



Celebrate Jewish Culture at YI Love Yiddishfest

By Jan Engoren

The 4th Annual YI Love Yiddishfest '22 returns live this year, Aug. 30 to Sept. 4, bringing six days of cultural events, including concerts, plays, lectures, and live entertainment, after two years of online events due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Founded by actor/comedian and Coral Springs resident Avi Hoffman (known for his "Too Jewish" trilogy), who's CEO of the Yiddishkayt Initiative and YI Love Jewish, the first event was held in 2018 at the Colony Theatre in Miami Beach. This year's events will take place in Broward County, Boca Raton, and Miami Beach.

"It's a little bit scary, very exciting, and very ambitious to be back," says Hoffman. "But I think we'll do great."

Hoffman says the event will appeal to everybody – "not just Jews, but anyone who is Jewish, knows someone Jewish, or has a curiosity about the Jewish culture or religion."

Highlights of the event include the musical concert entitled "Stars of David: Story to Song," based on the best-selling book, "Stars of David: Prominent Jews Talk About Being Jewish" by Abigail Pogrebin.

"Stars of David" adapts these real-life stories of Jewish personalities, including



actor/director Stephen Spielberg, Bravolebrity Andy Cohen, shoe mogul Kenneth Cole, actor Fran Drescher, singer/pianist Michael Feinstein, and former Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, to name a portion of the 62 personalities featured in the book.

The concert will feature Hoffman, Shira Ginsburg, cantor at East End Temple in New York City, Carbonell-winning actor Patti Gardner, and local singer/actor Michael Harper, with musical director Caryl Ginsburg Fantel. Cantor Ginsburg is the niece of Fantel and daughter of Arthur Ginsburg, the former television chef and author, known as "Mr. Food."

Additional live performers include the Canadian group YidLife Crisis, based on a web series of the same name, created by two friends, Eli Batalion and Jamie Elman, as a way of paying homage to the Yiddishkeit in their upbringing and to shed a Jewish comedic lens on the life in which they were raised. The two have collaborated with actor Mayim Bialik and fellow Canadian Howie Mandel.

Jewish rapper Kosha Dillz, who has performed with rapper Fat Joe and Nissim Black and whose raps about matzoh and Passover have gone viral, will bring his unique rap style to

South Florida. Hoffman hopes that his appearance at the festival will attract a younger demographic.

Although Hoffman is modest about his performing contribution, for his fans, another highlight of the festival will be Hoffman's latest and perhaps last in his "Too Jewish" trilogy performance when he debuts "Still Jewish After All These Years," a culmination of his Jewish life and career.

Hoffman is also working on a memoir to be titled "Confessions of a Nice Jewish Boy."

For Hoffman and his mother, Miriam, co-founder of the Yiddishkayt Initiative, a former columnist for the Yiddish edition of The Forward newspaper, a Yiddish playwright, and a past lecturer in Yiddish at Columbia University, it's an honor to be a cultural emissary for the Yiddish language and culture.

The two teach Yiddish online, a language Hoffman says was predicted to die out with this generation. Instead, he says, Yiddish is flourishing and is everywhere. For examples, he points to Seth Rogan's 2020 film "An American Pickle," the Emmy-nominated Netflix series "Unorthodox," and Billy Crystal's Yiddish call and response at the 2022 Tony Awards where he had half the audience singing "Oy" and the other half responding "Vey."

Coral Springs OB/GYN physician Bruce Zafran, who has been practicing in the city for 35 years and moonlights as a stand-up comedian, was watching old Jackie Mason comedy bits online when he got a pop-up message asking him if he wanted to learn Yiddish. He thought, why not?

Hoffman and his mother taught that Yiddish class, and while Zafran was familiar with Hoffman, he was surprised to learn they were neighbors in Coral Springs.

Not only did he sign up for the class, he decided to sponsor the Yiddishfest, along with his wife, Lesley. "Yiddish is a beautiful language," he says. "Whenever you hear it, you just smile."

Says Zafran, "I'm happy to help Avi and the Yiddishkeit cause." He jokes, "Avi is the brains and brawn and I'm the pretty face."

Zafran's favorite Yiddish phrase? "Freylakh zol men tomid zayn," or, "Happy we should we always be," a phrase he used often at his son's wedding last June.

"Without Bruce and other supporters like him, we couldn't do what we do," Hoffman says. "We need people who see the



value in keeping this tradition alive and giving us the ability to bring it to the world."

Says Hoffman, "Since 1885, when a million Jews emigrated to America from Eastern Europe, Yiddish has permeated and influenced American culture.

"We [the Jewish people] have been around thousands of years and we have contributed to mainstream culture over those thousands of years," Hoffman says.

"We as a people have a lot to offer. There's a lot to be appreciated. Come, experience Jewish culture, enjoy yourself, have fun, and learn something new."

And, he says, echoing Zafran, "*farvas nisht* – why not?"



The festival is held in partnership with Florida Humanities, Miami-Dade County, and the city of Miami Beach. It is co-sponsored by the Sue and Leonard Miller Center for Contemporary Judaic Studies/George Feldenkreis Program in Judaic Studies at the University of Miami, the Greater Miami Jewish Federation, the Betsy South Beach, the Miami Beach JCC, the Adolph and Rose Levis JCC, the Holocaust Memorial of Miami Beach, and the Jewish Museum of Florida.

YI Love Yiddishfest '22 runs from Aug. 30 to Sept. 4. For more information, visit www.YILoveJewish.org, email info@yilovejewish.org, or call (888) 945-6835. 📍