

# Dr. Albert Bourla: He is a mensch. (מענטש) (Μεντς) He has Philotimo. (פילוטימו) (Παναγιωτα)

*by Judge Megan Goldish*

Decalogue is excited that the Hellenic Bar Association will be sharing in our traditions as they join us for our Seder this season. Some scholars believe the Seder ceremony is modeled after the Greek symposium. Moreover, during the Seder, we hide the afikomen and find it after dinner. The word “afikomen” derives from the Greek word for dessert (although I admit the Greek pastries I bought at Artopolis taste much better than the same box of matzah I’ve been nursing for a year). During this season, both peoples also eat unleavened bread; Greeks eat lagana on Clean Monday and Jews eat matzah.

Greeks and Jews share many similar traditions and origins. To illustrate, the Talmud was written at a time when Greek was the international language. According to some scholars, at least 100 Greek terms are in the Talmud. Further, many Hebrew words have become part of the Greek language (e.g., “Amen” and “Halleluia”). Additionally, the Greek and Jewish communities are known to treasure our *yiayias* and *bubbes*, and children in both cultures are traditionally named after grandparents. At religious celebrations, you might hear klezmer or bouzouki bands, and both have traditional wedding celebration dances: the Jews have the *Hava Nagila*, and the Greeks have the *Oraia Pou Einai I Nifi Mas*.

At the Greek New Year, a pomegranate is smashed, the multiple seeds symbolizing much good luck for the upcoming year. At the Jewish New Year, a pomegranate is also opened, and the multiple seeds correspond to the many good deeds in the coming year. Both cultures try to avoid the evil eye (in Greek, *Mati*, in Hebrew, *ayin ha’ra* or *kehan hora*) and both spit three times to defend against the evil eye (in Greek, “*ftou, ftou, ftou*,” in Hebrew, “*ptu, ptu, ptu*”).

**And now we share joint pride in a wonderful Greek Jewish man, who is making headlines for saving lives and philanthropic contributions, Dr. Albert Bourla.**

Dr. Albert Bourla is the Greek-Jewish CEO of Pfizer. He was born and raised in Thessaloniki, Greece. He is the son of Greek Holocaust survivors. Dr. Bourla trained as a veterinarian and a scientist and began working at Pfizer in 1993. He moved to the United States in 2001 and, since 2018, he has been the CEO of Pfizer. In 2020, Dr. Bourla was ranked as America’s top CEO in the pharmaceutical industry by *Institutional Investor*.

Pfizer is at the forefront of the fight against COVID-19. Dr. Bourla oversaw the quick development of a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine, saving countless lives. This vaccine was created in just eight months, without compromising quality, when that process typically takes 8-10 years. Certainly Pfizer profited monetarily, but it is worth noting that Dr. Bourla pushed for the development of the vaccine before FDA approval so that it would be ready to ship immediately upon approval. It’s been said that Dr. Bourla declined billions of dollars in US subsidies to avoid government bureaucracy and expedite production of the vaccine.

Dr. Bourla lives in New York with his wife, Myriam, and their two children. He still proudly supports his Greek heritage. He was born, raised, and educated in Greece. He has read the Greek classics, including Homer. He visits his home in Chalkidiki, Greece every summer, and he is an avid supporter of the athletic club *Aris Thessaloniki*. He is friendly with Geoffrey Pyatt, the US Ambassador to Greece. In fact, in April of 2019, at the Prix Galien of Greece Awards, the Ambassador awarded Bourla the “Preeminent Greek Leader” Award for his contributions to the global pharmaceutical industry. Dr. Bourla has also organized vaccine donations for Greece, and more than \$1 million in medicine to help uninsured patients in Greece. He chose Thessaloniki to establish the Pfizer Artificial Intelligence Center and, recently, Greek scientists from all over the world applied to join the Center. Pfizer also participated in the Thessaloniki International Fair.

Dr. Bourla is equally as proud of his Jewish heritage. During the pandemic, there were protests against vaccine requirements where people invoked offensive comparisons to the Holocaust. Dr. Bourla has spoken out against this practice. After all, Bourla is the son of two Holocaust survivors, Mois and Sarah Bourla, and believes that comparing public health guidelines to the Holocaust is an insult to victims. Bourla’s parents were from the once-flourishing Jewish community of Thessaloniki. Bourla’s family fled Spain for Greece in the 15th century due to the Alhambra Decree, requiring that all Spanish Jews convert or be expelled from the country. For a time, Thessaloniki was known as “*la Madre de Israel*” (the mother of Israel). Before World War II, approximately two-thirds of the residents of Thessaloniki were Jewish. However, in 1941, German Nazis occupied Thessaloniki and killed about 96% of the Jewish community there. Before the occupation, there were 520,000 Jews in Thessaloniki; after the war, there were only 2,000 Jews. As Bourla has described it, “It took the Nazis less than three years to eliminate and exterminate the Jewish community that had been living there for hundreds of years.”

All members of Bourla's paternal family were killed by the Nazis except his father and his uncle. All but Bourla's maternal aunt and mother were murdered by the Nazis in Auschwitz. Bourla considers himself fortunate that his parents were willing to share their painful stories of survival, and that they never spoke of hatred or revenge, just of the need to heal and preserve their heritage. Bourla said his parents' stories created "a very strong Jewish identity, and a sense that I want to work with others to make sure that those things never happen again, to us or to others." Bourla said that his father had two dreams for him: that Bourla become a scientist, and that he marry a nice Jewish girl. Bourla was happy that his father lived to see both dreams come true.

Bourla was named the winner of the 2022 Genesis Prize, known as the "Jewish Nobel," that "honors extraordinary individuals for their outstanding professional achievement, contribution to humanity, and commitment to Jewish values." The award includes a \$1 million prize, which Bourla is dedicating to Holocaust memorials, including establishing a Holocaust Museum in Thessaloniki. "It's a great, great honor, which I accept on behalf of everyone at Pfizer," said Bourla. He noted the overlap between his work and his Jewish values, and referenced the Talmudic teaching that one who saves a life is considered to have saved the whole world.