

“Nights of Broken Glass” in Pensacola, Florida

A discussion with Jerry Gordon and Zelda Young of CHIN Radio.



Brick thrown at Pensacola Jewish Chabad Center, July 17, 2023

by Jerry Gordon

This is an expansion of a discussion on August 6, 2023 with host [Zelda Young](#) of CHIN Radio, 91.9 FM in Toronto, Canada following the arrest of teen age boys who engaged in a campaign of anti-Semitic graffiti and vandalism in the Northwest Florida city of Pensacola where Senior Editor Jerry Gordon resides.

Zelda Young: Jerry Gordon, a Senior Editor of *The New English Review* is joining us. Jerry will talk about outbreak of antisemitic vandalism incidents in Pensacola, investigation of white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups in Florida and growth of problematic teen-age social media influences in the United States. What were the Pensacola anti-Semitic incident incidents?

Jerry Gordon: Over the three weeks from July 15th until the apprehension of four teenage boys on August 4th, we had eight incidents of anti-Semitic graffiti, white supremacist propaganda, and two incidents in which bricks were thrown breaking windows of two Jewish houses of worship. One was the Chabad Jewish Center here in Pensacola, and the other was Reform Temple Beth El, the first Jewish house of worship in the entire state of Florida, established back in 1876. Anti-Semitic graffiti were found on an Amtrak Station, on the wall of the East Hill Animal Hospital near the Pensacola Jewish Chabad Center, on an underpass sign on the Gregory Street Interstate I-110 connector, a home in downtown Pensacola on July 31st, the Al-Islam Dawah Center Mosque on August 2nd and Pensacola Liberation Center on August 3rd.

This outbreak of anti-Semitic vandalism is an example of how impressionable juveniles in the US are heavily influenced by hatred emanating from white supremacist, neo-Nazi and anti-Semitic groups using social media.

On August 4, 2023, Pensacola Police [arrested](#) and charged 17-year-old Waylon Fowler, 15-year-old Wyatt Fowler, and brothers 16-year-old Nicholas Ferry and 18-year-old Kessler Ferry were charged with felony criminal mischief enhanced to a hate crime. Three will be tried as adults, one as a juvenile. They came from what we would term good families. The parents of the Ferry brothers are prominent local attorneys in this community very active in local charitable activities, members of a local yacht club with Jewish members and active in their

church. One wonders how these boys could have pulled this off without alerting their parents.

What occurred in this northwest Florida community on the Emerald Coast of the Gulf of Mexico seems eerily familiar to Jews: Kristallnacht – the “night of broken glass” pogrom by NAZI SA troops in pre-WWII Nazi Germany “named after the smashed glass that covered streets from the windows of shops and synagogues that had been looted and vandalized during the attacks’ that witnessed 91 killed, 269 synagogues burned and 30,000 Jewish incarcerated. To many historians it was “the prelude to the Holocaust.”

Zelda Young: Could you give us the context of the Jewish Community in Pensacola.

Jerry Gordon: This anti-Semitic vandalism outbreak disturbed the traditional quiet and acceptability of Jews in this community. Pensacola is a city of approximately 54,00 in population. Rough estimates on the size of the Jewish community is less than 2,000. This is the first instance to my knowledge, living here 16 years, that we experienced these hateful events.

Zelda Young: So, what happened and what is happening currently?

Jerry Gordon: The first notable incident that [occurred](#) on Monday evening, July 17th when at 8:15 pm a brick came hurtling through the kitchen window of the Chabad Jewish Center in Pensacola while two visiting Chabad rabbis were preparing a meal. Fortunately, for four young children of Chabad Jewish Center Rabbi Mendel and Rebbetzin Nechama Danow were not in the kitchen. The brick was painted with Nazi Swastikas, “No Jews” letters WLM- symbolic of white lives matter slogans and the numbers 14 and 88. The four numbers stood for the 14 words of the white supremacist doctrine, while 88 was a reference to the eight letter of the alphabet

“H” a stand in for the Nazi salute “Heil Hitler”.

On Erev Shabbat, Friday 21st of July following the first incident the Jewish Community rallied. There were close to a hundred people at the Pensacola Chabad that night to show solidarity within the Jewish community in “Light up Pensacola, a Shabbat of Light.” My rabbi David Cohen-Henriquez spiritual leader at B’nai Israel Synagogue – the third oldest Jewish house of worship found in Florida in 1899 – canceled services encouraging members to attend services at the Chabad Jewish Center.

Then on July 28th, two similar bricks were discovered after being thrown shattering bathroom windows at Temple Beth El. The Community’s Mayor, Police Chief and non-Jewish religious leaders rallied in support of both the Chabad Center and Temple Beth El.



Rabbi Mendel Danow, Pensacola Chabad Jewish Center, July 21.2023

“Combat Hate with Light and Kindness”

Rabbi Danow at the Chabad Jewish Center chose to focus

attention on kindness extended to others in the community and using it as a fundraising campaign for the construction of a new larger center and mikvah – Jewish ritual bath- here in Pensacola. He was quoted in a *Pensacola News Journal* [article](#) on July 21, 2023 saying: “You’re trying to silence us, you’re trying to make us scared – we’re going to do exactly the opposite. We’re going to enlarge our activities in town and expand them, reach more people, and bring kindness and more positivity to Pensacola.”



Temple Beth El, Pensacola, Florida

Temple Beth El spiritual leader, Rabbi Joel Fleekop [reacted](#) after notification of the incident to the Pensacola police in a statement to *Pensacola News Journal* on July 28th. “Temple Beth El appreciates the support and concern of the greater Pensacola Community. We are committed to working with our neighbors of all faiths and backgrounds to build an ever more tolerant and welcoming community. That afternoon he had previously arranged to for his congregation to join him in a tour of an exhibit at the Pensacola Mess Hall exhibit “The Bias Inside us” covering the science and history of bias before an evening shabbat service.



Rabbi Joel Fleekop of Temple Beth El on Left with Rabbi David Henriquez-Cohen

B'nai Israel Synagogue, Hannukah, 2022, Pensacola, Florida

In his remarks he noted the relevance of the exhibit to what had just occurred in Pensacola;" it was intended to help us recognize some unseen biases to strive to be ever more just and fair people. That is what we must continue to do." The irony of the attack was it fell on the Shabbat of comfort Shabbat Nachamu that follows Tish B'Av- commemorating the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem and calamities that have befallen Jews over the past two millennia to this day.

As a measure of the comfort by local religious clergy in Pensacola Rabbi Fleekop noted the concerns of Father Joe Callipare – a resident of my condominium- who delivered a text of solidarity prior to the service: "the words of Father Joe are not alone there are others from across the faith communities and other backgrounds that have reached out."



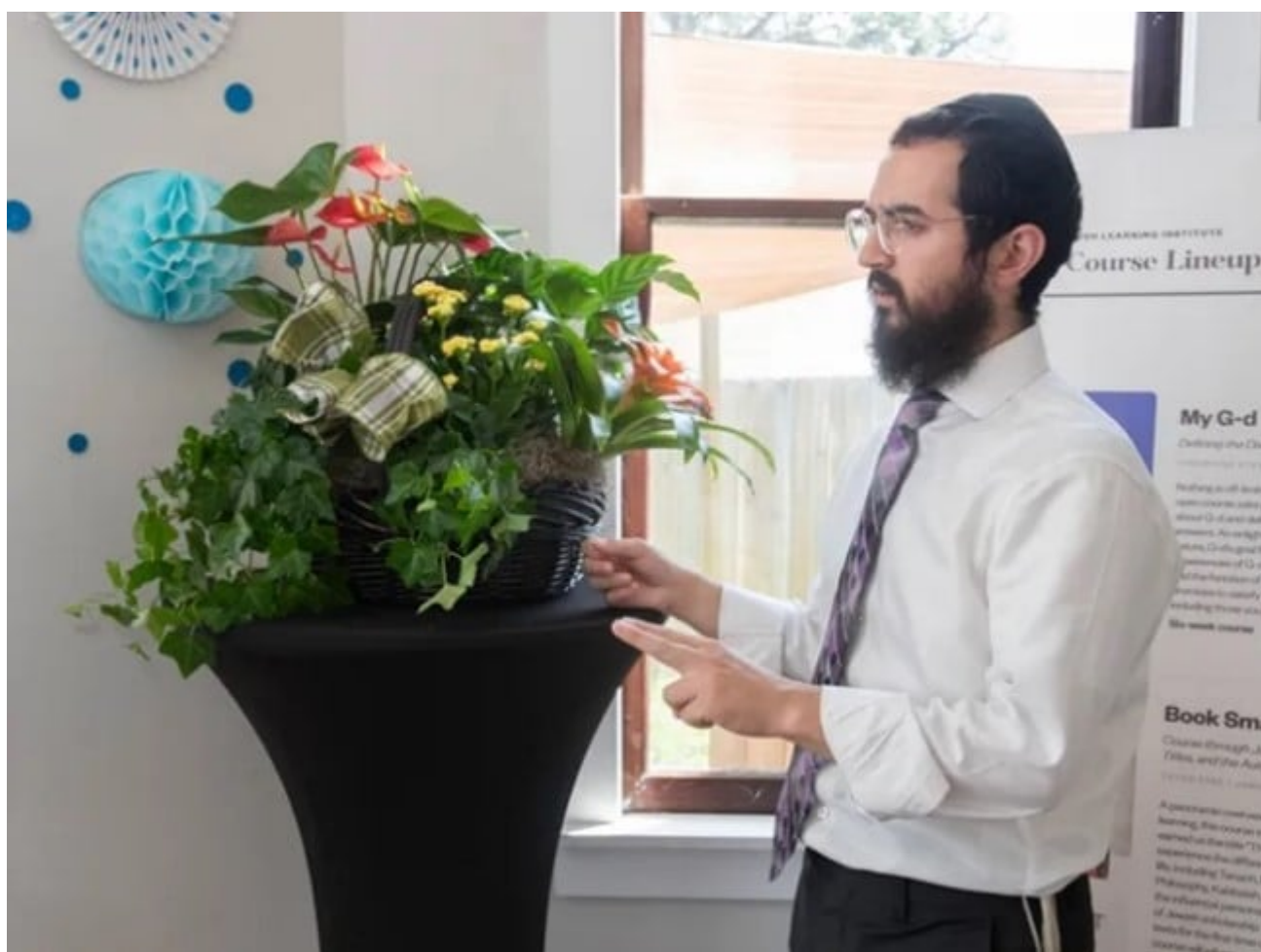
Deshawn McKenzie, Director of Pensacola Liberation Center

On August 2nd, another neo-Nazi anti-Semitic graffiti attack occurred at the leftist Pensacola Liberation Center (PLC) emblazoned with Nazi Swastikas, white supremacist and Hitler codes. The PLC had experienced a similar jarring attack on International Women's Day on March 1st when four masked individuals showed up with State of Florida flags, distributed anti-LGBT propaganda, made Heil Hitler Nazi salutes and tried to seize the PLC sound equipment. Deshawn McKenzie of the PLC noted the spray painting of anti-Semitic symbols emblazoned across its building and told the Pensacola News Journal: "We stand in solidarity with the Jewish Community Center and Muslim Community Center. We stand against antisemitism." On August 3, anti-Semitic graffiti was found spray painted across the door of the Al-Islam-Dawah Mosque in Pensacola.

Finally, after intense police investigations, the four teens were caught and arrested on August 4th. Pensacola Police Chief Eric Randall noted in a news release: "The extra hard work of investigators and many others in the Pensacola Police Department paid off today. We hope that these arrests can

bring comfort and closure not only to those in our Jewish community, but to all citizens of this great city.” Mayor D.C. Reeves added: “we will not tolerate hate crimes in the City of Pensacola.”

Pensacola police had been tracking this group of the four Pensacola teens who committed these acts of anti-Semitic, white supremacist vandalism. They were caught by early morning surveillance patrols that caught the four in the process of making another graffiti attack.



Rabbi Mendel Danow, Pensacola Jewish Chabad Center receives bouquet from grandmother of Waylan Fowler

What occurred here in northwest Florida illustrated the rising penetration of extremism among impressionable youth. Rabbi Danow, who heads the Pensacola Chabad Jewish Center said, the Jewish community was relieved by the quick action of the local police department and mayor who rallied general community

concern.

He was cited in a *USA Today – Network Florida* on August 21, 2023 [saying](#) “Thank God the community has come together in a very strong way. We’ve gotten a lot of support from so many individuals around town – even beyond Florida and across the country. One irony was a visit on August 15th by the maternal grandmother of two of the teen perpetrators bearing a bouquet of flowers. Danow noted: “she came and wanted to express that this is something that she didn’t educate her children on, it’s not something they learned at home. It was very kind on her part to come, show face to bring a beautiful bouquet and letter apologizing for what happened.”

None the less, the anti-Semitic, white supremacist graffiti and violent acts of these teens arrested and arraigned for prosecution of hate crimes were influenced by something more pernicious and not easily stifled given access to hateful social media.



“Thank you, Sheriff Chitwood, for standing against antisemitism.” Counter demonstrators at Ormand Beach neo-Nazi

rally, Florida April 23, 2023

Why does Florida have this menacing anti-Semitic problem and who is fighting back?

Unfortunately, Florida has become a magnet state for virulent white supremacists and anti-Semites. One example of that was moving the headquarters of the anti-Semitic group Goyim Defense League from California to Florida. An ADL [report](#) on extremism in Florida noted the rise of white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups such as White Lives Matter, Sunshine State Nationalists, National Socialism (NatSoc) Florida. Further it noted there have been over 400 incidents of distribution of hate materials by these groups during the past two years in Florida.

- There were anti-Semitic incidents in February and March in Daytona Beach, Ormond Beach, and in South Orlando on the Peninsula in Florida.
- Someone in Florida who is fighting the GDL is Sheriff Mike Chitwood of Volusia County, a tough transplant from New Jersey. A *Times of Israel* [report](#) tag line noted: "Mike Chitwood says he's coming after the Goyim Defense League, one of the most prominent antisemitic organizations in the US, after its leaders moved to his area". It noted:

After hate groups in his US county on Florida's East Coast [projected antisemitic messages](#) onto the Daytona International Speedway, the local sheriff delivered a press conference with one simple message: He'd had enough.

"We put up their photos, talked about their arrest records, and let everybody know what a bunch of reprehensible thugs were in our community, and what they were up to," Sheriff Mike Chitwood told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency about the February press conference. Standing with local Jewish, interfaith and

minority group representatives, the sheriff had announced he would be coming after the “scumbags” who did this.

“And after that,” he recalled, “all hell broke loose.

Online after the press conference, several men started making death threats against Chitwood, even harassing his daughter and sending SWAT teams to his parents’ house. Antisemitic groups began planning to hold a public demonstration to oppose him specifically, which Chitwood’s intelligence determined was set for this past weekend in Ormond Beach.

So Chitwood fought back. Thanks in part to his corralling, three men in three different states – California, Connecticut and New Jersey – were arrested and charged with making online death threats against him. Two of the three have already been extradited to Volusia County.

The *TOI* report noted Chitwood’s role in a law passed to combat the GDL:

In late April that these GDL anti-Semitic incidents occurred in Florida, Governor DeSantis, Ron DeSantis, [signed the bill into law during a ceremony in Jerusalem](#) after Randy Fine, the Jewish Republican state representative who authored it, delivered it to him there. The law was written specifically to address the kinds of activities the Goyim Defense League regularly engages in, including the Daytona message that spurred Chitwood to address the problem head-on, and enjoyed unanimous support from legislators of both parties.

“I guess we need to thank our scumbag Neo-Nazi invaders for uniting our community and the entire state of Florida against hate,” Chitwood tweeted after the signing.

“I see it as another tool in the toolbox,” Chitwood told JTA about his support of the bill. “You go onto private property and drop these leaflets on somebody’s doorstep or in their driveway, that’s now a felony trespass.”

On June 7, 2023 outspoken Sheriff Mike Chitwood of Volusia County was sued by an anti-Semitic Group for \$100,000 for mentioning their name. As [reported](#) by WFTV 9 Chitwood responded in a Tweet:

He sent the group a pacifier with a message: "Mike Chitwood hurt my feelings."

The troubling role of social media in fostering teen-age anti-Semitic hate.

What is troubling is how anti-Semitic "pied pipers" are using social media to poison the impressionable minds of teens like those in Pensacola to commit criminal anti-Semitic acts.

As illustrated by the Pensacola case, we are going to see more of this occur among targeted impressionable youth across the United States and Canada.

For answers to the question of why teenaged boys from good families in Pensacola would conduct a perverse campaign of anti-Semitic hate, a recent [Algemeiner](#) interview with Imran Ahmed, the CEO of the Center for Countering Digital Hate presented some disturbing, yet plausible answers as to why social media is the "pied piper" of hate, and in particular, anti-Semitism.

Between [the ages of] 14 and 24, that's this incredibly *Lord of the Flies* period in our development where we're being socialized by peers. Social media [tries] to tell us what our peers feel, but actually what they're doing is giving a megaphone to hate and lies. The more that those lies are able to spread without consequences and pushback, the more these ideas become lethal.

Note these findings from CCDH – sponsored poll of 1000 American adults and 1000 youths aged 13-17 conducted in March 2023:

[49 percent of Americans](#) agree with at least four statements that promote common conspiracy theories related to white supremacy, antisemitism, vaccines and climate change.

Belief in conspiracy theories was even more common among 13–17-year-olds (60 percent), and higher among teenagers who are “heavy social media users” (69 percent) – meaning that they spend four or more hours a day on any single social media platform.

43 percent of teens agreed with the statement, “Jewish people have a disproportionate amount of control over the media, politics, and the economy.” The number rose to 54 percent among teens who are heavy social media users.

68 percent of adults and 83 percent of 13-17-year-olds acknowledge that harmful content online has consequences in the real world – like antisemitic terrorist attacks.

74 percent agree that safety should be a core principle in products created by social media platforms.

The culprits among social media platforms conveying this hate are *Tik Tok*, *YouTube* and *Instagram*. According to CCDH CEO Ahmed:

These platforms “normalize antisemitic ideas and hate among billions of people,” noting those most affected are people who are vulnerable and spend the most time on these platforms. “They have the least resistance because they know less – kids know less than adults.”

In May 2022, CCDH held a summit in Washington DC and presented a regulatory model for social media after consultations with legislators in US, UK, Australia, New Zealand and the EU. Called STAR, the model’s goal is to create requirements that would have social media giants still maintain freedom of speech while also ensuring that their companies face consequences and economic penalties for allowing harmful

content to flourish online.

What are local Jewish worship centers doing to protect themselves in Florida.

In the small Jewish community in Northwest Florida, we have seen great support from the general community and most of the local mainline and most significantly from pro-Israel evangelical churches. The sentiment is that we have to rally together as a community endeavoring to provide programs to prevent that this does not happen again.

For Jewish and other houses of worship, such as my own synagogue, we have applied for and secured FEMA grants from the State of Florida to improve the physical security for our congregations and facilities, as well as training by law enforcement specialists on dealing with possible intruders. We have also had active shooter training from staff of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. We also had congregational training in elements of the Krav Maga fighting system from a former Israeli counterterrorism specialist who works with both USAF and Army Special Operation units in Northwestern Florida.

As a result of the recent Pensacola anti-Semitic incident, we took advantage of an offer by the Community Relations Security team of the Escambia County Sheriff's office to conduct a security survey to see what we can do to improve our existing surveillance and alert systems. We did a previous one in October 2018 following the Pittsburgh Etz Chayim (Tree of Life} Synagogue massacre of 11 Jews on shabbat by now convicted perpetrator, Robert Bowers, facing a death penalty for his deadly actions. I think we are already seeing a rise in security concerns for all worship communities, both here and elsewhere in this country, to be alert and prepared for contending with hate driven attacks.

Zelda Young: What has happened to the state of Florida? I mean, Florida used to be, still is in many cases, a haven for Jews and hopefully will always be. But we seem to be making a dangerous turn, with rising hate by extremist groups threatening possible attacks driven by anti-Semitic hate. Why is this occurring?

Jerry Gordon: Yes, increasingly Jews from other regions in the US, Canada and even Europe are moving here. But so are hate groups. Part of it is connected with the gun laws here in the State of Florida, which no longer require permits for a hidden weapon. That was deemed an important attraction for the Goyim Defense League moving its headquarters from California to here in Florida. That has triggered growth of anti-Semitic extremist groups gaining a foothold here.

Zelda Young: So, is there any form of solution, Jerry? I mean, it doesn't seem to end. We see things coming to a pinnacle, basically. We hope we're going to be able to, to conquer the problems, but they keep coming back. What is the answer if there is anything to, to holding this down?

Jerry Gordon: As demonstrated by what we have done here even before this anti-Semitic spree occurred, we made plans, applied for federal funds to "protect our congregations" through training and installing enhanced physical surveillance and security measures.

Anti-Semitic hate is ancient, going back to Egypt in the 38 C.E. with a pogrom in Alexandria, Egypt led by the Roman Governor Aulus Avilius Flaccus, Jews were killed, synagogues defiled and closed, and Jews were confined to a restricted area what would become known as a ghetto later in renaissance Italy.

Eternal Jew hatred hasn't dissipated when you have events like what just occurred here in Pensacola. This despite the community rallying saying this is outrageous and we have to do

something about it. The only defense we have is the leadership of Jewish and other houses of worship must establish and train security teams and secure funding to physically protect their congregations.

Beyond that national Jewish and other communal groups must begin a conscious campaign of destroying the myths of antisemitism across North America whether in your country of Canada or here in the United States.

That requires more aggressive actions on the part of mainstream Jewish organizations. Yes, major Jewish Federations have done some of that. The National Federation has established a security consulting network in the United States to provide assistance in developing protection of Jewish houses of worship and centers. Reaching out to local, state and FBI resources and the ADL may provide intelligence alerts on threats by extremist groups.

But there is more. Jewish communities need to reach out to allies in mainstream and Evangelical Christian churches and welcome visits by groups of school-age children to synagogues and temples to provide opportunities to learn about Judaism, the history of the Jewish people and the emergence of the State of Israel as the Jewish homeland following the Shoah.

Then there is the problem of domestic Jewish groups allied with enemies of Israel, such as the misnamed Jewish Voices for Peace, J-Street, and Israel Policy Forum. Jewish students are in crisis on major university campuses forcing them to hide their Jewish identities in the face of virulent hate-filled threats by groups like Students for Justice in Palestine and anti-Israel Middle East studies faculty members.

Zelda Young: Okay, I'm just wondering what keeps this terrible rhetoric alive. You would think that after a period of time with the information that was given, it's not working in any way you'd see it. This is wrong, but it doesn't seem to get

better. So, what do we do? My final question is, can we deal with this?

Jerry Gordon: Well, as I pointed out we can deal with this threat in the context of physical security and the funds are available to do that here in the United States. There may be the same situation up in Canada. As evidenced by groups like the Center for Countering Digital Hate, we must make sure that appropriate regulation of major social media prevents anti-Semitic memes indoctrinating impressionable and ill-informed youths.

Zelda Young: Yes.

Jerry Gordon: But, proving that anti-Semitic myths are fraudulent is a difficult, daunting task because these communities may not be terribly receptive or even interesting in changing long-held beliefs and attitudes. Nevertheless, we must combat the lies. And as you know Zelda, this hate is also directed at Israel as "the world Jew."

Zelda Young: Of course.

Jerry Gordon: We have hatred from the right, and we have it from the left, we have it from the Democrats, and we have it from some Republicans here in the US. The only way that can change is by political leadership at the highest levels, taking the lead saying, this is not this country, this is not reflective of our values. A program to combat should be developed to address flagrant anti-Semitic propaganda, especially on social media. That is something that should be a part of cybersecurity priority interests in North America, whether it be in Canada or the US. That means that legislators, whether they're in your parliament or our Congress down here, have to prod the political administrations in power to get moving on this to close down infiltration and broadcast of hateful lies.

Zelda Young: Well, that should be of greater concern than

finding out more about the Jews, because Jews are not the problem. It is the other parts of the community that are making the problem and we have to find a solution.

Jerry Gordon: As exemplified by what happened in my community in Pensacola and elsewhere in Florida Jews must form coalitions of mutual interest with allies in the general communities to vigilantly combat this.

Zelda Young: Well, it seems to me that it is something that we have to combat, but we have to be much more aware of what is going on so that we know how to deal with it. Can you think of a positive way to end this?

Jerry Gordon: I think that is reflected the positive resilience of the Pensacola general and Jewish communities' response to this explosion of anti-Semitic vandalism. Look at the aggressive actions of Sherriff Chitwood in Volusia County that resulted in Florida Governor DeSantis signing legislation to convict hate groups like the Goyim Defense League of statutory felonies. Congress and your Parliament should seriously promote the regulatory STAR model of the Center for Countering Digital Hate for penalizing the proliferation of anti-Semitic hate conveyed by social mean platforms to naive uninformed impressionable youth.

Zelda Young: All right, thank you very much.