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AMERICA: ENCOUNTERING ANTISEMITISM

An Israeli report uses icon Jerry Seinfeld as a litmus test for the evolving attitude toward US Jews



Antisemitism in America: Jerry Seinfeld then and now

How the beloved comedian who epitomizes 'New York Jew' is reflecting the changing attitudes toward US Jewry

• ALAN ROSENBAUM

With antisemitism reaching record levels, one might have expected that the Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry's Annual Report for 2025 on antisemitism would have featured a cover image of anti-Israel demonstrators, the remnants of a burnt-out synagogue, or an iconic image symbolizing the scourge of antisemitism.

However, the figure that graces the cover of this year's report is a caricature of Jerry Seinfeld – the famous comedian and star of *Seinfeld*, the legendary TV sitcom that dominated the ratings in the late 1980s and 1990s – soaring above the New York skyline, Superman-style, with a Star of David emblazoned on his suit and a grin on his face.

AMERICAN COMEDIAN Jerry Seinfeld performs in Tel Aviv, 2015. (Nir Elias/Reuters)

What does Jerry Seinfeld have to do with antisemitism?

Recently, this reporter interviewed Prof. Uriya Shavit, head of the center since 2022, which is based in Tel Aviv, to discuss the connection between Jerry Seinfeld, antisemitism, and the future of American Jewry. The Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry at Tel Aviv University supports research on Jewish history, culture, and politics, and every year it issues its annual report on antisemitism, titled "For a Righteous Cause," on January 27, International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

The purpose of the report, Shavit explains, is to highlight initiatives and programs – both governmental and nongovernmental – that were established to advance the fight against other extremism and racism at large, with an emphasis on initiatives in countries that receive less media attention. This year's report features articles on Gibraltar, the Netherlands, the Muslim world, and the United States, among others.

Shavit specializes in research on Islamic law, theology, and politics in modern Islam, Muslim minorities in the West, processes of liberalization and democratization in the world, and the haredi society in Israel. And while he may not have a formal degree in the fictional world of Jerry Seinfeld as he appeared on NBC, he has a formidable body of knowledge about the series and its characters.

In an earlier stage of his career, Shavit worked at *Haaretz* and was the editor of weekend supplements for *Maariv* and *Makor Rishon*. He also contributed book reviews for *Yediot Aharonot*.

When *Seinfeld* became popular in Israel, Shavit was serving in the IDF and didn't have time to watch much TV.

"I think I really became a devout fan only in the late 1990s, in my mid-twenties, watching reruns," he explains. "Ever since, I have watched the masterpiece episodes – there are at least 30 that deserve this title – at least 100 times each."

Shavit was present at a press conference that Seinfeld gave during a visit to Israel in 2007. It is his intimate acquaintance with the 180 episodes and Seinfeld's real-life experiences this year that provided him with the inspiration to use both the fictional and the nonfictional versions to treat the subject of antisemitism in the United States.

While the real Jerry Seinfeld grew up on Long Island, attended Hebrew school, and volunteered in Kibbutz Sa'ar in northern Israel at the age of 16, his fictional counterpart rarely displayed any overtly Jewish characteristics on the show.

Instead, writes Shavit, "The Seinfeld persona was made of all-American and New York icons and traditions, from baseball to cornflakes to Superman. No Star of David, no lighting of the [Hanukkah] candles when others have Christmas trees, no Yiddish phrases, no Hebrew, no rallying for Israel, no comical gigs inspired by Archie Bunker 1970s-style prejudice directed against him."

While Jewish characters occasionally appear in the series, such as a *mohel*, a rabbi, and Jerry's dentist, who converts to Judaism just so he can tell Jewish jokes, they make up a relatively small part of the *Seinfeld* corpus.

"What's very interesting about the entire series," says Shavit, "is that it is no secret that Seinfeld is Jewish, and he's surrounded by Jewish characters such as the rabbi who cannot keep a secret, and the mohel with trembling hands."

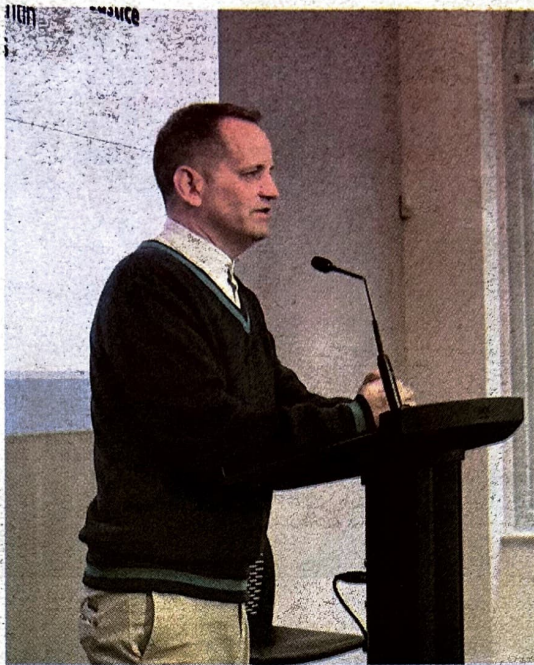
"They are all very Jewish, and we can recognize them as Jews, but there is nothing Jewish about Jerry Seinfeld – nothing that is visibly Jewish ideologically, culturally, or anything aside from the fact that he tells jokes, which is not really a 'Jewish' thing. There are Jewish comedians, but telling jokes does not make someone Jewish."

In the 1990s, says Shavit, being a Jew and an American was one and the same, both for the fictional and the real Jerry Seinfeld.

"Seinfeld's casual approach to his roots," writes Shavit, "was enabled by a social transformation: the emergence of secular Jews who felt fully accepted in American society."

Many ethnic and minority-group characters appear throughout the series, such as Pakistanis, South Koreans, and Puerto Ricans, and when compared with Seinfeld, they are the outsiders.

"Seinfeld is no longer the minority," says Shavit. "He is



PROF. URIYA SHAVIT, head, Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry. (Tel Aviv University)

PERHAPS THE apex of Seinfeld's awakening to Israel and the war was his appearance on the 'Honestly with Bari Weiss' podcast on May 28, 2024. (Screenshot; YouTube)

American, and it's clear that he is the master of the domain called New York. He is in charge, and is comfortable in his own skin, whereas they are the ones who are speaking a language that's not the language of the majority. It's as if he was American, and they were not.

"I think Jerry Seinfeld of the 1990s – both Seinfeld the person and *Seinfeld* the series – manifested the sense of comfort that Jews felt – that they are America and America is them."

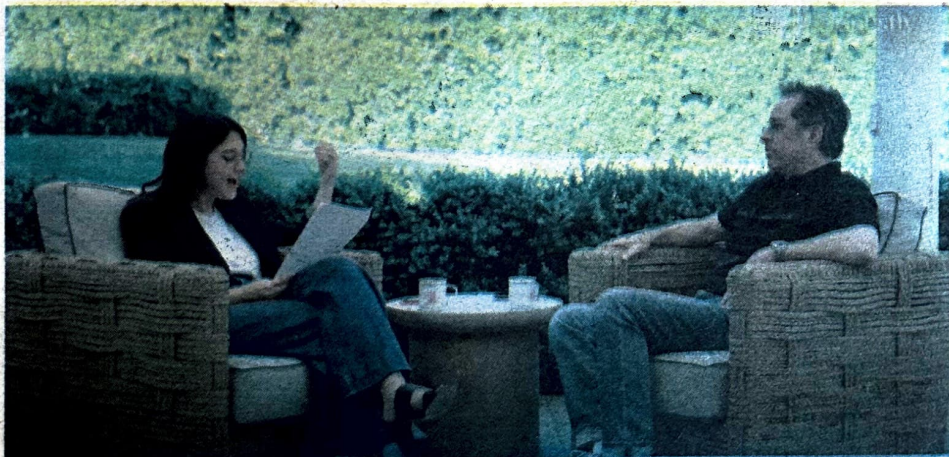
Jewish sensitivity of the 'Seinfeld' series

Israel is mentioned just twice in the 180 episodes of *Seinfeld*, notes Shavit, and only once directly, in Episode 74, titled "The Cigar Store Indian," which first aired in December 1993.

When Jerry asks a mail carrier of Chinese extraction if he knows of a good Chinese restaurant in the neighborhood, the mailman becomes upset with him for his ethnic insensitivity, at the same time that Jerry is trying to convince the Native American woman that he wants to date that he is politically correct.

Jerry complains to George that people are becoming too sensitive and says, "If somebody asks me which way is Israel, I don't fly off the handle."

Shavit further bolsters his point about the series' lack of Jewish sensitivity by discussing three well-known episodes





Nazi-related themes:

IN 'THE Limo' episode of 'Seinfeld,' George and Jerry get entangled with the head of the Aryan Union. Pictured: Chilean neo-Nazis.

(Jorge Sanchez/AFP via Getty Images)

IN 'THE Raincoats,' Jerry and his girlfriend get into trouble for making out during 'Schindler's List.' The March 1943 liquidation of the Krakow Ghetto is the subject of a 15-minute segment of that film.

(Photos: Wikimedia Commons)

'NO SOUP for you!' The Soup Kitchen International restaurant was the inspiration for the famed 'Soup Nazi' episode.



that have Nazi-related themes – "The Limo," "The Soup Nazi," and "The Raincoats."

In "The Limo" (Season 3, Episode 19), which aired in February 1992, George goes to the airport to pick up Jerry, but his car dies on the way there. Needing a way to get back, George sees a limousine driver standing in the terminal holding a placard with the name of a Mr. O'Brien, waiting to drive him to the city. George pretends to be O'Brien, and Jerry pretends to be his sidekick, Dylan Murphy.

To their horror, they find out that O'Brien is the never-seen-in-public head of the "Aryan Union" and author of an antisemitic tract. While Jerry is terrified when things get out of hand in the limousine, he is not frightened, writes Shavit, "as Jerry the Jew."

"It's striking," says Shavit, "that Seinfeld doesn't really have a moral or an ideological problem with being associated with the neo-Nazi, even as a joke. When both of them are exposed, and the neo-Nazis threaten, he becomes very much intimidated – not as a Jew but as a comedian whose

joke went too far.

"I think that's stunning when you think about it now in retrospect. When I watched the first time, I didn't think about it at all. I think that after October 7, it became something. How could he sit in the limousine and have this speech read to him or actually be the one reading it and not feel that this affects him as a Jew?"

Perhaps one of the most famous *Seinfeld* episodes is "The Soup Nazi" (Season 7, Episode 6), which aired in 1995. The storyline focuses on the bad-mannered, tyrannical soup restaurant owner, who obsesses over the conduct of his customers, yells at them, and rejects customers' orders if they misbehave in line.

Shavit says that the episode made the word "Nazi" synonymous with someone who is unkind and aggressive.

"I think that before the episode aired, people would hesitate to describe a clerk who did not give them good treatment in public as a Nazi," he notes. He writes, "This could not have happened unless, for Seinfeld, at that time, the term was just another taboo to break. That mainstream television and a Jew were so comfortable with such a usage meant everyone might legitimately feel the same."

The third Nazi-related episode, which aired in April 1994, is titled "The Raincoats." A significant part of the storyline centers on the visit of Jerry's parents to New York. They are staying in his apartment, making it impossible for him to spend time alone with Rachel, his Jewish girlfriend.

Jerry's parents urge him to see Steven Spielberg's award-winning Holocaust drama *Schindler's List*, and Jerry and Rachel go see the movie but spend most of the time making out in the darkened theater. Newman, Jerry's nemesis, spots the couple and informs Rachel's father of their behavior, who then forbids his daughter to see Jerry again.

"Fictional Jerry is simply indifferent to anything which is serious," says Shavit, "because he is like Peter Pan. The Holocaust and antisemitism are no exception, and it works so well because it's real – because Jerry Seinfeld, in his 30s and early 40s, was that kind of person; that's why it projects such reliability."

Oct. 7 and onward

After *Seinfeld* ended in 1998, Jerry Seinfeld married Jessica Sklar in 1999, had three children, and continued his comedic career, albeit with a somewhat lower profile.

He performed in Israel in 2015 and 2017, and those visits gave him a greater sense of his importance as a Jewish performer.

Speaking of those visits with Bari Weiss on the *Honestly with Bari Weiss* podcast, he said, "The first time I went to Israel, after I finished the show and I saw the way they reacted to me, I said this is not the normal interaction of a celebrity public





SEINFELD VOLUNTEERED in Kibbutz Sa'ar, up north, at age 16.

interface. It is different. I meant something which I never knew, and it gave me a wonderful feeling like, 'Oh, I didn't realize what I was doing had another value that I didn't know about.' I loved it."

In October 2022, after a spate of antisemitic incidents and rapper Kanye West's antisemitic tweets, Jessica Seinfeld, Jerry's wife, posted a response on Instagram, "I support my friends and the Jewish people," and encouraged her 580,000 followers to share the post. Jerry supported his wife's post, writing, "This is no time to be silent about antisemitism."

Beyond that, though, he was not particularly known as an outspoken supporter of Israel or Jewish causes, echoing his fictional self.

After Oct. 7, everything changed for Jerry Seinfeld.

On October 10, three days after the Hamas attacks on Israel's South, he released the following post on Instagram: "I lived and worked on a kibbutz in Israel when I was 16, and I have loved our Jewish homeland ever since. My heart is breaking from these attacks and atrocities."

"But we are also a very strong people in our hearts and minds. We believe in justice, freedom, and equality. We survive and flourish, no matter what. I will always stand with Israel and the Jewish people." Attached to the post was a poster of a girl covered with the Israeli flag and the banner "I Stand with Israel."

Seinfeld also signed a petition, along with hundreds of other figures in the entertainment industry, supporting Israel, condemning Hamas, and calling for the immediate release of the hostages in Gaza. Among the signatories were Gal Gadot, Jamie Lee Curtis, and Mayim Bialik, but none was as prominent as Jerry Seinfeld.

Two months later, he traveled to Israel with his wife and visited communities in Israel's South, including Kibbutz Be'eri, and met with survivors. Jessica also funded pro-Israel counter-demonstrations on college campuses.

After expressing support for Israel in the wake of the war, the feedback that Seinfeld received from some audiences was predictable. In May, one of his performances was interrupted by a member who yelled "Free Gaza." Seinfeld was called a genocide supporter and Nazi scum.

His commencement speech at Duke University was marred by chants from some students and walkouts. Reporting on the controversy, *The New York Times* (May 4, 2024) wrote, "The comedian, long beloved for his apolitical riffs, has been wrestling with what it means to be Jewish amid the Israel-Hamas

War. Not everyone is pleased."

Perhaps the apex of Seinfeld's awakening to Israel and the war was his appearance on that *Honestly with Bari Weiss* podcast on May 28, 2024. Weiss discussed the art of comedy, his movie *Unfrosted*, and what it's like writing comedy.

Midway through the podcast, Weiss asked him about his trip to Israel during the war. He replied, "[It was] the most powerful experience of my life." When she asked him why it was so special, he lost his composure and could only nod his head before he could continue speaking. It was clear that what he had seen had made a deep impression.

Commenting on Seinfeld's pro-Israel stance, Shavit says, "Jerry Seinfeld is in a league of his own, and he is like an American icon. I think that his speaking out will be remembered in cultural history and social history as a day of reckoning for American Jews in the sense that our identity is something that is part of us and has a political meaning. We cannot escape it."

Secular Jews in America - the future

Despite his stand, Shavit is somewhat discouraged about the outlook for secular American Jews. "In the end, when Seinfeld finally became manifestly Jewish, he also manifested the old question of whether American Jewish secular identity can survive without either Israel to fight for, or antisemitism to fight against because the question remains - what else is there?"

"If there is no Israel and there is no antisemitism, what defines the way you define your identity? What makes you Jewish? In the end, the Jerry Seinfelds of the world would have to seriously consider this position if they want this passed on to their children and grandchildren. If the day comes when there is no longer any antisemitism, and Israel is peaceful and safe, what would that make you as an American secular Jew?"

Shavit says that it is unlikely that Jewish life in the US will return to the relatively carefree days of the 1980s and 1990s, and he notes that antisemitism was on the rise even before Oct. 7.

When one considers Israel's still-precarious position in the world today, it seems likely that these two reasons - antisemitism and the continued threat to Israel's existence - will ensure that many American Jews will retain their loyalties to Israel for many years to come. Not that there's anything wrong with that. ■

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