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**THE CANADIAN JEWISH NEWS**



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## COVER STORY: 24 Jews who are changing the world

CJN Staff, Wednesday, April 1, 2015

Tags: News

3 Comments



**Zev Moses, Julie Greenbaum, centre, and Melissa Shiff** The 24 visionaries profiled in this week's edition are re-examining age-old understandings of Judaism, with an eye to furthering our tradition in ways some of us probably hadn't even considered before. And in their enthusiasm, their passion – even their audacity – for a Jewish future, we find hope and excitement. If they can find a way to move Judaism forward, perhaps all of us can in our own unique ways.

Change may be inevitable, but it's not easy. It requires vision, inspiration and bravery to make it happen. Over the past few months, we here at *The CJN* have been thinking a lot about change in the Jewish community and how it affects where Canadian Jewry is headed in the future. And that's what prompted us to take a closer look at some of the young innovators taking our religion, and our community, in bold new directions.

### MELISSA SHIFF

#### Artist focuses on Jewish culture and ritual

Melissa Shiff, a Toronto-based video, performance and installation artist, said she chooses to focus her work on Jewish culture, memory and ritual because "memory is the means that preserves Jewish culture."

Shiff, 48, a research associate at York University's Sensorium: Centre for Digital Arts and Technology, said her decision to present Jewish themes through her art came out of an art school class she took called "Representing the Jew as Other."

"As an emerging artist, it struck me that I had a responsibility to add my voice and perspective to this history of representation," she said.

"What interested me was rather how identity is constructed and, for this reason, I b

egan to make work about ritual and how this constitutes, along with cultural memory, an important method of identity construction."

Some of her projects include a performance art piece called *Times Square Seder: Featuring The Matzo Ball Soup Kitchen*, and another was an installation called *The Medium is the Matzo*.



But for the past three years, Shiff has been the lead artist on *Mapping Ararat: An Imaginary Jewish Homelands Project*.

"With *Mapping Ararat*, we are using the new technology of augmented reality to image and imagine what Moredecai Noah's 1825 plan to turn Grand Island, N.Y., into a Jewish homeland might have looked like," she explained.

"With the latest geo-spatial technology, one can now place virtual architecture anywhere on the globe, and visitors can see this virtual architecture on their smartphones or tablets with the precise GPS co-ordinates."

Shiff said she's working on a film that will show the walking tour and hopes to circulate it at film festivals.

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7 hrs

"The customers were not just Jewish. It was more of the non-Jewish guests than the Jewish guests, because I'm quick, fast. People came."

**ZEVI MOSES****Curating a virtual Jewish museum**

When Zevi Moses founded the Interactive Jewish Museum of Montreal in 2010 his goal was to develop a Jewish museum unlike any other: one that would be “community-driven and participatory.”

Executive director Moses, now 31, wanted to present the city’s Jewish past in a way that would appeal, especially, to younger, tech-savvy people – Jews and non-Jews. Its major funding is from Federation CJA’s Generations Fund and the Jewish community of Montreal as well as private foundations and individuals.

The museum is virtual ([imjm.ca](http://imjm.ca)) and accessible on the Internet. The goal was to use archival material available in innovative ways, as well as do original research. The Museum of Jewish Montreal (MJM), as it is known today, has gone a long way to accomplish that.

One of its first projects, to “map” historic Jewish sites in Montreal, remains popular. The interactive map allows visitors to select a location and get tidbits of information, be it a famous writer’s home, an iconic business or a long-gone community institution.

Coming this year are stories and photos on Jewish Montreal contributed by the public, to be shared electronically via an easy-to-use web tool and preserved.

“Much of the information that relates to Jewish life in Montreal has been passed down from generation to generation through photographs and storytelling,” he said. “But most of them have never been recorded and therefore are at risk of being lost forever.”

More recently, MJM has been emerging into the physical world. It has organized “pop-up” exhibitions: last year, a simulated 1930s clothing sweatshop and this year one on cantor/crooner Sammy Davis Jr. In summer, MJM’s student interns lead walking tours of the old Jewish neighbourhoods.

**JULIE GREENBAUM****Fighting cancer, one party at a time**

Five years ago, Julie Greenbaum was just 19 and living in Montreal when her mother died of ovarian cancer. Ten months after her mother’s death, still reeling from the loss, she and her family put on their first event at a local nightclub, to raise money for cancer research.

“It started naturally. I wanted to engage my generation, so I threw a party... it was a fun, interactive way to raise money for a good cause and have fun.”

That event for 350 people led to another, three times larger, and soon Greenbaum had a full-time non-profit organization on her hands, which was named **Fuck Cancer**.

“I really believe [the name] embodies the aggression and emotions that most people who’ve experienced the disease feel,” she said.

Meanwhile, in Vancouver, another Jewish woman, Yael Cohen Braun, had started an identically named charity, inspired by her mother’s bout with breast cancer. Braun’s charity was largely web-based and encouraged young people to learn more about early cancer detection and prevention and to discuss cancer screening with their own parents.

About a year ago, the two charities merged, combining the women’s formidable and complementary talents.

“It was pretty obvious that by joining forces we could achieve our goals more quickly,” said Greenbaum. “It was a no-brainer.”

In the last eight months, since the two charities merged, they have raised \$500,000 for cancer screening programs, some of it earmarked for people who cannot afford tests.

Just a few weeks ago, Greenbaum moved to Los Angeles, to further expand the scope of the charity. A fundraising event is being planned for May in the city.

“The goal is to continue making the greatest impact we possibly can.”

**SYDNEY WARSHAW and KATHERINE (Kat) ROMANOW****Using food to explore Jewish culture****Tweets****Follow****Canadian Jewish News** 7h

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The duo of Sydney Warsaw and Katherine (Kat) Romanow are dedicated foodies who run the Wandering Chew, a Montreal program started in late 2013, sponsored by Federation CJA's Generations Fund and the Jewish Community Foundation of Montreal.

They research Jewish cuisine in its international variety and the cultures that nourished it. Then they organize intimate "pop-up" dinners at different venues suited to the theme, cook the meal with the help of a professional chef, and invite other young adults to learn about different Jewish communities around the world through what they eat. The goal is to engage those who might otherwise not be attracted to community activities.

Warsaw, 25, comes from a long line of Jewish cooks. Her great-grandmother was one of the editor's of Canadian Hadassah-WIZO's (CHW) classic cookbook *A Treasure for My Daughter*. A McGill University graduate in cultural studies and music history, she is currently studying law. She was previously social action co-ordinator in the federation's outreach and engagement department.



Romanow, 30, describes herself as a scholar of Jewish food. Her Judaic studies master's thesis at Concordia University was on the post-Passover Mimouna tradition among Montreal's Sephardim.

Iraqi, Mexican, U.S. Southern and, most recently, Scandinavian Jewish cooking have been featured at the dinners. The pair also teamed up with CHW to hold a Shavuot dinner last year, coinciding with the 14th printing of *A Treasure*, using recipes from that cookbook.

"We care about Jewish food, the culture that surrounds it, and its preservation and modernization," said Romanow. "Montreal has a diversity of Jewish communities whose food and culture deserve to be recognized."

## SARAH LAZAROVIC

### Tackling the news unconventionally

Sarah Lazarovic's portfolio is so diverse that even she has a hard time explaining to people what she does for a living.

"I don't have a single focus... This year I'm considered a journalist, maybe next year an artist. I consider myself an artist/journalist. I do a bit of everything... I kind of let the projects guide what I'm going to be defined as," said Lazarovic, a 35-year-old Montreal-born, Florida-raised illustrator, writer and filmmaker who moved to Toronto in 2003.

"I think most people think of me as a comics person. It's kind of what I'm known for."

As a "visual journalist," Lazarovic won an Ontario Newspaper Award for a sketch diary piece for *Maclean's* about then Toronto mayor Rob Ford's speech to the Economic Club of Canada.

"I try to tackle the news in an unconventional way," she said.

Having published a graphic essay late last year titled *A Bunch of Pretty Things I Did Not Buy*, Lazarovic is busy writing a proposal for her next book while doing a journalism fellowship at the University of Toronto.

"My first book was getting people to think about why they buy what they buy and how they can buy a little bit less, so my next book is building upon that and how to be a little bit more active, an active citizen," Lazarovic said.

"My next book will still be illustrated and funny but it will have a little... more girth when it comes to putting these ideas into practice when it comes to consuming less."



## DANNY RICHMOND

### Helping young people pursue social justice

Danny Richmond, 29, wants to ensure that young Jews interested in effecting positive change in the world are equipped with the appropriate tools, be it through education or direct opportunities to take action.

The Toronto native has spent over a decade working in youth leadership, community mobilization and international development.

At 24, he was one of 30 young leaders from across North America and the United Kingdom to be a fellow at the Tony Blair Faith Foundation, and through the program he worked to build interfaith co-operation in Toronto and develop a national campaign for malaria prevention.

Two years ago, Richmond brought his passion for social justice to the Jewish charity Ve'ahvata, where he



founded a department of youth leadership and became its director. In this role, he helps facilitate a range of programs designed to engage young Jews in community-building and global citizenship. The department is currently developing workshops directed at Jewish day schools, youth and bar/bat mitzvah groups, which will address issues of poverty, social inclusion and homelessness.

It's also working to integrate aboriginal history and education into Jewish day school curricula.



"I think a lot of our Jewish institutions have spent time building a strong community," Richmond said, "but it can sometimes seem like we only interact with the wider world when we feel threatened...We'll talk about poverty, but it'll only be Jewish poverty."

"I'd rather see a discussion around poverty in general being a Jewish issue, whether or not the poor people are Jewish...We need to widen our circle of responsibility."

## RACHEL ROSENBLUTH

### 'Neo-Chassid' seeks to make prayer joyful

Toronto-born Rachel Rosenbluth, says a challenge facing many young Jews today is finding ways of being Jewish that feel meaningful, relevant and spiritual.

"I think for a lot of us, Judaism is about culture or amazing traditions or family, but we end up turning to yoga, meditation or Buddhism for spirituality, for living lives more joyful and meaningful," the 25-year-old aspiring rabbi and self-described "neo-Chassid," said.

"For many of us, Judaism has a ton to offer, but we don't realize it."

Rosenbluth, who is currently studying at a yeshiva in Jerusalem and working towards getting smichah, is intent on sharing with others the elements of ecstatic prayer, mindfulness and contemplation, which she says are rooted in chassidic tradition, and the ways these can integrate into a "modern, progressive lifestyle."



A passion for farming and sustainable agriculture led her to serve, previously, as director of education at the Toronto non-profit Shoresh Jewish Environmental programs.

Currently splitting her time between Toronto and Israel, Rosenbluth has co-founded a beachside Tel Aviv minyan that includes dancing, singing and the option of traditional davening or seaside meditation.

Last year, she ran alternative Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services at Toronto's Beth Tzedec Congregation, in which she weaved textual study and meditation. "I see the chagim as tools for mindfulness," she explained, "for guiding us to be more self-aware and compassionate."

Rosenbluth's ultimate goal is to establish a centre for Jewish spirituality that leads "joyous, spirited Shabbatot, meditation, mindfulness... that sees Judaism as a path to stepping outside our egos and expanding consciousness."

## JOSH DOLGIN

### Performer fuses musical genres

Joshua Dolgin, also known by his stage name, Socalled, is tired of being asked whether he considers himself part of the Jewish community.

"[The assertion that I'm not], came from an interview I gave once, and the quote was totally taken out of context," the 38-year-old, Montreal-based rapper, singer, record producer and multi-disciplinary artist said.

Known for fusing hip-hop, klezmer and genres ranging from classical to folk, Dolgin has released five albums, is the subject of a National Film Board of Canada feature documentary and has collaborated with artists from an eclectic range of backgrounds and styles.

"I'm not religious or affiliated with a particular synagogue," Dolgin clarified. "But if you look at my career, I'm constantly performing in every Jewish music festival around the world, I've collaborated with Jewish artists, made Jewish-themed records."

He fell in love with hip hop in high school, he said, but "happened upon" klezmer 10 years later, while rummaging through old records at the Salvation Army. "I started to find all this Yiddish theatre music, cantorial music... this culture that was lost and forgotten," he said.

Dolgin stressed the Jewish community is too heterogeneous to paint with one brush, and that he's unable to answer the oft-posed query, What do Jews think of you? "If I play an instrumental Yiddish beat with someone rapping on top of it," he said, "maybe a traditional Jew from Poland won't like it, but they might when I sing a



traditional song by a Yiddish folk singer... It's all about the audience, the platform."

## JODY SPIEGEL

### Helping Holocaust survivors tell their stories

Looking back on her career choices, Jody Spiegel knows she could have been in the world of corporate law, billing big numbers and doing well.

But it's likely none of her clients would have crocheted a baby blanket for her when she had her first child.

When you work with Holocaust survivors, helping them get their stories out to the public, you strike up personal relationships. That's what happened with Rachel Shtibel, who was so excited about Spiegel's pregnancy that she made a little welcome-to-the-world gift for her.



Those are the kinds of connections that make her job as director of the Azrieli Foundation's Holocaust Survivor Memoirs Program particularly worthwhile.

The program takes survivors' memoirs and turns them into books for schools, libraries, and for sale commercially as first-hand accounts of the Holocaust.

So far, the foundation has published 51 books in French and English. This year's *As the Lilacs Bloomed*, is a memoir written in 1945 by Anna Molnar Hegedus, a Hungarian Holocaust survivor whose story had stayed within the family until recently. Hegedus wrote the memoir while waiting for the return of her daughter from a wartime death march.

Becoming a mother helped make survivors' stories into something she could better relate to, Spiegel, 36, said. Stories of mothers turning over their small children to the care of strangers in hopes for their survival touch her deeply.

Helping survivors tell their stories has given her own life more meaning. Working for the Azrieli Foundation and not for a big law firm was the best decision she made, Spiegel said.

"I wanted to help people whose voices were not being heard."

## MITCHEL MARCUS

### Love of theatre dates to his youth

It didn't take long for the acting bug to hit Mitchell Marcus. He was only five when he dragooned his nanny to sit as his audience for a show he put on in the family basement. His younger sister, Dara, handled the lighting.

Not long after, his parents had an extra ticket to the *Buddy Holly Story*, a Broadway extravaganza. Young Mitchell was available and the performance – the spectacle, the acting, the music – stirred feelings of wonder. He was hooked.

Today, Marcus is 32, and his passion for the theatre continues unabated, though he no longer treads the boards.

Marcus is the founding artistic director of Acting Up Stage Company, a not for profit outfit that focuses on "entertaining and poignant contemporary musicals."

Since 2004, Acting Up shows have attracted 37 Dora Mavor Moore Award nominations, eight Toronto Theatre Critics' Awards and seven Dora Mavor Moore Awards.



The company's greatest success came in 2012 when it staged *Caroline, or Change*. The plot involved a black maid working for a Jewish family in 1963 and included themes of family, work and current events, and it uses the kind of intelligent writing that Marcus relishes.

Audiences appreciate shows that are "meaningful, thought-provoking storytelling about relationships," he said.

Next up on Acting Up's agenda is *Ballad of the Burning Star*, an autobiographical show written by Israeli Nir Palvi.

The show is based on Palvi's personal interactions with Palestinians. It's a "crazy cabaret," Marcus said. "Without giving answers, it looks at his internal conflict, from being persecuted to being a persecutor."

Thought-provoking indeed.

## HANNAH ALPER

### 12-year-old is a veteran blogger and activist

"Hi, I'm Hannah, welcome to my blog!

"I'm nine years old and just finished Grade 3! I launched this blog at the Digital Family Summit in July 2012."

Whoa! Stop right there.

A nine-year-old running a blog, speaking at the Digital Family Summit. What gives? She goes on: "I am passionate about the environment, and I was in a eco club in school. I also have interests in dogs, technology, I'm a big baseball fan! My favourite kind of music is pop. I have been to a lot of concerts!"



"Passionate" is a word that comes up frequently in a conversation with Hannah Alper, who is now 12 and in Grade 6. You can practically hear the exclamation marks as she describes her latest projects.

For a 12-year-old, she's done a lot interesting things and met a lot of fascinating people. She's met Martin Luther King III, son of the legendary civil rights advocate, and Martin Sheen, the actor who played the president on *The West Wing*, and she's talked with Oscar-winning actress Marlee Matlin – "she was really, really nice."

Alper started her blog, [callmehannah.ca](http://callmehannah.ca), to raise concerns about the environment and the effects of environmental degradation on wildlife.

Since launching the blog, she's branched out into other areas that motivate her – anti-bullying, Earth Day, clean water, children's rights.

One of her most satisfying ventures in the world of public advocacy was her participation in the We Create Change Tour, part of Free the Children initiative, which aimed to celebrate the way Canadian youths are helping their contemporaries around the world.

Alper has become something of a celebrity among young people. She's not shy to tell them that you, too, can make a difference.

## NEIL CLOSNER

### Medical marijuana business is growing

Neil Closner has run a lot of businesses, but his current role as CEO of MedReleaf is the most satisfying.

Not only is the licensed cannabis producer doing well financially, he also provides a product that has helped his mother cope with a chronic autoimmune disease.

Thanks to the marijuana she now ingests, she's able to get a good night's sleep for the first time in 10 years, and it has alleviated her pain to a great extent, Closner said.

In only a year and a half, MedReleaf has grown quickly. From three people, it now employs 80, and it's "the largest supplier of cannabis in Canada," Closner said.

MedReleaf is a privately held company and Closner is a minority shareholder, in addition to his role as CEO. He won't reveal the partners, but said one is Tikun Olam, an Israeli company in the medical marijuana business.



"They provide us with a lot of the intellectual property and we grow some of their genetic material," Closner said.

A native of Toronto, Closner, 41, began his business career on Wall Street in investment banking and venture capital. He's been CEO of several startups in Miami and Toronto in the technology and health-care fields.

He has served as vice-president of business development at Mount Sinai Hospital and he's a member of the board of directors of Technion Canada.

Despite success elsewhere, Toronto beckoned. Running a business like MedReleaf seemed like a good fit for someone with an interest in business and health care, who was close to his ailing mother.

"I thought it had the potential to help her," he said.

## RABBI AARON LEVY

### Serving Toronto's downtown community

When Rabbi Aaron Levy founded Makom: Creative Downtown Judaism to meet the needs of Toronto's growing Jewish community, he said he had no idea what it would become.

But today, the 39-year-old Maryland native who lives just outside of Kensington Market with his wife and two boys, said he's thrilled that Makom "has grown tremendously."

Makom, founded in 2009, is a grassroots community that works to build Jewish life in Toronto and create an "inclusive and diverse space, committed to Jewish learning, arts and culture, spirited prayer and ritual, and social and environmental activism." Services are held at the historic Kiever shul in Kensington Market.



Rabbi Levy, an educator on a variety of topics including

environmentalism, spirituality, pluralism, social justice and even percussion, said the programming is geared toward people of all ages, all denominations and orientations.

"One of the things that has enabled Makom to reach such a wide spectrum of Jews is the diversity of our programming, and especially in the past year or so, we've really amped up our programming for families with children," he said.

"We're into our fourth year of running our five-day-a-week, after-school Hebrew immersion and pluralistic Jewish learning program called Downtown Jewish Playschool."

There are two locations – one at College Street and Spadina Avenue, another near Bathurst Street and Davenport Road – and there are plans to open a third location next year in the Annex.

"I'm excited for the ever-increasing vibrancy of downtown Jewish life and I'm thrilled that Makom is very much a part of that and I'd like to see that keep growing," Rabbi Levy said.

## DALIA KRUSNER

### An advocate for youth leading youth

At 24, Dalia Krusner, executive director of Heart to Heart, a program that aims to address the divide between Israeli Jews and Palestinians, understands the value of youth leadership.

"I am a big advocate of youth leading youth, youth leadership and the power of youth," said Krusner, who also works at Ve'ahavta as its youth leadership manager.

"I've had a lot of experience with Israel and Palestine in many different ways. It is something I've studied in school and I've lived in Israel for various short periods of my life... This is one of the only things I've experienced that has given me hope and some idea of how to move forward."

Founded in 2011, Heart to Heart is a program born out of a partnership between Hashomer Hatzair/Camp Shomria in Canada and the Givat Haviva Education Foundation in Israel, an Israeli non-profit organization dedicated to promoting equality, and co-operation among Israelis.

Each summer, a group of 20 14-year-old Israelis – half of whom are Jewish and half of whom are Palestinian – fly to Canada and spends about three weeks together at Camp Shomria in Perth, Ont.

Krusner grew up in Toronto and was involved with Camp Shomria and Hashomer Hatzair, which she said was a big influence on her Jewish identity.



She was deeply influenced as a former Camp Shomria camper, and said one of the most rewarding parts of her work with Heart to Heart is seeing how quickly the campers grow.

"Seeing that massive transformation and how they treat each other and how they interact with the world in just three weeks [is rewarding]," she said.



**AARON ROTENBERG****Approaching Judaism with interntion**

Aaron Rotenberg believes there's merit to stepping out of one's comfort zone, and that Judaism can be approached through a variety of lenses, including art, sustainability and social justice.

The Thornhill native, 28, is one of five friends who came together in November 2013 to found The Orchard, an intentional Jewish home in downtown Toronto.

It's an undertaking that Rotenberg, who's doing a master's in film production at York University, said he conceives of as "an experiment in pluralism and diversity."

Driven by a desire to foster a strong, inclusive downtown Jewish community, the house members come from a range of Jewish backgrounds, and Rotenberg said they're constantly engaged in conversation about how they want to live as a house, but also, how to "have influence that radiates outwards, serve as a model and bring other people in."

Currently, The Orchard hosts a monthly Shabbat service and dinner and holds events on some Jewish holidays, like a ninth of Adar session on constructive conflict, a Purim party and an annual Chanukah party, replete with live klezmer and a Jewish henna ceremony.

They're also planning an art beit midrash program, to explore the intersection between Judaism and artistic practice.

"It feels like there's a mix of people who come to our events, those who lean on the more religious end, those who lean on the more secular end and all the permutations in between," Rotenberg said.

"There's so many different ways to engage in Judaism...I think that's part of what we're trying to offer."

**Yael MACHTINGER****Taking an academic approach to agunot**

Yael Machtinger, 28, wants to enlighten Toronto's Jewish community and tell them that, even in 2015, there are women who are chained to their husbands (agunot) and who do not have a religious divorce (*get*).

"*Get* refusal is the ultimate form of domestic abuse," the PhD candidate in socio-legal studies at York University said. "In interviewing dozens of women [who are agunot], there isn't one woman who hasn't suffered some other form of abuse in her marriage."

Machtinger has become an expert on the controversial area of agunot, speaking about the problem at both academic and community events.

Her thesis compares the situations in Toronto and New York and finds that women in New York generally fare better in the religious court, which has endorsed prenuptial agreements, while the Toronto beit din has not.



Machtinger, who grew up in Toronto, fell into the study of agunot by chance when she studied the marriage laws of different religions, in a class on legal pluralism.

What started as a "little term paper," grew to become a doctoral dissertation.

"It's become an explicit goal [of mine] to put the stories of women at the centre of academic analysis," she said.

In her fifth (and "hopefully final") year of her PhD, Machtinger hopes her work will be published as a book or a series of scholarly articles and that she lands a job as a professor.

"Every time I try to move on, it pulls me back. This is an issue I'm totally passionate about."

**MAHARAT RACHEL KOHL FINEGOLD****Carving out a new role for women**

Maharat Rachel Kohl Finegold, 34, a member of the clergy at Congregation Shaar Hashomayim in Montreal, was one of the first three graduates of a new modern Orthodox yeshiva that ordains women.

The Brooklyn, N.Y., native was appointed director of education and spiritual enrichment at the Shaar, a congregation of more than 1,400 families, in August 2013, two months after completing the four-year program at Yeshivat Maharat in the Bronx, N.Y., founded by Rabbi Avi Weiss.

The ordination of women, even at a level beneath the rabbinate, has been controversial in the Orthodox movement, including its liberal wing. (Maharat is a Hebrew acronym denoting a female leader in Torah,

spirituality and religious law.)

Maharat Kohl Finegold downplays any trailblazing role and insists the duties entrusted to a maharat are in keeping with Halachah.

"I'm not really changing anything," she said, "it just looks different. There may have been skeptics at the beginning, but people see that I am deeply Orthodox...and not trying to make a statement or waves, or be the token woman."

She is qualified to determine halachic issues, teach Torah, officiate at life-cycle events, and provide spiritual and pastoral counselling.

She prefers to be addressed simply as Maharat Rachel (pronounced the Hebrew way).

Most of her work at the Shaar has been spent in education, including overseeing the synagogue's supplemental schools, developing programming for youth, and engaging with young families.

Maharat Kohl Finegold was previously education and ritual director at Chicago's Anshe Sholom B'nai Israel Congregation.

She and husband, Rabbi Avi Finegold, a Montrealer, have three young children.



## YEHUDA AZOULAY Preserving Sephardic culture

Yehuda Azoulay, founder of the Sephardic Legacy Series Institute, is on a mission to preserve and promote Sephardic culture and bring it to the mainstream Jewish community.

About a month shy of his 29th birthday, Azoulay, has been working since 2007 to bring information about Sephardic history and culture to the forefront.

By the time Azoulay was 20 years old, he had written his first book, *The Legacy of Leaders*, a biographical history of Sephardic rabbis. To date, he's written five books, with his most recent titled *Maran – The Life and Scholarship of Hacham Ovadia Yosef*, a biography about the late Baghdad-born rabbi.

"I think what motivates me is a combination of everything: family, what Sephardic Judaism could offer to the world. [The Sephardic voice] is lacking. People are always preached to by Chabad, there is so much reform within Conservative Judaism, and we don't often hear about Sephardic Judaism. It has a lot to offer simply because... it offers a balanced way of life," Azoulay said.

But writing books is not where it ends for Azoulay. Earlier this year, for the first time in Canadian history, an official delegation of 30 Sephardic community leaders, activists, philanthropists and spiritual leaders visited Parliament Hill and met with the prime minister, ambassadors and other dignitaries.



Looking forward, Azoulay said he plans to head back to Ottawa to meet with Defence Minister Jason Kenney to inquire about security grants for Sephardic community institutions, as well as obtain a PhD in Sephardic studies and continue to write books and lecture about his cultural heritage.

## ELI BATTALION Web comedy in the mamaloshen

Actors Eli Batalion and Jamie Elman finally found a practical use last year for the Yiddish they learned at Bialik High School in Montreal. They created and starred in *YidLife Crisis*, an irreverent web comedy series – in the mamaloshen.

Batalion, 35, and Elman, 38, play, respectively, the uptight Leizer and impish Chaimie, who tangle over the relevance of Judaism today while munching their way through treif in Mile End's eateries, starting with a famous poutine.

They pack a lot of humour and food for thought into the four 5- or 6-minute episodes, subtitled in English (and now French), which were released between Rosh Hashanah and Chanukah.

They believe they are expressing their generation's conflicts about their Jewish identity, and contributing to better understanding between Jews and other Quebecers.

They call *YidLife* their "love letter to Yiddish language, culture and comedy," which has influenced much of

modern American humour.

"We were trying to imagine what conversational Yiddish would be like today for secular Jews, if it had not been wiped out by the Holocaust," Elman said.

With *YidLife's* surprising success, the pair is now planning to film another similar series this summer.

Elman, who has lived in Los Angeles for 15 years, has had roles in such TV shows as *Student Bodies*, *American Dreams* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and in film, most recently, in the 2013 *Saving Lincoln*.



Batalion, who divides his time between Montreal and Toronto, is also a composer and has used his talents in his Montreal Fringe Festival show with Jerome Sable, *Job: The Hip-Hop Musical*, and in his feature-length horror/comedy musical movie *Stage Fright*, which came out last year.

## RISA ALYSON COOPER

### Judaism and environmentalism united

Environmentalism and Judaism intersect in many ways, and Risa Alyson Cooper, executive director of Shores Jewish Environmental Programs, a non-profit that works to respond to contemporary food and ecological issues, said her organization is a prime example of that.

"In the Torah, it says that HaShem finished creating the world and took Adam, the first human being and told him... to work the land and protect the land," Cooper said.

"And we definitely see the work we do at Shores as honouring that dual mitzvah of working the land – using it to provide our food – and protecting the land, growing everything organically and making sure that we are creating habitat spaces for native pollinators."

In the six years since Cooper founded Shores's Kavanah Garden, at the Joseph and Wolf Lebovic Jewish Community Campus in Vaughan, Ont., she's been working to expand its programming and reach.



In addition to offering educational and hands-on programs, workshops and events and producing more than 500 pounds of vegetables each season for community members in need, Shores has recently developed a rural centre at Bela Farm, a 100-acre farm in Hillsburgh, Ont., an hour northwest of Toronto.

Cooper, 33, has a master's in contemporary Jewish environmental ethics. She's excited about a new project that has Shores managing beehives to produce local, Jewish-grown honey.

She said they also hope to offer local, organic matzah, herbal teas, pickled products and organic horseradish for Pesach.

"We're also scaling up our food production, both at Kavanah and Bela. We're thinking about how we can affect the issue of hunger relief in a real and meaningful way," Cooper said.

## TAMARA KRAMER

### Journalist makes cool shtetl radio

For Montrealer Tamara Kramer, what started seven years ago as a goal to produce "one hour of cool radio, on a regular basis" has evolved into a personal exploration of what it means to be simultaneously Jewish and part of the greater world.

The 38-year-old journalist developed *Shtetl on the Shortwave*, a bi-weekly Jewish arts and culture radio program she produces and hosts, after a slot opened at Montreal community station CKUT for Jewish content of a "young, progressive, 'cool'" quality.

Kramer said the show and its accompanying online magazine broach the question: "How do you have all your identities fit together? For example, your social activism, love of music *and* being Jewish?"

Through the lens of art, culture and especially music, *Shtetl* examines everything from Jewish-Arab relations to the intersection between secular Jews and Chassidim, workers' rights to gender politics.

*Shtetl* aspires to a highly inclusive vision of Judaism, and Kramer's interview subjects are accordingly diverse, including non-Jews, Palestinians, rabbis, politicians, activists and people across the political spectrum.

By featuring viewpoints not often heard in mainstream Jewish spaces, Kramer hopes listeners access a broader sense of "what Jewish culture and community could be, and is.



"For many Jewish people I know, there's an alienation from Jewish life and culture," she said, "But especially from religion. There's this tendency to throw out the baby with the bathwater... But I also see this push to do meaningful, cool stuff around food, history, ecology – all these things young hipsters are into – but from a Jewish perspective."

## STEPHAN OUAKNINE

### Entrepreneur focuses on clean tech

Stephan Ouaknine is a risk-taker. Calculated risks to be sure and risks that offer handsome payoffs if they pan out, but risks nevertheless.

Or as he puts it, "I like to go toward a burning building while others are running away."

Ouaknine, a Montreal-based entrepreneur with an impressive record of launching successful telecom startups, is banking on continued technological innovation to bring down the costs for alternative energy sources.



Inerjys, the company he founded and manages, is developing and marketing technology solutions for clean and sustainable energy, such as wind, solar and "the next generation of hydro."

Given that governments around the world are cutting back on subsidies, there is more than a little risk involved in financing them. His solution to making sustainable energy pay? Invest in companies that reduce the cost of energy and in the projects where it will be applied.

Creating commercial opportunities is something Ouaknine has been doing since he was a kid.

"I was born with a feeling of entrepreneurship," he said. "I've always like to build things, since I was a kid – forts in the snow or Lego [structures]."

A graduate of McGill University, he moved to Israel and was part of "start-up nation," the name given to the country's entrepreneurial high-tech sector.

"I cut my teeth in Israel. It has the best combination of engineering talent and guts," he said.

Israeli entrepreneurs challenge the status quo and believe they can do things better than others around the world, he said.

Ouaknine uses those skills to develop technological solutions to energy demands. It's a bit risky, he acknowledged, "but there is no zero risk. We've created a vehicle that takes just the right amount of risk, but mitigates it."

## JASON ROSENBLATT

### Artist embraces diversity in Jewish music

One of Jason Rosenblatt's claims to fame is his virtuosity on the diatonic harmonica. He can coax music that ranges from klezmer to bluegrass to jazz out of this humble instrument.

But Rosenblatt, 41, is also an accomplished pianist, composer and producer, devoted to bringing Jewish music to a wide audience. He is an exponent of "the new Jewish music." Rosenblatt is the former artistic director of KlezKanada, the week-long summer camp in the Laurentians where hundreds from around the world annually converge to enjoy traditional and not-so-traditional eastern European Jewish music.

Rosenblatt, who divides his time between Montreal and Philadelphia, is a "graduate" of KlezKanada, a scholarship recipient in 1998. Four years later, he founded the band Shtreiml, of which he remains musical director. It is renowned for his original blues/rock-infused arrangements of klezmer music, with a dash of Turkish music. His wife Rachel Lemisch is the trombonist.



Shtreiml has played throughout North America and Europe. Rosenblatt also heads Jump Babylon, a newer band that has a rock/country vibe.

In 2010, Rosenblatt spearheaded the first Montreal Jewish Music Festival, now an annual event, with support from Federation CJA's Generations Fund, the Azrieli Foundation and others.

"I define Jewish music by a fairly narrow definition, but one that allows for a broad range of styles," he said. He considers language and lyrics, but especially the melody. "Even if the style is jazz, bluegrass, African beat or funk, at the core, all of this music has a melody that is Jewish."

Rosenblatt's goal is to present the diversity of Jewish music by leading artists at venues that will attract people of all origins and ages.

## SARA ANGEL

### The business of Nazi-looted art

By the time Sara Angel finishes her doctoral dissertation next year, she will have compiled a unique handbook on how to restitute Nazi-looted art.

Angel, 45, a journalist and art historian, became fascinated by the story of Max Stern, a Jewish art dealer whose art collection was sold at a forced auction in Dusseldorf, Germany, in 1937. About a dozen works of art have been recovered by his estate.

Stern was interned when he arrived in Canada in 1940, but he became a renowned dealer in Montreal, representing Emily Carr among other artists.

Angel was working on a different topic for her PhD, but she wrote a magazine article on Stern and the project to restitute his collection. She changed her topic midstream to examine the problems of Nazi-looted art.

"I'm using the Max Stern Restitution Project as a case study in order to look at how different countries are looking at restituting art," she said. "Every country has a different way of dealing with it. There has not yet been created one standardized, global policy."

In some cases, artwork has been returned to heirs because of moral suasion, in other cases there has been considerable litigation, she says.

As the founding director of the Art Canada Institute, an organization based at University of Toronto's Massey College, dedicated to the promotion of Canadian art history, she also wants to raise awareness about Stern.

"Max Stern was an amazing Jewish-Canadian hero. His legacy will have an impact on restitution studies around the world."



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