In this issue…

Washtenaw Jewish News
c/o Jewish Federation of Greater Ann Arbor
2939 Birch Hollow Drive
Ann Arbor, MI 48108

Presort Standard
U.S. Postage PAID
Ann Arbor, MI
Permit No. 85

WASHTENAW JEWISH NEWS

November 2021 Cheshvan/Kislev 5782 Volume XXI Number 3 FREE

Antisemitism: Why now?

Hannah Davis interviews Andrew Lapin and Andy Kirshner

It may be something in the air. Two local creators are releasing pieces of media profiling prominent figures, who were also antisemites, in American history from the early 1900s.

Andy Kirshner is an associate professor at the University of Michigan School of Art and Design and the School of Music, Theater, and Dance. He has a background in music composition and theater, and has been making films for about ten years. His film, *Ten Questions for Henry Ford*, follows the ghost of Ford, whose antisemitic politics are often less well known than his automotive legacy, on a journey through modern Detroit. Andrew Lapin is an editor with the Jewish Telegraphic Agency and has been a working journalist for the last decade, including a stint as editor-in-chief of the Detroit Jewish News and a decade or so as a film critic. He is releasing an eight-episode podcast about Father Charles Coughlin, an antisemitic preacher based at the Shrine of the Little Flower in Royal Oak in the 1930s. Coughlin supported both Hitler and Mussolini and invented political talk radio as we know it today. Lapin's eight-part podcast, produced with *Tablet*, is "Radioactive: the Father Coughlin Story."

Andy Kirshner on the set of his new film Ten Questions for Henry Ford. Photo by Nick Azzaro.

WJN sat down with these two creators to talk with them about their work (interview has been edited for clarity and length).

WJN: You're both releasing projects about influential figures — influential antisemites — who were both active in Detroit in the same time period. Why do you think these stories are coming out now? Why now for these projects of yours?

Andrew Lapin: It's definitely something in the air, right? People have become very interested in the last few years in issues of fascism and demagoguery, and there has also been this effort to look at history with a more critical eye, and that, I think, is in the spirit of both our projects. For me, it was this weird personal connection that I felt, with Father Coughlin and the Shrine of the Little Flower: I grew up

continued to page 8

Shmita is Judaism's sabbatical year. It can be a model for tackling climate change and inequality.

Sen. Meghan Kallman, Rabbi Lex Rofeberg, originally for the JTA

We are in an era of multiple interlocking crises. From record-breaking heat waves to wildfires to water shortages, from rising authoritarianism to a pandemic rampaging across the world, it is clear that, to survive, human beings will need to make urgent, major changes to how we live.

Bold policy proposals already exist to address these problems, both nationally and in different states. Additionally, we — one of us a politician, the other a rabbi, and both progressives — want to suggest another possibility, gleaned from Jewish tradition: the ancient idea of shmita, the sabbatical year, which can guide our work in this urgent moment when everything we do matters.

Both of us are millennials, and therefore have come of age under the worst inequality since the Gilded Age — exacerbated and symbolized by a student and healthcare debt crisis. The disastrous effects of climate crisis, extinctions, displacement and environmental degradation are threatening to turn life into a nightmare for most on the planet. These problems can be traced to a global obsession with unending growth

RI State Senator Meghan Kallman

Rabbi Lex Rofeberg, cohost of Judaism Unbound podcast.

Our only chance to avoid that is to drastically re-envision our society and its priorities.

Both of us are also, in particular, *Jewish* millennials. We have, in different ways and at different points in our lives, felt called to participate in Jewish communities of learning, prayer and communal gathering. Despite our involvement in those spaces however, neither one of us learned of shmita's existence until adulthood. It is time for our Jewish spaces, around the world, to re-prioritize this sacred ritual, and apply its wisdom in concrete ways to our own times.

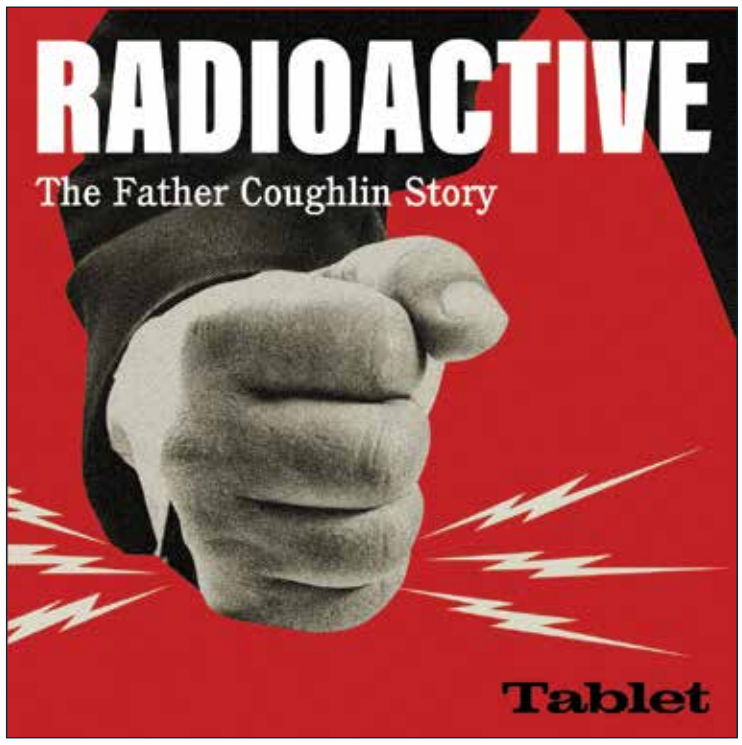
The word "shmita" is observed every seven years. The shmita year began on Rosh Hashanah. "Sabbatical" tends to refer to respite from work, typically in a university context. But the shmita year is slightly different. It is a collective sabbatical, a radical recalibration of society as a whole, in order to align it with

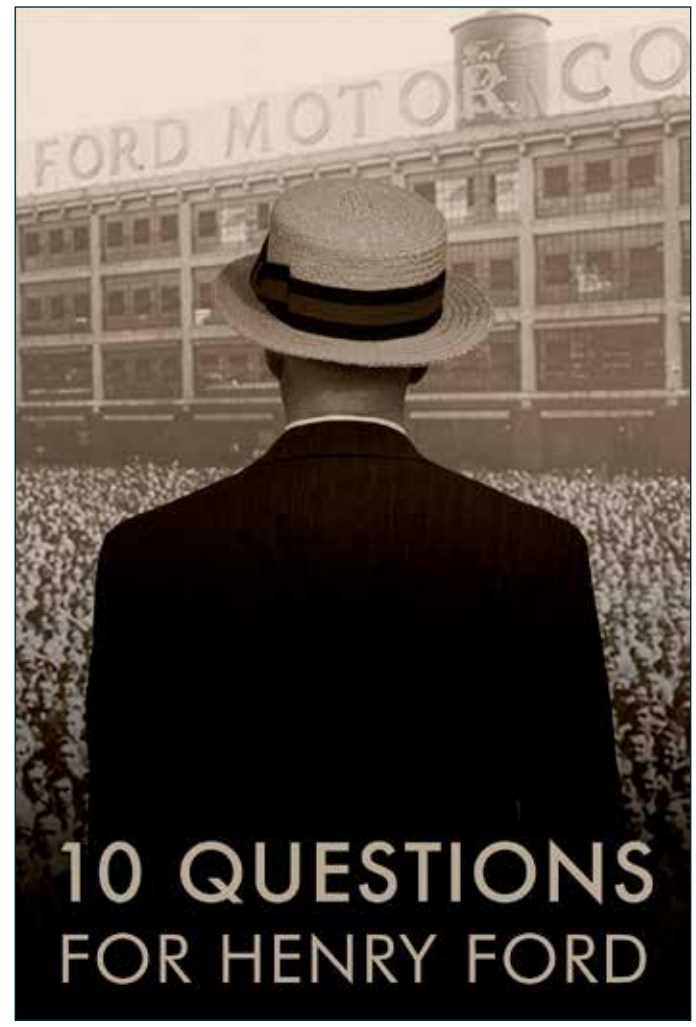
continued to page 9

Antisemitsm: Why Now ? *continued from page 1*

maybe a mile from the church, so growing up, I knew his story and was always surprised to find people did not really know who he was or what he wrought on this country. So this was a journey for me to understand him through a modern context. So many things happening in the present day were eerie reminders or direct echoes of the kinds of things Coughlin did 80 years ago. I thought it was important to revisit that today.

Andy Kirshner: This time that we're in right now, where you have this authoritarian, right-wing, populist, and anti-immigrant movement in the country, that was also true in the 20s and 30s. Jews were the Mexicans and Guatemalans of the time. They were the aliens who were going to destroy Anglo-American civilization, according to people like Ford and Coughlin. So there are those parallels. And as Andrew mentioned, there is the local connection: everywhere you go in Michigan, it's Henry Ford something or other. [laughs] It's the Henry Ford Museum, the Henry Ford Hospital, the Henry Ford Freeway, the Henry Ford whatever. And I found, as Andrew did: everybody has heard of Ford, but a lot of people don't know his full story, that he was also an antisemite, he was anti-labor, and he even accepted a medal from Hitler. In that same spirit of addressing history in a more honest manner, I felt it was important to try to tell the whole story. Michigan also has this weird history of being at the center of a lot of right wing movements. It was Coughlin and Ford, and it was also Gerald L. K. Smith, and militia movements, and the resurgence of the KKK.





WJN: So why is it always happening in the Detroit area? [laughs] What's going on there?

AL: Detroit was the hot place to be at the dawn of this new economic era in America. Everyone wanted to move here for work, it was on the forefront of innovation not only in automobiles but in a lot of other areas, a lot of that spurred by Henry Ford. That population growth was something Father Coughlin fed off of. As the fortunes of Detroit changed drastically, the threat represented by these movements and the ways they capitalized on society sort of metastasized around that. So when people are in economic despair in Michigan, that's when they turn to militias. While I was at the Detroit Jewish News, I interviewed the former head of the biggest neo-Nazi movement in America, which had earmarked Detroit as a prime recruitment spot because of how many people were out of work following the bankruptcy. So if you look at the long history of the last century, it was both a place of immense cultural importance and a place that feels like it is abandoned by the powers that be. All of which creates a kind of proving ground for populist, racist, and antisemitic theories.

AK: Detroit during the Depression was a real center for left-wing movements as well, so there's a sort of action-reaction thing going on. Between 1880 and 1924, the composition of society was radically changing. In 1920, Detroit was maybe 5% African-American, and millions of Jews came to America in this time period. So people like Henry Ford who grew up in white Protestant Dearborn, they're looking around and the world is changing in front of their eyes. It may be similar to what's happening now in places like Arizona and Florida and Texas where the demographics are changing and there's this kind of backlash that happens.

AL: The race and class experience across Michigan is a huge part of this. Detroit has historically been one of the most segregated cities in the country, and the ruling white class often bulldozed Black neighborhoods and otherwise ripped apart the fabric of lower income society. You also get these pockmarks of rural white poverty across the rest of Michigan, which tends to be where militias get their start. I often say that Michigan is all of America in one place, for better and worse.

WJN: Both of your pieces of media rely so much on music and audio to set the scene. How do the media formats you have both chosen inform, assist, and constrain the story?

AL: For me, using a podcast was totally crucial to the goals of my project, which was to really put you in the headspace of someone who would have been listening to Coughlin's radio show in the 1930s. You can hear his voice, the pattern of it, the way he delivers his proclamations. We use a lot of the original music from his radio programs, the church hymnals, because that was how he packaged himself. I want my listeners to be thinking about why someone you hear over the radio or consume in some other piece of media would be so compelling that they can shape your entire belief system. I also saw the internet and social media as being the radio of the modern era, this new form of communication, barely regulated, that is a home for a lot of Coughlin-esque figures to find an audience. So there was a clear parallel to make there that we also wanted to establish through using a podcast.

AK: What actually got me started on the project was a book called *Fordlandia*, by Greg Grandin. Ford had this rubber plantation in the Amazon called Fordlandia, where he built a main street and a white clapboard chapel and all the trappings of a Midwestern village, right in the jungle. He was trying to enculturate his indigenous Amazonian workers by teaching them to square dance. And so I originally had this idea that I was going to do a musical, set in the Amazon with people square dancing! The concept morphed, but I stuck with the idea of square dance as being the central metaphor. It was this cultural imperialism, and also it was really quaint and weird. I found articles in Ford's newspaper, *The Dearborn Independent*, where he talked about how the Nordic square dances are the best, and how lately there've been all these dances coming in from the Congo, corrupting civilization, but he has this plan to restore the traditional dances, get away from "jazz sex dancing" and return to good old American whatever. Ford had a full time dance master on the payroll, and he had a ballroom in the Ford engineering plant, he had his executives square dance as part of their job. So in the film the ghost of Henry Ford, played by John Lepard, dances at various times: in front of the old Model T plant in Highland Park, in his barn all alone, and when he is accepting a medal from Hitler. So it's just this weird surreal thing, but I worked with choreographer Debbie Williams, and John was totally down to learn how to do these kookie dances, and we got the old Henry Ford dance manuals — he and his wife published these books, "Henry Ford Shows You How to Dance." The source material from the score is tunes by Stephen Foster, the first American commercially popular songwriter, who was a composer of beautiful nostalgic sentimental ballads, and also the composer of virulently racist minstrel songs. So that seemed particularly appropriate since Ford revered Stephen Foster. So you have these two sides of Ford, this sentimental guy and then this horrible racist guy at the same time. You wouldn't think square dancing would be racist, but you find a way.

AL: Radio too: as a technology, the first big hits were racist minstrel shows, that's what Coughlin was building off of as well.

WJN: A lot of articles came out during the Trump era profiling neo-Nazis or Trump voters and talking about why they held their beliefs, why they voted the way they did, that tended to come off very sympathetic. I'm curious if that's something you were both aware of as a risk factor going into your projects. Because you're humanizing these subjects but also trying to convey the horror along with the humanity.

AL: While for me Coughlin is definitely the protagonist of the show — you're following him as he accumulates fame and power and ultimately loses it all — I was never worried about making the audience sympathetic to him inadvertently, because it's pretty clear from the outset that he's a horrible person and we don't really give him any quarter in that regard. But horrible people still have dreams [laughs] and ambitions, and I think there's some value in understanding what those are. I take a lot from Hannah Arendt's idea of the banality of evil: people are not monsters, they are people. It's not like they came from outer space, they grew up in the same landscape as you and me.

AK: I did want to complicate Henry Ford, I didn't want to make him a total villain or a total hero. He has this certain kind of charm to him, he's this farm boy who early in his career was taking on some of the big powerful business interests and so forth, he has this populist thing going on, and he likes square dancing, he likes birds. There's something charming about him. I wanted the movie to be something where you could be alternately charmed by him and repelled by what he did. You know, I think in some ways the film is best described as a tragedy. If you think of Henry Ford as King Lear, even at the end of *King Lear* you still feel sorry for him when his daughter is killed. And so one of the main stories in the film is

about Henry Ford's relationship with his son Edsel. There was all this mutual love between the father and son, but it was ultimately a destructive relationship for both of them. So I was interested in how we can destroy the people we love as a broader theme. And this relationship between Henry and Edsel in some ways reflects larger struggles going on in society, with Edsel being pro-labor, not a bigot, patron of the arts, Henry for having no use for art, being a bigot, being very anti-labor.

Andrew Lapin, photo courtesy Anna Megdell.

AL: It was important for me to understand how people who listened to Charles Coughlin would have found him charming, and would have seen him as the truth teller. Regardless of whatever doctrines he held in his heart, he was able for a time period to project an outward appearance of trustworthiness. Obviously he was a priest, people took religious inspiration from him, and he delivered a lot of messages that resonated with a lot of people. I think you get into trouble when you just write off people like him and anyone who follow him as "deplorable," like if you don't really want to understand what's going on there, then you're just kind of setting yourself up for a future that you also don't understand.

WJN: Do you feel like there's an overarching philosophy to the work you are doing, from past work to these new pieces?

AK: I've always kind of been interested in exploring social and historical issues through the media of dance, film, theater, music, and the written and spoken word, and themes of race and identity. And I'm attracted to these iconic figures in American culture and history. So I did a piece years ago that was based on the life of — or the iconography of — Frank Sinatra, where I played an aging crooner named Tony Amore, and he's giving farewell concerts one after another and never quite leaves the stage. But that was a piece where it was a lot about masculinity, it was about Frank Sinatra representing American masculinity to people. So, Sinatra, Ford, these are iconic American figures that give us this sort of window into the American psyche.

AL: I think in a general sense I'm certainly fascinated by media and the arts as tools for mass communication and the ways that people interact with them, how those things reverberate across society. But that might also just be a bit high-falutin'.

WJN: Andrew, you did an interview with *Jewish Currents* when you were editor at the *Detroit Jewish News*, and talked about the generational tension you saw in the Jewish community, a feeling in older Jews that younger Jews don't really understand the fear and vulnerability that come from being close to the Holocaust. Was that something that informed your work here?

AL: Yeah, that's very true. My career has centered around Jewish journalism over the last few years, and that was a central tension I noticed when I was at the *Detroit Jewish News*, the completely disparate reactions I would get from Jews in the older generation and in the younger generation. For this project, I'm sort of trying to reach multiple generations at once: there are older folks who, if they don't remember Father Coughlin himself, they remember their parents reacting to him. And that places us on a timeline that can incorporate perceptions of the Holocaust and about a time when antisemitism was so prominent in the world. And now, because it's also in a new media format, and because it's touching on a lot of parallels to what's been going on here over the last couple years, that's also energizing a younger generation of Jews and also non-Jews to engage with this work.

AK: So I'm a little older than Andrew — my father fought in WWII and he was Jewish. His memory of the Holocaust was very present. When I started working on this project I was talking to my in-laws about it, who are Jewish and who grew up in Detroit, and heard Father Coughlin on the radio, and Henry Ford was kind of notorious among Jews. There was this informal boycott of Ford cars by Jews that continued for quite a long time. And you know, I didn't know any of that stuff, and contemporaries of mine, both Jewish and non-Jewish, they've often had the reaction of, "I didn't know any of this stuff about Henry Ford. I just knew like, Greenfield village! Cars! Henry Ford hospital!" That part of the legacy. So it's kind of amazing, really, the way that history kind of gets deep-sixed, not very long after.

AL: Over the course of my project I talked to current Shrine parishioners as well as current employees of the archdiocese of Detroit who did not know about Father Coughlin, did not know about his antisemitism. Maybe they had heard of him, but didn't know any of this. Whereas, like, every Jew in Detroit probably knew who he was! So that's definitely, there is something interesting there, some divide in two different cultures.

WJN: So what's next for you both?

AL: I'm just trying to get to the end of the [eight part] podcast. It will all be out at some point and I will take a big breath. Haven't really thought beyond that.

AK: It's pretty consuming when you're trying to roll something out there, because you feel like there's this window you have to let people know about it, and you're also trying to finish it, which I still am! Also my wife, Stephanie Rowden, is a sound artist, and we're actually talking about all the things that got left out of the Henry Ford film that I couldn't fit in 67 minutes, particularly some of the weirder stories. We're thinking of doing a podcast — we started going around to some of these sites in Michigan that we wanted to research more. Somehow, there's this feeling that Henry Ford can take you back to every thread in American history in one way or another.

The first episode of the podcast "Radioactive: The Father Coughlin Story" is available on podcast streaming services: find it at https://www.tabletmag.com/podcasts/radioactive. *10 Questions for Henry Ford* will premiere at the Ojai Film Festival on November 6, and afterwards will be available for a limited streaming run from November 9–14. Find out more at https://www.henryford-questions.com. ■

Shmita is Judaism's sabbatical year, continued from page 1

principles of justice and equity for human beings and for the lands we inhabit. Shmita offers a framework for how we might enshrine seemingly individual choices as social values.

The shmita year has two major components. The first is that it serves as a rest for land: Just as humans get to observe a sabbath once every seven days, the land that we inhabit gets a sabbath, too. In biblical times, it meant that the land should lay fallow for a year, and the gleanings left for the needy and even animals. Through shmita, our relationship to land can shift from one of control and domination to one of *appreciation and interdependence*. Clearly, such lessons are applicable to this moment as well.

Shmita's other major component is that debts are forgiven. This is done to address financial inequities that grow over time, and to enable everyone to have the opportunity to thrive. Debt forgiveness every seven years disrupts wealth-hoarding, and provides relief to those struggling to meet their basic needs. Shmita approaches justice expansively.

These ideas can be, and should be, used in practice — not just in our ancient texts, and not just aspirationally. For instance: we could forgive debts, and change the systems that cause such terrible indebtedness. Two-thirds of contemporary U.S. bankruptcies are over medical issues and medical debt; we must make healthcare free and universal to solve this problem over the long term. Collectively, U.S. college students owe nearly $1.6 trillion in student loan debt; President Biden could and should forgive up to $50,000 per borrower in federal student debt through executive action. Over the medium term, we must make public colleges and universities free, to avoid re-creating the same problem — something that our home state of Rhode Island is already on its way to doing. This year, its General Assembly permanently enacted RI Promise, the free tuition program at the Community College of Rhode Island.

The idea of shmita can also guide us in acting to avoid the most catastrophic effects of climate change. Shmita proposes that for a year, humans must avoid treating land simply as a means to our ends; we must not think in terms of limitless expansion, but rather in terms of sustainability and rest. Leaving the land fallow rejects the notion that our planet, and its resources, exist only to serve us.

Our state's Act on Climate bill sets legally binding targets for emissions reductions; now we must act urgently to meet them. Measures like mandating net-zero emissions in energy generation, a critical move that passed only the Senate this session, are crucial first steps. We need to rebuild our food systems, and expand public transit and clean energy production. Neighborhoods are building community gardens while offering training for formerly incarcerated people, rethinking financial systems, and experimenting with basic income. Communities and legislatures are mobilizing around these issues, but we need more action, faster, and at every level.

The choices we make now will determine the survival of millions within the next few decades. We must seek out every strategy available to us as we take on the challenges that threaten the inhabitants of our country, other countries, and our planet. That includes strategies anchored in ancient wisdom, like the shmita year. We need to act collectively, for everyone's health. Because a society that takes care of itself and its most vulnerable is one that is, quite simply, the only moral option. ■