apply to everyone else, do not apply to Israel.

And this is not the only time I have noticed a certain blindness when it comes to their reporting. I subscribed briefly to the New York Times online a few years ago. However, after being confronted by their anti-Israel bias in their reporting on Operation Cast Lead in the winter of 2008-2009, I unsubscribed. Sadly the Gray Lady does have a long documented history of anti-Jewish and anti-Israel bias¹ which was also demonstrated this past spring with its choice of articles during the

¹ <https://www.jns.org/opinion/why-does-the-new-york-times-incessantly-attack-israel/>

Passover / Easter season when they ran an Op-Ed by Shalom Auslander entitled, “In This Time of War, I Propose We Give Up God.” No similar articles were printed about other religions during their sacred seasons.

But attacking Judaism and its beliefs is fair game.

On its surface then, it would appear then that their most recent story

“Failing Schools, Public Funds – Hasidic Students in New York state are

Deprived of Basic Skills” from September 11th could also be a result of

the same embedded bias. Thankfully reporters Eliza Shapiro and Brian

Rosenthal, rather than making all sorts of assumptions, instead

demonstrated their curiosity. They asked a lot of questions and they did

the hard work by talking to a lot of people. And thank you to Libby

Tulin for dropping this article off in the office for me to read.

Not only did I read the article in its entirety, but I also looked to my

colleagues for their thoughts. As Rabbi Jeff Salkin wrote, “The Jewish

world awakened to a New York Times article - on the front page, above

the fold — about the massive educational failures at Haredi (ultra-

Orthodox) schools in New York.

When I say “awakened,” I do not only mean from a restful sleep. I mean, awakened to a disturbing social reality that many of us had known about and simply brushed over.

The failures center on secular education — or, rather, the lack of secular education. There has been a self-imposed, woeful ignorance in secular subjects that has unfolded in plain sight of several political administrations.

In short, it is an educational horror. The mere fact that many students do not learn English adequately means they will not be able to function in American society. This has crippled generations of young Jews — many of whom then fall victim to any number of social woes.”²

To describe the situation as a Shanda is an understatement. As the article states, “There is a 99% failure rate among the thousands of students at Hasidic boys’ schools who took standardized tests in 2019.” Even among the worst schools in New York State, the passing rate is 40%, which is a shanda. But at the yeshivot, it is 1%!

² https://religionnews.com/2022/09/13/hasidic-school-education-schools-new-york/?fbclid=IwAR0dmwWaa4Gc5bLmxc4vquzf4IWE6zhhnXQCChxPKx_MtEnIqNvdK94qVVc

And yet, these same yeshivot have received public funding and subsidies over the past four years that totals nearly \$1 Billion even while New York City is cutting funding to public schools.

So how did we get here? To start, these communities were founded on the idea of rebuilding after the Shoah. They came here in tatters, decimated by the slaughter of six million. They came dressed in the garb from the ghettos and shtetls that have been idealized by movies and musicals like Fiddler on the Roof. Their clothing reminiscent of Polish nobility from the 17th century.

A few highly observant European Jews sought to preserve their lifestyle by moving their communities and learning institutions out of Eastern Europe, mainly to Israel and the United States. Leaving many of their followers behind, European rabbinic figures who were saved, such as the Beltzer Rebbe; Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Alter, the third Hasidic *rebbe* of Ger ; and the Satmar Rebbe, helped reestablish learning centers for their communities in new locales.

Their goals became focused on rebuilding through their children.

However, because they spend most of their lives dedicated to study,

most in the Haredi community are poor, but not all. There is a rising upper-class who have built their wealth on business management as well as their participation in the diamond industry. What this means is there is wealth in the community, even though there also continues to be abject poverty. One of the lingering questions is: where is the wealth and who controls it?

This is why such a fierce battle broke out in 2006 after the death of Rebbe Moshe Teitelbaum, the leader of the Satmar Sect.³ With over 100,000 followers and 100s of millions of dollars in real estate and social services, it is not just about the soul of a community.

I mention all of this as background information. But you may already know all of this or at least some of this. Now to be fair, the Haredim, are a number of different communities, often competing with one another, and what could be more Jewish than that?

So we get back to the New York Times article. First off, this article was not a so-called hit piece. It was a thoroughly researched with hundreds

³ <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/1,7340,L-3244001,00.html>

of interviews by Eliza Shapiro and Brian Rosenthal. It was even translated into Yiddish to be distributed to the Haredi communities, as many of them do not read or speak English. At the beginning I mentioned that the New York Times has a history of anti-Jewish bias. However, there is a caveat, just because an organization or institution has a bias does not immediately discredit all of its work. It may not report on Israel the way I think is fair, and its underreporting of antisemitic assaults in the city is problematic, but that does not invalidate the work of these journalists.

Secondly, as I have heard others argue including provocateur and writer Liel Leibowitz of Tablet Magazine who argues in his Op Ed “The Plot Against Jewish Education”⁴ by emphatically stating: how dare they call out Yeshivot when so many public schools are failing?! Of course, this is a classic case of misdirection. Yes there are many issues facing public education in the city and in the state, and despite what these critics might

⁴ <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/plot-against-hasidic-education-new-york-times>

say, the Times has and continues to report on those schools as well. One does not preclude the other.

Third, as some have argued, this is not an issue of religious freedom. No one is telling these Yeshivot how to teach Judaism. No one is forcing them to take on staff from other faiths to come in and teach a multi-faith approach to religious life or even, God forbid, about Jewish pluralism. Instead, it is about them needing to follow New York State law when it comes to the basics: language, math, and science. If they are to be receiving public funds and to be good participants in society, they have a responsibility to provide to the basic educational needs of their students. So why are they so resistant to even offering the bare minimum? It is not about some idealized form of Judaism. Let's not kid ourselves, it is all about control. If your student body is only educated in the way you want them to be educated, then you are limiting their choices. Time and again in both the article and in the book All Who Go Do Not Return by Shulem Deen, we hear horror stories of those who wish to leave, but lack the basic skills to be able to do so.

Religious freedom also means the freedom not to practice the religion and not to have the religion forced upon any person.

This article does not set out to destroy the Haredi community. Instead it is a wakeup call that they can and must do better by their students, by their children. These children deserve, like all children, to have the skill sets and knowledge to lead whatever life they so choose for themselves wherever and how ever they choose to lead them.

As Rabbi Salkin notes, “The sages of the Mishnah, the ancient code of Jewish law, put it this way (Avot 2:2):

Rabban Gamaliel the son of Rabbi Judah Hanasi said: excellent is the study of the Torah when combined with a worldly occupation, for toil in them both keeps sin out of one’s mind. But study of the Torah which is not combined with a worldly occupation, in the end comes to be neglected and becomes the cause of sin.”⁵ Let me state that again, according to the rabbis, study without work leads to sin.

⁵ https://religionnews.com/2022/09/13/hasidic-school-education-schools-new-york/?fbclid=IwAR0dmwWaa4Gc5bLmxc4vquzf4IWE6zhhnXQCChxPKx_MtEnIqNvdK94qVVc

So what can we do aside from our outrage and frustration. First and foremost, we can continue to support organizations like Yaffed who have been fighting the Sisyphean battle for enforcement of educational standards in Yeshivot for years now, only to finally see their work acknowledged without being mentioned in the article. We can support organizations like Footsteps who help those who wish to leave the Haredei communities and join the secular world. We can continue to reach out to our elected officials and demand that they hold communities accountable and that if they are unable or unwilling to follow New York State Educational laws, they cannot receive tax payer funding. And we can demand more from our Jewish organizations and institutions that represent the plurality of Jewish life.

My fear is that this wakeup call, though startling and eye opening will quietly slip below general awareness. Thankfully this may not be the case. As of just a few days ago⁶ “the Board of Regents approved new oversight rules that would make it easier to crack down on religious and

⁶ <https://www.cbsnews.com/newyork/news/n-y-state-board-of-regents-to-require-private-schools-to-follow-minimum-academic-standards/>

other private schools to make sure they provide the same education as public schools.”

Now there will be challenges with enforcing this, but it is a step in the right direction. Judaism was never intended to be an insular community. As we learn in Leviticus, “You shall be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” the idea being that we are supposed to be a model of holiness, kedoshim to the greater world.

Marvel has stated that they are going to take a new approach to the character of Sabra for the movie. Hopefully it will not be to the diminishment of Sabra’s heritage, and instead a celebration of her legacy. So too, when it comes to kedoshim, holiness, we do well when we represent the ideals of our heritage. A heritage meant to be shared and elevated. A tradition of learning both of the sacred and the profane. To do otherwise, diminishes us all.

At this season where we engage with the hard work of teshuvah, of repair, we pray that all will hear the call of the shofar. We pray that all will be reminded that teshuvah involves more than beating one’s chest. It means doing right by those we have harmed. And many have been

harmed through this approach to education. We can be partners by being vigilant and demanding more from elected officials, from school officials, and from community partners, and by supporting the organizations doing the sacred work of accountability and repair. For even as they may circle the wagons and condemn critics, we will nonetheless continue to do what is good, right and just, for all communities. For all children deserve to have the tools to reach their fullest potential. This is the challenge and this is the call. The task is great and the obstacles are many, but the rewards if we and the greater community succeed could be boundless.

L'shana Tova