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# Civil Disobedience, *A LOVE STORY*

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*Once the bane of John Silber, he has been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. She is a rabbi who defied the law by wearing a prayer shawl at Jerusalem's Western Wall. Yes, they met outside Howard Zinn's office.*

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*By  
Susan  
Seligson*





He wants to be president. She wants Jerusalem to become the adoption capital of the world.

They are taking Israel by storm. Yosef “Captain Sunshine” Abramowitz is a long-time human rights activist, a three-time Nobel Peace Prize nominee, and a global social entrepreneur who was the first to commercially

harvest solar energy in Israel. His wife, Susan Silverman, is an activist rabbi, author, and adoption advocate. Both turn up regularly on lists of “Most Influential Jews,” from the *Jerusalem Post*, which wedged Abramowitz (CAS’86) between Natan Sharansky and Jon Stewart one year, to the *Jewish Forward*, which dubbed Silverman a

Rabbi Susan Silverman and daughters Hallel (in profile, at left) and Ashira defy tradition and law by donning prayer shawls at the Western Wall. Yosef Abramowitz (facing page) at Israel’s first commercial solar field near Eilat.



“We make girls and import boys,” says Silverman, pictured here with Abramowitz and three of their children, Zamir (from left), Ashira, and Adar.

prophetess.” Although Silverman (CAS’85) has put herself out there—there was that *New York Times* photo of her being hauled off to jail for donning prayer shawls at the Western Wall—her famous sibling Sarah has propelled “Rabbi Susan” to a level of international recognition that prompted Silverman to call herself “Rabbi Kardashian.” If turning up on Jewrotica.org’s list of the world’s “sexiest rabbis” intensifies that spotlight—one of the criteria was “badassery”—then why not use it to trumpet your message, says Silverman. In April she shared the podium with her comedian sister and longtime partner-in-crime at Tina Brown’s Women in the World Summit.

Ask 11-year-old Ashira what’s interesting about her family and she’ll tell you: “Everything!” Ashira is one of the couple’s five children. The raucous, high-profile family, who migrated

from Newton, Mass., to Kibbutz Ketura in the Negev before settling in Jerusalem, are observant Jews and fervent Zionists unafraid to challenge religious orthodoxy and Israeli recalcitrance. In an age of cynics, they are unabashed idealists.

“Our family motto,” says Silverman, “is, ‘Don’t be a schmuck.’”

It’s September in the Holy City. The nights grow cooler and the High Holy Days spill into the lighthearted weeklong Festival of Sukkot. If one were to take Judaism’s heartbeat, the stethoscope would best be placed on this soulful, simmering metropolis. “I love this city’s immediacy,” says 51-year-old Silverman, who never expected to make aliyah, the Hebrew term for Jews returning to their spiritual homeland, when the family first came to Israel for what was to be a year’s sabbatical. Etched with the battle lines of secularism versus

fundamentalism, modern versus old, Arab versus Jew, Jerusalem embodies one of Silverman’s favorite expressions: “If you’re addicted to meaning, Israel is like pure heroin.”


WHERE EVERYBODY KNOWS YOUR NAME

**IN ISRAEL** the two are becoming household names. At 50, Abramowitz is president and CEO of the global energy company Energiya Global Capital, which is developing solar energy in Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. The company just inaugurated its first commercial solar field in Rwanda. He is also cofounder of Arava Power, an eight-year-old company that built Israel’s first commercial solar field—18,500 photovoltaic cells over 20 acres—at the edge of Kibbutz Ketura. The kibbutz is near the southern city of Eilat, and

the company hopes to soon supply 80 percent of the city's power.

In April Arava Power launched five new solar fields, all larger than Ketura. In May Abramowitz announced his bid for the Israeli presidency, in the hope of modernizing and lending political and cultural muscle to the mostly ceremonial post. Historically a reward for decades of public service, the position has been held since 2007 by former two-term prime minister Shimon Peres, who is now 90.

Silverman is becoming increasingly well known as an adoption advocate (her website, JustAdopt.net, was recently launched with a three-



*Abramowitz says he is grateful to Boston University for jump-starting "a lifetime of beating up governments for good causes."*

hankie video of her being handed her infant son Adar in an Addis Ababa orphanage) as well as for the protests and arrest as part of Women of the Wall, a group that has fought since 1988 for the right of women to wear a prayer shawl (tallit) and bring a Torah scroll and pray beside men at the Old City's Western Wall.

After three years at Ketura, the family settled into a light-soaked duplex in Jerusalem's prosperous Baka neighborhood, where the streets are named for the 12 ancient tribes of Israel. Here Silverman and Abramowitz, their children leaning in, routinely join an ongoing repertory of journalists, rabbis, politicians, and scholars to debate the state of the world over cast-iron pans of shakshouka at the local Café Itzik. Their passions can be burdensome and exhausting; where most people see cloudless skies as a reprieve, Abramowitz sees an inexcusable squandering of potential kilowatts. While most of us react to media images of war orphans with impotent heartache, Silverman has written a theological manifesto rallying fellow Jews to welcome those orphans into their families.

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A PRECOCIOUS FIREBRAND AND A FREE SPIRIT CONVERGE

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**THE SUN** is fading into the eve of Yom Kippur, and around a family table long enough to accommodate a procession of visitors, the Abramowitz-Silvermans (except for daughter Aliza, who is studying at the Berklee College of Music) dive into platters of salad and pasta before the looming daylong fast. Everything is interesting. Beside the traditional challah sits a plate of injera, the spongy flatbread of Ethiopia, birthplace of Susan and Yosef's sons Adar, and

Zamir, a hearing-impaired child they adopted at age four. In Israel Zamir received cochlear implants, and as Susan rounds up the kids for

the walk to shul she reminds her son to "put on your ears." In the spirit of atonement and starting the New Year with a clear conscience, they take turns naming the previous year's wrongs. The children and teenagers share regrets about their obstinacy or not fully appreciating their parents. Abramowitz, who the *Jerusalem Post* named "one of 50 most influential Jews in the world" three years running for his accomplishments as Arava Power CEO and who is one of CNN's 6 most prominent green pioneers worldwide, apologizes to his family for his difficulty in prying free from the demands of his work. Silverman softly says, "I'm sorry I'm so spacey."

Silverman and Abramowitz converged at BU in the mid-1980s, when Abramowitz founded and led an antiapartheid and South Africa divestiture movement. Those were tumultuous years on campus, as students, faculty, and labor unions clashed with the administration of the late President John Silber (Hon.'95). Abramowitz was a precocious firebrand, a child of activists whose Zionism was solidified during the family's three-year stint in Israel. He proved to be an unrelenting

thorn in Silber's side—their battle of wits immortalized in a 1986 US Supreme Court ruling (*Abramowitz v. Boston University*) supporting Abramowitz's right to hang an anti-apartheid banner from his dormitory window. (At the time BU had \$22.3 million invested in South Africa.)

Silber "was my nemesis," says Abramowitz, whose bold acts of defiance, along with Silber's description of them as "temper tantrums," dominated the headlines of the *Daily Free Press* and often spilled onto the pages of the *Boston Globe* and the national press. "He just wanted to get rid of me."

"Yosef didn't fit into any box," recalls his College of Arts & Sciences Judaic studies professor and friend Hillel Levine. "He was a smart kid from Newton here on a scholarship, and he turned the place upside down." For Abramowitz the BU years offered an education he came to be grateful for, jump-starting, he says, "a lifetime of beating up governments for good causes." He's been arrested twice; in 1985 he was arrested outside the Soviet Embassy in Washington, D.C., on behalf of refusenik Boris Lifshitz, a young engineering student from Leningrad who was allowed to attend BU after a student group led by Abramowitz helped raise thousands for his tuition. Abramowitz was convicted, a conviction later overturned in a US Supreme Court ruling. Two years later, protesting on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry at the World Zionist Congress outside the Jerusalem Convention Center, he was beaten and arrested by Israeli border police. (He was released without charge.)

Silverman found the young Abramowitz to be "a totally original character." Hailing from a liberal, secular family that was its own lonely Borscht Belt in a white-bread suburb of Manchester, N.H., Silverman was a free spirit. The oldest of four sisters, she and her siblings were eliciting gasps from Republicans with a rendition of *Rocky Horror's* "Time Warp" at a local pub while Abramowitz was spending a high school year tending livestock on a kibbutz. She jokes that she majored in "smoking and drinking" at BU—psychology, actually—while

Abramowitz designed his own major in Jewish public policy.

But since childhood Silverman had also felt a pull to embrace her faith. In Abramowitz, who was chair of the World Union of Jewish Students and an activist for the rights of Soviet Jews, she found someone who followed his own compass, a man for whom Judaism was synonymous with social justice. Both protégés of the late historian and social activist Howard Zinn, a CAS professor emeritus of political science, they showed up for the same rallies and sat together bleary-eyed at

*Silverman and Abramowitz ran for Jerusalem City Council on a progressive ticket. The party pulled less than one percent of the vote.*

a four-day vigil against BU's South Africa investments outside Silber's office. Abramowitz says he first spoke to Silverman when she was coming out of Zinn's office and he was on his way in. "I asked, 'When do you graduate?' and she said, 'Next week,' and I said, 'Well, have a nice life.'"

Their actual first date is a matter of dispute. An occasionally rocky decade and many geographical separations later, when they decided to marry—the ceremony was performed by Levine, an ordained rabbi who has since presided over the bar and bat mitzvahs of several of the couple's children—Abramowitz declared that their future together was destiny. Silverman's take was, she says, "We're so devoted to each other that we'll thumb our noses at destiny."

"We're complete opposites," says Silverman.

SHORTENING THEIR NAME  
TO JUST...JEWS

**TALL**, athletically built, and prone to swearing, Silverman rails against injustice in a honey-coated voice nearly identical to that of her sister Sarah, who lives in Los Angeles near middle sisters Jodyne, a writer and producer, and Laura, who played

Sarah's sister on Comedy Central's *The Sarah Silverman Program*. Sarah, who famously managed to use the word "vagina" repeatedly in her speech at niece Aliza's bat mitzvah, is also a serious and outspoken supporter of her sister and brother-in-law's causes. She paid tribute to the couple early in her career in one of her few appearances on *Saturday Night Live*'s "Weekend Update." "My sister Susie just got married, and they took each other's names," Sarah announced. "So now she's Susan Silverman-Abramowitz. But they're thinking of shortening it to just...Jews."

For all his defiance, Abramowitz appears bemused and slightly disheveled, his *milkich* complexion for-

ever cowering under the Middle Eastern sun he has labored so hard to harness. His nature is forgiving. "He never wishes anyone ill," says his wife. And from former colleague Palestinian-Israeli engineer Tareq Abuhamed, "I've never seen him get angry." This isn't necessarily seen as a virtue. Amir Cohen, at the time the chief operating officer of Abramowitz's pre-Israel, multimillion-dollar media company, Jewish Family & Life, was quoted in a 2006 *Jewish Week* article as saying that Abramowitz "is almost oblivious to bad news. His half glass is always completely full. If he believes in Jewish peoplehood, he cannot imagine why this is not the thing everyone is fully committed to."

One of Abramowitz's forearms is obscured by a rainbow of rubber bracelets honoring various causes, and his résumé is similarly multihued. The former journalist, editor, and internet entrepreneur has amassed, Zeliglike, a string of right place, right time credits. These include winning the free speech ruling while at BU, engineering a gathering of thousands of Jews "left behind" in Ethiopia, being the last person to see Lubavitcher Grand Rebbe Menachem Schneerson—considered by his followers to be the messiah—alive, and immigrating to Israel already a

candidate for the Knesset (he joined the unsuccessful ticket as a favor to a politically like-minded Israeli friend). For three years Abramowitz was president of the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews, and he was the keynote speaker at Russia's 2004 national human rights convention. He helped to establish the Ethiopian Atid Ehad party in Israel and worked to bring solar energy to Israeli Bedouins.

There's more. With a master's from the Columbia School of Journalism, the young journalist single-handedly took down the leadership of the Jewish National Fund (JNF)—yes, the one Jewish children everywhere collect pennies for—after uncovering its creative financing. These revelations resulted from a freelance assignment Abramowitz, who had been an editor at *Moment* magazine, took on reluctantly because he needed the cash, but ended up costing him more than he was paid. In typical Abramowitz fashion, he threw himself into the story, hiring private investigators and paying for travel out of his own pocket. (The JNF has since become a vigorous supporter of the Arava Institute of Environmental Studies, an educational center and alternative energy think tank based at Ketura, which Abramowitz went on to cofound.)

Silverman earned a master's at Harvard and was ordained at Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion in New York City. She is one of a handful of women rabbis in Jerusalem. Last October she and Abramowitz ran for the Jerusalem City Council on a progressive, mostly female ticket dubbed Ometz Lev, Hebrew for "courage of heart." Founded by former Jerusalem deputy mayor Naomi Tsur, the newly hatched party promotes environmental responsibility, diversity, and equality for women. Its platform reads like a mission statement for Silverman and Abramowitz, whose 19-year-old daughter, Hallel, worked 12-hour days for the campaign while on a gap year between graduating high school and mandatory service in the Israeli army. The party fared miserably a month later, with less than one percent of the vote, which went largely to the



She laments being “spacey”; he finds it hard to put his work aside. But the Abramowitz-Silverman home is full of laughter and the aroma of kosher vegetarian meals.

ultraorthodox, or Haredi, Jews, who in their modest dress and unbending ways hold sway in the Holy City. The Haredi’s fundamentalism and some of their tactics—like hurling stones at Women of the Wall protestors—render Silverman apoplectic.

BATTLING CYNICISM, POLITICS,  
AND ENTRENCHED INTERESTS

**MICHAEL** Cohen, a Vermont rabbi and director of strategic partnerships for Friends of the Arava Institute, the supporting American arm of the nonprofit environmental group, was among the founding faculty of the institute at Kibbutz Ketura in the mid-’90s, when Abramowitz brought his young family back to live in the community where he’d spent a year two decades earlier. Cohen recalls

Abramowitz “crumpling in the desert heat” and assuming that the kibbutz had, at the very least, solar-powered air conditioners. Abramowitz (a journalist, not an engineer) did some quick research and learned that his family had joined 150 others under some of the highest levels of solar radiation on the planet. From then on, no one could tell him that a solar field, which would initially use more power than it would generate, was a pipe dream. “People said, ‘You are a naïve American kibbutznik. If it was a good idea, someone would’ve done it already,’” Abramowitz recalls. “I said, ‘We’re in the middle of the desert. It makes complete sense to me.’”

In 2006, with office space donated by Arava Institute, Abramowitz teamed with American investor David Rosenblatt and longtime Ketura member Ed Hofland to “do the impossible:

battle the cynicism, the politics, and the entrenched interests and push forward” to establish a solar power industry in Israel, says Cohen. Five years later, after the resistance of 23 separate agencies, the 49.5-megawatt Ketura Sun rose, the only solar field in the world with a mezuzah. (It also functions as a sundial.) Unfolding at the edge of the kibbutz like a Goliath-sized deck of cards, Ketura Sun is expected to offset approximately 125,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide. And as Cohen observes, “it wasn’t just about energy—it was about peace. Arava teamed with Palestinians and Israeli Bedouins.” Arava is now a \$20 billion industry, and Ketura Sun is one of six Arava-run solar fields, three on other kibbutzim in the south near Ketura and two in the northern Negev near Beersheba.

Abramowitz’s success with Arava



Silverman and Abramowitz are well known in Jerusalem's comfortable Baka neighborhood, a progressive counterpoint to the city's exclusively orthodox enclaves.

has thrust him into the headlines of *H'aaretz* and the conservative *Jerusalem Post*, which report on his string of honors, most recently the Bonei Zion Prize, awarded by Nefesh B'Nefesh, or Jewish Souls United, a nonprofit that promotes aliyah from North America and the United Kingdom. It's given to six Israelis from English-speaking countries who "encapsulate the spirit of modern-day Zionism" by making a significant contribution to the state of Israel. Abramowitz was cited for his entrepreneurship and technology. In February the *Jerusalem Post* ran a story under the headline "Captain Sunshine mulling presidential run," with a photo of Abramowitz standing with an arm thrown affectionately over the shoulder of Peres as Susan and Sarah Silverman look on. In the article, Abramowitz, who concedes he is mostly testing the waters for a

more realistic pitch in 2021, said that if the Knesset "decides they don't want the brand equity of the presidency to be an aging politician...they know who to call."

Even with the seven-year wait for the next Knesset vote, Abramowitz would be Israel's youngest president since the nation's birth in 1948. "We're a young, vibrant, innovative country that has a lot to offer the world," he says. "Wouldn't it be amazing if the president mirrored that?" Although the presidency would require him to step down from his executive roles, he wants it so badly that he can, well, taste it. "First of all, the president's house would be vegetarian," Abramowitz says. "We would have pluralistic Friday night services that would be televised. I'd create a Jewish Peace Corps-style program and export sustainable food and energy technologies to Africa.

Every time ambassadors would come to present their credentials, I'd ask about the carbon footprints of their country and what's being done to reduce them. And I'd ask about human rights for minorities in their countries."

"And ours," Silverman adds.


"Yes," he says. "And ours."

A TACTIC PASSED DOWN FROM  
ACTIVIST HOWARD ZINN

## SILVERMAN

has a terrible sense of direction, an inconvenient manifestation of her spaciness that forces her to backtrack along the cobbled byways of the Old City on her way to the Western Wall, or Kotel. It has been a site for Jewish prayer and pilgrimage dating back as far as the fourth century. In the past year Silverman has become a

prominent voice for Women of the Wall. At one point Silverman and a companion dodge a raucous bar mitzvah procession, a kind of Semitic second-line parade with blaring horns and balloons in the blue-and-white colors of Israel. Passing through the security gate, where she faces a soldier's scrutiny for her Women of the Wall T-shirt, she collides with another bar mitzvah, and frowns. At the Wall, all of the women—young girls, grandmothers, mothers—are on one side of a wooden barrier, teetering on plastic chairs and craning their necks to glimpse the jubilation of the men in their unrestricted area. Silverman is



*Silverman postponed a flight to the United States, linked arms with her daughter at the Western Wall, and got arrested instead.*

incensed. The right of women to pray, marry, and mourn freely, she says, “is not negotiable.”

In February 2012 Hallel asked to go with her mother to Rosh Chodesh, “the head of the month,” or new moon, when women protesters gather to don tallit and pray at the Wall. Silverman was booked on a flight to the United States that morning, but at the urging of her daughter and her husband, she rescheduled, and arms linked with her daughter, got arrested instead. (In May 2013 an Israeli judge ruled that a 2003 Supreme Court ruling prohibiting women from carrying a Torah or wearing tallit at the women's section of the Wall had been misinterpreted, which put an end to the arrests there.) Hallel had learned the civil disobedience tactic of going limp, passed down through her mother from Zinn, and she used it as the police dragged her off. (Although the Zinns were not observant Jews, Howard's wife, Rosalyn, referred to Silverman as “our rabbi.”) In awe of Zinn after taking his lecture class as a BU junior, Silverman began going to see the popular professor at his office. “He'd sit there eating his roast beef sandwich, and I'd ask him questions like, ‘How

do you change the world?’” she recalls. “He'd take a bite and then flash this Howard Zinn sunshine smile and say, ‘One person at a time.’”

Abramowitz first tore a page from Zinn's book when he resisted, by peaceful means, the University's efforts to remove that now-iconic antiapartheid banner. “Susan and I went to Hillel House and got big poster boards and made huge signs that said, DIVEST, which were promptly removed by Buildings and Grounds,” Abramowitz recalls. “So we hung another one, and when B&G came to my door, I put on my prayer shawl and tefillin and just stood in the doorway

praying with my eyes closed. This poor guy didn't know what to do, so he just left. It was unbelievable. I'd won a little battle using a tactic Zinn was

preaching.” When Silber tried to evict Abramowitz from his dorm, the case caught the attention of a BU School of Law student named Steve Masters (LAW'86), who presented the case to the American Civil Liberties Union. With Zinn's help, the law firm Hill & Barlow represented Abramowitz pro bono, leading to the Supreme Court's free speech ruling in his favor.

At BU Abramowitz also caught the attention of Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel (Hon.'74), BU's Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities, who despite his close relationship with Silber became a supporter and friend. “I was always scared to go see him because I never thought I was ready,” Abramowitz says of Wiesel. “But when this whole thing was heating up, I finally walked into his office, and Martha, his assistant, said, ‘It's about time.’” Wiesel, says Abramowitz, “gave me *chazakah*,” Hebrew for strength. Years later, Wiesel would write the introduction to *Jewish Family and Life: Traditions, Holidays, and Values for Today's Parents and Children*, a book coauthored by Silverman and Abramowitz.

In the 1990s, Silverman served two years at Congregation Or Chadash, a

Reform synagogue in Germantown, Md., doubling its congregation. But the job was so all-consuming that one day she heard herself rushing her toddler past some flowers the child had stopped to smell. “I actually told my daughter there was no time to smell the roses,” says Silverman, and she decided then and there to phase out of the job.

These days, she says, “I have no pulpit, but it means that everything I do represents the Jewish people in some way.” She recently finished and is shopping publishers for a book called  *Casting Lots: How Raising My Children Helped Me Find God*, a theology on adoption that is also a manifesto. As Levine observes, “It's the most anti-Nazi policy—a vision where values matter more than blood.” Her website JustAdopt.net is a play on words: “Just Do It, and Justice,” she says. Adoption resources abound online, but Silverman sees her mission as coaxing people to consider international adoption, through stories, videos, and slideshows of adoptive families like hers. “It's to inspire people,” she says, and to correct what she sees as pervasive misconceptions about international adoption.

Silverman, Abramowitz, and increasingly, their children are not shy about saying they want to change the world. But many of the barriers they face are homegrown: the Orthodox grip on Israel's government, its resistance to renewable energy. Yet in spite of its problems, Israel is a perfect fit for Abramowitz and Silverman, who take a page from David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister and one of Abramowitz's heroes, who said, “In Israel, in order to be a realist you must believe in miracles.”

They revere what they call the country's organic lifestyle for people of their values. “And considering the saga of the Jewish people, who were able to reemerge into history with power and ingenuity after 2,000 years of exile, is so inspiring,” says Abramowitz, “but I don't believe in resting on our laurels. A friend of mine asks, how can Israel become a platform for solving global issues, and that's what's exciting to me. I feel privileged to be part of this story.” ■