

NEWS

So I say thank you for the music, the songs I'm singing"
"THANK YOU FOR THE MUSIC", ABBA

Departing rabbi led Jewish students through pandemic, protests

BY SARAH RIVAS
STAFF REPORTER

Following the announcement that Campus Rabbi Alex Ozar GRD '22 would be leaving the Joseph Slifka Center for Jewish Life, students and faculty reflected on how he led Yale's Jewish community through difficult moments. Ozar's tenure spanned challenging times on college campuses, including the COVID-19 pandemic and student protests in response to Hamas' Oct. 7 attacks in Israel and the subsequent war in Gaza. Ozar first began working at Slifka in 2018, when he and his wife Lauren Steinberg became co-directors of the Orthodox Union Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus, a program that is "a partnership between the Orthodox Union and Slifka Center that has ensured strong Orthodox community rabbinic leadership and learning at Yale" according to an email sent by Uriel Cohen, the executive director of the Slifka Center, to the Slifka community. "My job is to help our students have better conversations about their shared life and things that matter, through the articulation of ideas, through modelling my own vulnerability and listening along with sharing my convictions, and through the pastoral work of helping students in hard moments sustain their equilibrium and stay focused on what really matters," Ozar wrote to the News. In 2024, Ozar became the campus rabbi after Rabbi Jason Rubenstein left his position as the Howard M. Holtzmann Jewish chaplain. He also earned

a doctorate in philosophy and religious studies at Yale, according to the Slifka Center's website. On Jan. 21, Ozar announced that he would be leaving Yale to serve as the director of academic programs for the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America, which is described on its website as "a leading research and educational center serving Israel and world Jewry." Shlomi Helfgot '25 in an email described Ozar as "a visionary leader, inspiring educator, unflinching moral compass, and dedicated pastoral caregiver." During the pandemic, Ozar and Steinberg had to adapt to new restrictions to continue serving the Jewish community at Yale. The couple passed kosher food and shabbat supplies to students under the gates of their residential colleges and through the backs of the dining halls, Ozar wrote. "It's not just a religion but the whole of life. And our conviction was that communities can't just press pause and hope to pick up later. The heart has to keep beating," Ozar wrote to the News. As communal standards adjusted, Ozar and Steinberg began hosting communal Shabbat dinners and prayers in their backyard, a space which became like their "synagogue," Ozar said in an interview. "It is no exaggeration to say that I — and the other Sabbath observers in my class — practically lived at the Ozar's home for multiple days a week," Helfgot wrote.

After the pandemic ended, Ozar and Steinberg continued to invite students to their house, often hosting meals on holidays and for Shabbat, Eytan Israel '26 wrote to the News. Ozar wrote that this practice is "one of the best things" they do. "Judaism is more about the home and family than the synagogue. Beyond all the programming and teaching and relationship work, the aim is to model, and welcome students into, a Jewish family," Ozar wrote. Ozar's appointment to campus rabbi followed months of pro-Palestinian activism on campus. According to Ozar, a part of his role was to navigate tensions between Zionist and pro-Palestinian Jewish students. "Many Jews discovered or rediscovered in new depth that their Jewishness was essential to them," Ozar wrote. Ozar spoke with many Jewish students "to just be with them and meet them wherever they were and with whatever they were sitting with," Aviva Green, the director of Jewish student life at the Slifka Center, wrote to the News. "I think this called for gentle but firm top-down leadership at certain points, but more importantly it was about a conviction that a thousand hours of difficult conversations toward generating mutual understanding and acceptance across our differences is more important than any given practical outcome," Ozar wrote. While Ozar is a member of the observant community, he connects to the broader Jewish community at Yale by lead-



MARTIN PERALTA / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Rabbi Alex Ozar's seven years at the Slifka Center spanned moments of turbulence for Jewish Yalies, including the pandemic and campus protests about Israel's war in Gaza.

ing classes and events, according to Green. "Rav Alex manages to simultaneously maintain pluralism and promote inclusivity across multiple axes within our Jewish community" Yossi Moff '27 wrote to the News. This semester, Ozar is teaching classes at Slifka that include "Intro/Intermediate Talmud Club" and "Yeshivat Yale," according to the center's website. "His classes are full of students from all types of Jewish lives," Green wrote. "I think Rav Alex has impacted the community by allowing Jews, both orthodox and not, to feel proud of their Jewish identity, excited by Jewish texts, and interested in seeking a life that engages with the questions of the human condition and our purpose as Jews," Israel wrote. Maya Viswanathan '28, a member of Yale Friends of Israel, wrote that she appreciates Ozar's "guidance on how to mark world events in a respectful way." Ozar told the News that the conversations he had with Jewish students gave him "a huge amount of hope that these young Jews are going to be the leaders of the Jewish community going forward." Ozar grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, according to the Slifka website.

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Disabled comics, student sketch groups perform at faculty group event

BY JAEHA JANG
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Around 200 people gathered on Wednesday for a comedy show featuring disabled comedians. The event, which was hosted at the Yale School of Medicine by the Faculty with Disabilities at Yale Interest Group, was meant to challenge stereotypes about disabilities, according to organizers. It featured the comedian Josh Blue, as well as Yale linguistics

faculty member and comedian Andrew Fisher and the undergraduate comedy groups Red Hot Poker and the Fifth Humour. "I think people tend to not respond as well to lectures, but everybody likes humor," Katie Wang, an associate professor at the School of Public Health and a co-chair of the faculty group, said in a phone interview. "So we thought we would do that to raise disability awareness and to sort of challenge some negative ableist stereotypes that

we might all have, just because we have not had as much contact with people with a wide range of disabilities." The Faculty with Disabilities at Yale Interest Group was founded in the fall of 2024 by Wang and Monkol Lek, an associate professor at the School of Medicine. Lek and Wang told the News that the comedy show was their first major event and that they invited undergraduate groups to perform in hopes of increasing student engagement. The group's primary goals this year are to increase accessibility for faculty with physical disabilities and to secure more adequate and timely communication about accommodations for new faculty with disabilities, Wang said. The Fifth Humour kicked off the show, performing comedy sketches ranging from a man requesting Viagra at a pharmacy to children asking their parents for liquor. Red Hot Poker also gave the audience laughs with sketches about a fortune teller predicting a man's pregnancy and a "giving tree" breaking down to dance. Comedian and Yale linguistics lecturer Andrew Fisher then performed a stand-up act in American Sign Language, accompanied by an interpreter. He poked fun at the discrimination he faces as a deaf person, as well as his experience performing comedy with an interpreter.

Wednesday's headliner was Josh Blue, a comedian who was voted as the Last Comic Standing on the NBC reality show "Last Comic Standing" in 2006. Blue has cerebral palsy, which, according to the National Institutes of Health, affects body movement and muscle coordination. Blue gave the audience laughter — and some murmurs — for 45 minutes as he joked about his disabilities, comparing his movements to those of homeless people on the New Haven Green and quipping that his Apple Watch records 90,000 steps daily. He also joked that he was selling handicap parking signs, which he said he was calling bookmarks "for legal purposes." After his act, Blue joined Elizabeth Caldwell SPH '27, the content and events manager of the Faculty with Disabilities at Yale Interest Group, for a question-and-answer session, in which Blue discussed the power of humor in changing perceptions on disabilities and how he navigates life as a professional comedian. Wang said that featuring Blue, who has placed third in Season 16 of "America's Got Talent" and also competed at the 2004 Paralympics as a soccer player, helps combat ableism. "Josh Blue had cerebral palsy but hasn't let that impact all the things he wants to achieve in life," Lek, also a co-chair of the faculty group, said in a phone interview. "He's achieved a lot in his life, and he's never let his

disability be an excuse getting in the way. So he's a great inspiration." Lek added that many people with disabilities have to "deal with hardships in life" and that it helps "just to have a good sense of humor." Three attendees told the News that they found the comedy acts both entertaining and inspiring. "I thought it was a great way to make light of very real situations that people are living with every day," Nikki Tehrani SPH '27 said after the event. "It was nice to see how people translate that into their work and how Josh has made that into a career and is making comedy his avenue of awareness for people with disabilities." Scott Roberts, a research assistant at the School of Medicine, also said that he found Fisher's act "really enjoyable" and that he thought "it was such a clever act" to perform comedy with an interpreter. Lek and Wang said that another goal of the event was to raise awareness about their group and grow membership — among not only faculty with disabilities but also others. "In hitting up our goals and missions, we need allies too, when you're such a small group," Lek said. Josh Blue has more than 261,000 followers on Instagram.

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JAEHA JANG / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

The first major event hosted by the Faculty with Disabilities at Yale Interest Group brought together comedians with disabilities and undergraduate comedy groups.

Graffiti cleared from campus snow as Jewish leaders identify threat

BY ANAYAH ACCILLEN
STAFF REPORTER

On Wednesday morning, workers for Yale removed political messages painted in red in the snow on Cross Campus and Old Campus. "Free Palestine," "ICE Out," "Intifada" and "IDF Die" — apparently referring to the Israel Defense Forces — were among the phrases painted in the snow, according to photos reviewed by the News. By the late morning on Wednesday, the messages had been cleared from the snow. In a Wednesday morning message sent to a Slifka Center for Jewish Life email list, Campus Rabbi Alex Ozar described the graffiti as "violent" and "simply unacceptable language." In an email to the News, Uri Cohen, the Slifka Center's executive director, described the painted messages as "harmful and threatening" to Yale's Jewish community. Tina Posterli, a Yale spokesperson, said the messages were removed to be "consistent with Yale's policies on poster and chalking."

"We are grateful to Yale Facilities for promptly removing the graffiti," Hillel Student Board Co-Presidents Zach Pan '27 and Yossi Moff '27 wrote to the News in a joint statement. Cohen acknowledged that several Yale students and faculty have served in the Israeli military, and said that the language graffitied onto the snow was received as "a direct personal attack on those individuals, as well as Jewish Yalies' family members and friends who live in Israel where military service is mandatory rather than optional." Cohen referred to the word "intifada" as "a direct and personal threat" to the Jewish community. The Arabic word "intifada" is used to refer to two historical periods of uprising against Israel. It has also been invoked, including in current protest movements, to express solidarity with Palestinians. "Students are entitled to their beliefs. Students are not entitled to deface the University with messages of hate and violence," Eytan Israel '26 wrote to the News. Israel added that he was "grateful" to Yale for its response. "The Jewish community has thou-

sands of years of experiences of suffering from threats, persecutions, and violence," Cohen wrote to the News. "This morning's incident is just the latest in a long string of attacks and attempts to make Jews feel and be unsafe, and we stand against it." In order to "fight back" against the messages, Cohen wrote that the Jewish community must continue celebrating their culture and supporting those who feel emotionally targeted. Sophie Schonberger '26 said the messages "bring up memories of community members and loved ones killed in violent acts of terror targeting explicitly civilian spaces." Schonberger added that seeing the term "intifada" on campus concerned her, and she described the term as "a call for violence against Israel." The high temperature in New Haven on Wednesday was 37 degrees Fahrenheit, according to the National Weather Service.

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XIMENA SOLORZANO / HEAD PHOTOGRAPHY EDITOR

Messages such as "Free Palestine," "ICE Out," "Intifada" and "IDF Die" that were painted on snow on Old Campus and Cross Campus were removed.