

## PISTONS

# As NBA grapples with antisemitism, Arn Tellem's family history educates Detroit Pistons



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*Clarifications and corrections: A previous version of this story incorrectly stated the number of deaths in the Holocaust. An estimated 6 million Jewish people were murdered. Millions of other non-Jews were murdered, including prisoners of war, Romany (Gypsies), Slavs (Poles, Russians), disabled people, homosexuals and others.*

Dozens of Detroit Pistons employees — players, coaches, front office members and business staffers alike — were seated in a large room at Huntington Place downtown as Arn Tellem shared his family history.

Tellem paused and gathered himself as he talked about his grandfather, Max, who emigrated from the shtetl of Viduklė, Lithuania, to Philadelphia in 1910. An Orthodox Jew, Max hailed from a long line of rabbis. His frequent Sunday visits to his grandfather often consisted of playing chess and watching baseball.

“He used to say that being a Phillies fan was like being Jewish — it wasn’t easy, and every day, it was a test of faith,” Tellem, a former sports power agent and the Pistons’ current vice chairman, said, drawing laughter from the crowd.

**ON THE FLOOR:** Kevin Knox capitalizing on big opportunity after being buried on bench

Tellem and his wife, Nancy, were honored at the Zekelman Holocaust Center’s 38th Anniversary Benefit on Nov. 13. Both of their families were affected by the tragedy, during which 6 million Jews and millions of others were murdered by Nazi Germany and its collaborators during World World II. Max was able to bring three of his siblings to the United States. Two others, Aaron and Bayla, remained in Europe and were eventually killed by Nazis.

Arn is named after Aaron, carrying his Hebrew name. As the NBA handles the fallout from Brooklyn Nets star Kyrie Irving posting an antisemitic movie on Twitter a month ago, the Pistons have been able to learn, largely through Tellem, the history of Jewish people in Europe and America, and why antisemitic propaganda is dangerous.

Every coach on the roster — including head coach Dwane Casey — and nearly every player, attended the benefit despite that Sunday being a rare off day for the team. General manager Troy Weaver, assistant general managers George David, Josh Bartelstein, Tony Leotti and several others front office members were also present. Several Pistons players sent supportive texts to Tellem after his speech.

“For the players to see and witness and hear the memories in the film that was shown, I think the hope is when you have those events, the immeasurable pain of the Holocaust and the significance is not lost on this generation or any future generation,” Tellem told the Free Press in a phone interview this week. “That’s the importance. For all of us — for the players, for the coaching staff — I think it’s a reminder for all of us and for all of us that were there and for all of us as we talk about these things, is so we can never shut our eyes, never turn our backs, never refuse to acknowledge the truth no matter how unpleasant and we must remind ourselves of these tragedies, not just the Jewish ones but of all these tragedies that we suffered, and that it shouldn’t be lost on any future generation.”

On Oct. 27, Irving posted a documentary titled “Hebrews to Negroes: Wake Up Black America.” The documentary, among many false claims, included a fake quote from Adolf Hitler claiming that “negroes” are the “true Hebrews,” and asserted that the Holocaust never happened. The next day, Nets owner Joe Tsai tweeted that he was “disappointed” that Irving shared the documentary. On Oct. 29, the NBA released a statement condemning hate speech.

After Irving failed to apologize for sharing the documentary on social media, NBA commissioner Adam Silver released a statement on Nov. 3 condemning Irving’s “reckless decision to post a link to a film containing deeply offensive antisemitic material.” Nike suspended its partnership with Irving and announced it wouldn’t release his next shoe, the Kyrie 8. The Nets eventually suspended Irving for at least five games; it ended up lasting for eight games. Irving has since apologized, but he received support from several NBA players, including LeBron James, who felt his punishment was excessive.

Tellem has seen a worrying rise in antisemitism in the United States over the last half-decade. He declined to weigh in on Irving for the story, but he wants to use his platform to

educate — not just the Pistons, but broader society as well.

**MITCH ALBOM:** Holy day brings a sad reminder: Antisemitism is always around

“It’s about education and really, for me, what’s so hard and really since 2015 or 16, our country has really been divided,” Tellem told the Free Press. “There’s been so much hatred unleashed against all people, just recently against gays in Colorado. Racism and antisemitism and all forms of bigotry have been unleashed in this country. And for me, what was powerful about the night is that it brought all of us together in a moment of support for one another. What was so encouraging for me was that the players and coaching staff all reacted overwhelmingly positive about the experience they had there that night, and wanting to learn more, wanting an expression of support.”

Neither Tellem or the Pistons have shied away from politics since Tellem joined the franchise in 2015. In June 2020, the organization marched alongside protestors following George Floyd’s murder. Later that summer, the Henry Ford Pistons Performance Center was converted to a satellite center for that November’s presidential election.

Tellem sees sports as a vehicle to bring people together. In the wake of the NBA’s bout with antisemitism, he hopes sports can accomplish that goal once again.

“Hopefully it will open up better dialogue between us, which is the most important thing, having better dialogue among everyone,” Tellem said. “Everyone has suffered, and has tragedy and loss in their background and heartbreak. To better learn about everyone’s experience, whether it’s Blacks, Muslims, Hispanics or Jews, or anyone else, the list is endless. Hopefully it’ll enable us to get to a better place in our society through this kind of dialogue and education.”

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