

## Jews in Sports

# The sportscaster and the rabbi: Adam Cohen and Laurie Phillips

BILL SIMONS

Rabbi Laurie Phillips played a pivotal role in the ascent of Adam Cohen, announcer for the Tri-City ValleyCats of the independent Frontier League. The team plays its home games at the "The Joe," fan-friendly Joseph L. Bruno Stadium, located on the Hudson Valley Community College campus in Troy, NY. Since his 2023 arrival in the broadcast booth, Adam Cohen, now 24, has invested ValleyCats home games with telling detail and "inside baseball" engagement.

A graduate of Allegheny College, Adam, despite his youth, earned broadcasting spurs with the Norfolk Redbirds, Rockford Rivets, Duluth Huskies and Erie SeaWolves before joining the ValleyCats. Through subscription, ValleyCats streaming and radio game broadcasts, along with Adam's pre- and post-game shows, stream on FloBaseball and Mixlr. Working without a partner, Adam does a remarkable job of communicating the facts, flow and feeling of the game sans recourse to bathroom, respite or munchies.

Through notable memory and thorough preparation, Adam effortlessly treats fans to the essential team and player stats, trends and storylines. On the air, he is the best version of himself, holding the excitement of "punchout" whiffs, "bang-bang" double plays and "out of here and out of sight" home run calls. Eschewing the excessive partisanship of a "homer," he, nonetheless, conveys identification with the ValleyCats through phraseology and emphasis. During each game, a young fan gets to spend a few minutes on-air in the broadcast booth. Adam has a knack for setting these fledglings at ease and showcasing their charm.

In addition to broadcasting, Adam is the ValleyCats' media relations coordinator, setting up interview logistics, contributing to sales and publications, monitoring broadcast technology, sharing metrics with coaches and fulfilling a host of other duties. Although he would welcome another season at "The Joe," Adam looks forward to working his way up the broadcasting ranks.

### Prologue and epilogue

A child of divorce, Adam went back and forth between the homes of his father, Howard, a New York Life Insurance Company executive, and Jules, his social worker mother, during the course of a typical week, albeit spending more time with his father. Although his parents moved around, including a significant stint in Harlem, Manhattan's Upper West Side was the frequent habitat. Adam grew up in a complex, blended family: "My dad and mom divorced in 2005, my mom married my now-stepmother... Nyna in 2008, and my dad married Laurie in 2009. After my dad and Laurie broke up in 2018, my dad got remarried to my now-stepmother named Lol in 2022."

Adam and his father shared several attributes – analytic minds, orientation to detail, attraction to travel, baseball



At a Jerusalem restaurant in 2019 (rear): Rabbi Laurie Phillips and her stepson, Adam Cohen, with friends in front. (Photo courtesy of Adam Cohen)

fandom and self-identification as secular Jewish atheists. Laurie, Reform Rabbi Laurie Phillips, introduced new levels of spirituality, creativity, happiness, structure, strength and responsibility to Adam's world. With his father's support, Adam attended Jewish services and programs that Rabbi Laurie led; he was bar mitzvahed. By age 14, however, Adam preferred New York Yankees games to temple.

A dynamic and creative force in New York Jewry, Rabbi Laurie – founder of the Beineinu "synagogue without walls" movement, innovative educator, model and missionary of kindness and intimacy, champion and celebrant of Israel, exponent of candor leavened by humor and humanity, passionate feminist – did not challenge Adam's adolescent religious agnosticism.

Ironically, the relationship between Rabbi Laurie and Adam grew stronger and more personal after she and his father divorced. He calls their evolving relationship "a huge blessing." They would meet at restaurants, synagogue, her place in Brooklyn, the beach and vacations with her family. When Adam took a gap year between Bard High School and Allegheny College as an Israel Association of Baseball player, youth coach, umpire and groundskeeper, Rabbi Laurie arranged one of her periodic trips to Israel to greet him upon arrival and facilitate Adam's transition to a place he had never before visited.

Rabbi Laurie, recalls Adam, "was not the biggest baseball fan. But as a devoted stepmother, she learned a lot more about it after entering my life. She listened to some of my broadcasts and came to some of my games." Financial contributions from Laurie, her father Dennis (whom Adam calls "Saba"), and her siblings facilitated Adam's travels and professional development, including

a "three-week intensive voice work course in Pretoria, South Africa" that proved instrumental in his growth as a broadcaster.

During her final journey, Rabbi Laurie valiantly battled leiomyosarcoma, an uncommon cancer. Despite the complications of the disease and chemotherapy, she continued to model kindness and courage, celebrating a *b'nai mitzvah* just a couple of weeks before she passed. But the last days were very hard. At age 55, Rabbi Laurie died on Sunday, November 26, 2023, three days after Thanksgiving. Her *Jerusalem Post* obituary listed four immediate survivors – father, brother, sister and stepson Adam. He had complex and intense feelings about Rabbi Laurie's departure: "I wasn't with her when she passed away, as much as I would have liked to have been there in her final moments. She was not herself, and I'm sure that would have been traumatizing. So, I think she tried to protect me." Rabbi Laurie's body was cremated and the ashes scattered in the Sea of Galilee. Despite his still nascent religious beliefs, Adam confides, "I believe there's a heaven. I hope to see her again."

When I first interviewed Adam in 2023, he identified as a secular Jew and an agnostic. A year later, he wanted to discuss a significant change: "Now, considering myself religious for the first time in my life, I believe in God." Upset by the death of Rabbi Laurie, Adam spoke almost every day to her sister, whom he calls Aunt Beth. And a Christian friend from the Frontier League "got me into religion. That's when I started going to synagogue." Joining Congregation Gates of Heaven, a Reform temple, in Schenectady, Adam attends Shabbat services unless broadcasting responsibilities conflict. He also engages with the synagogue's Torah study group, enjoying the spirited disputation amongst participants.

Networking with the Jewish Federation of Northeastern New York, Adam played a significant role in facilitating Jewish Heritage Night at the ValleyCats' last home game of the regular season on August 25. To honor his stepmother, Adam gave out 400 pins to fans emblazoned with Rabbi Laurie's signature credo – "Be Kind."

The JCC Friendship Club is going out for lunch. Please join us on Wednesday, November 20, at 1 pm, at The Lost Dog Café. Everyone is welcome. No reservations needed.

## On the Jewish food scene

# Jewish ice cream flavors

RABBI RACHEL ESSERMAN

A friend and I differ in our tastes in ice cream. As much as I like chocolate (her usual pick), I also love the fruit-flavored ones, for example, blueberry, key lime pie and banana cream pie. She thinks ice cream and fruit should not mix. While she sticks to her usual choice, I also like to try different flavors just for the fun of it – sometimes the more exotic the better.

However, I'm not sure I would have tried the flavors Salt and Straw offered when its new stores opened recently in New York City. Well, two of the flavors – chocolate babka with hazelnut fudge, and cinnamon raisin bagels and schmear – didn't sound that bad. But I'm not sure I would ever want to try pastrami-on-rye flavored ice cream. I eat ice cream because it's sweet. If I want something savory, I'll get a deli sandwich. But I do understand offering outlandish flavors to generate attention. That obviously succeeded or I wouldn't be writing about it. (FYI: the flavors were on a limited time offer and are no longer available.)

Thinking about this made me wonder if there are other Jewish flavors. That is, in addition to the periodic jokey ones like gefilte fish ice cream. (At least, I hope that was a joke.) There actually is a Ben and Jerry's charoset flavored ice cream, but it was only available in Israel last year during Passover. However, search the Internet for "charoset ice cream" and you'll find several recipes for how to make your own from scratch. For those looking for a short cut, I suppose you could buy a good vanilla ice cream, make the charoset of your choice and then mix the two.

The next question is, of course, what makes a food Jewish, something we could debate for hours, if not years. Is concord grape ice cream Jewish? How about ice cream made with figs, dates or halvah? Hmm, is an olive oil ice cream Jewish? Maybe anything made with the seven species (the agricultural products considered sacred in the

Bible) would work, although I'm not sure I would want a wheat ice cream. I would be willing to try a pomegranate one, though.

A bigger question is whether ice cream season – at least, eating ice cream outdoors – ends in November. A great number of ice cream stores close for the winter, although there are some that stay open all year. But that's really a question for a different column.

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