

THE WEEKLY PRINT

The timely arrival of HBO's 'Oslo'; In a Dallas council race, police politics are dividing the Jewish community; Bob Dylan at 80; Inside the new New Orleans museum telling the stories of Southern Jews; Jonathan Chait on the Israel debate and left-wing antisemitism; and Edward-Isaac Dovere chronicles the 'craziest election' in American history

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The timely arrival of HBO's 'Oslo'

Director Bartlett Sher reflects on the lessons of history, why the Middle East matters to so many people and what the Oslo peace process could teach Washington

By Gabby Deutch

The opening scene of the film “Oslo” begins not in Norway but in an unusually snow-covered Middle East. A dream sequence intersperses videos of violence in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank with footage of a European woman, headscarf pulled down around her neck, wandering through Gaza. An ominous soundtrack crescendos as the violence grows more intense, until viewers see the woman in a United Nations car that takes a direct hit from a projectile — a bullet or a rock, it isn’t clear which.

The woman is Mona Juul, an official in the Norwegian Foreign Ministry who is haunted by her time in Gaza, including a memory of seeing a Palestinian boy with a stone in his hand get shot by an Israeli soldier. After returning from the region, she and her husband Terje Rød-Larsen, a social scientist, undertake the defining mission of their career: orchestrating the 1993 back-channel negotiations that kicked off what ultimately became the Oslo Accords.

The story of Mona and Terje — and the Israelis and Palestinians they brought together — was first told in the 2016 Broadway play “Oslo.” That show has now been adapted into a movie, which premieres

Saturday on HBO and was produced by Marc Platt and Steven Spielberg. Playwright J.T. Rogers adapted the script, and his collaborator, Tony Award-winning director Bartlett Sher, directed the film.

The movie depicts how this unlikely Norwegian couple convinced Israelis and Palestinians to come together at a historic mansion in a Scandinavian forest to hash out their differences while enjoying traditional fish dishes and drinking copious amounts of liquor.

The characters at the heart of the story are not the expected leaders — no one plays Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin or U.S. President Bill Clinton, although Shimon Peres, then Israel’s foreign minister, makes a brief appearance. Instead, it features the lower-level politicians and intellectuals who participated in the early rounds of talks, before they became official. The Israeli side includes, first, a professor from Haifa, and later Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin and Uri Savir, director-general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry. The Palestinian side features Ahmed Qurei, the PLO’s finance minister who is living in exile in Tunisia, and Hassan Asfour, his associate.

“The premise was getting enemies into

a room to actually see each other as human beings,” Sher told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview in Washington, D.C. “Oslo” tells the story of a nearly three-decade-old event, but it does not attempt to offer a comprehensive history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; instead, it seeks to offer lessons on courage, leadership and humanity from an era that now feels quite distant.

The recent 11-day war between Israel and Hamas might be compelling marketing for a movie about Israelis and Palestinians who were committed to coming together to end decades of fighting. “I would give anything for it not to be like this at this moment. Let’s just make that clear,” Sher said. But, he added, he recognized that it could “stir up a huge amount of interest in the subject, and therefore someone [who] goes to see ‘Oslo’ will learn something good, about the positive, about the history of where we are.”

While the movie is coming out at a time in which increased attention has been given to the conflict, it is also being released into a cultural moment where one-sidedness is very much in fashion, at least on social media. Many people who have recently begun to speak out about the conflict seemingly shun the complexity that is an inherent feature of the film.

“Great theater is always not between a wrong and right, but between two rights. If both sides are right, in a way it makes for a better story,” said Sher. “For people now who’ve gotten so entrenched in certain positions, to see that there was a time when people were willing to be helping, doesn’t hurt.”

While the disputes between the Israelis and the Palestinians remain unresolved, Sher views “Oslo” as a historical film. “It’s not a story which has a conclusion, and I don’t make the conclusion that, ‘Oh, if only we could go back to Oslo,’” Sher explained. “Learning about your own history, especially in the crazy social media world, is good.”

The story of these early negotiations is told through the eyes of Mona and Terje, who are meant to be neutral facilitators. Throughout the movie, Mona remains calm, interjecting only to stop an outburst from one of the Israeli or Palestinian negotiators. Keeping thoughts internal is more difficult for Terje, but he, too, succeeds — the conversations are left to the Israelis and Palestinians, who often pull the doors to the negotiating room closed as Mona and Terje watch from outside.

“They delivered us into a world we didn’t know, but they didn’t take credit for or try to do it from a motivation, or like they’re there to save all these people,” Sher noted. Still, he recognizes that telling the story of one of the most complicated regional, religious conflicts in the world through the eyes of white Christian characters could be a minefield. “We assiduously avoided that. It would be a trap. It’s not up to us,” he said. “The agency and importance of the story has to live with the Israelis and the Palestinians, and the Norwegians are simply the facilitators.”

This neutrality is what makes the roles of Mona and Terje so difficult for the actors to play, said Sher. “It’s hard on the actors playing those roles, because they don’t get to have their own emotional response. They have to withhold, and they have to stay back,” he said. The couple is played by the British actors Ruth Wilson, a Golden Globe- and Tony-nominated actress who recently appeared in “His Dark Materials,” and Andrew Scott, who gained international acclaim two years ago when he starred in the hit show “Fleabag.”

The play came about from a personal connection: Sher and Terje’s daughters were best friends who attended the same elementary school in Manhattan. They would see each other at the girls’ soccer games, where Terje recounted tales of his largely secret role in getting the Oslo peace process off the ground. “He would tell me the most outrageous stories about Middle East peace. It occurred to me that that was theatrical, the theatricality of hearing about going up there and doing a back channel and getting them to all sit and talk.”

Sher and Rogers, the playwright, have collaborated on other historical plays. The pair previously produced a play called “Blood and Gifts,” about the Stinger missile program in Afghanistan in the 1980s. “It was the most successful counterintelligence operation in U.S. history. It helped the Russians be driven out of Afghanistan, and it produced one thing that wasn’t so good. That was Osama bin Laden,” said Sher. The pair also worked on a project on the 50th anniversary of the moon landing. They are now working on a production based on The Power Broker, Robert Caro’s bestselling book about Robert Moses, the influential and controversial New York City urban planner.

Sher’s CV is long, with a mix of originals plays and adaptations, including the 2019 Broadway production of Harper Lee’s “To Kill a Mockingbird.” But Sher has also directed a number of award-winning musicals, including a 2008 revival of South Pacific that won him a Tony and a 2015 production of “Fiddler on the Roof.”

“Like most people [in the industry], I was in shows in school, in high school, playing small parts in musicals,” Sher said. After writing plays in college, he went back to his high school in California to run the drama department. He went to graduate school in England, where he studied sub-Saharan African theater and then experimental Polish theater. “I had a weird range of influences,” Sher noted, “and then I got better teachers and mentors and went into theater, and have been doing it for a long time since.”

In bringing “Oslo” to the big screen, Sher had to learn an entirely new way of directing. For one, the length had to change; the movie is just under two hours, while the

play clocks in at two hours and 45 minutes. One challenge that he faced as a director was the fact that film is less interactive and less intimate than theater. At a play, with a live audience, “you get to select what you’re focusing on, and the whole thing’s going to unfold in front of you,” Sher explained. “In film, I’m going to select every single thing you see, and I’m going to really control all of that.”

With a play, the director can make changes before each showing. To now release “Oslo” to the entire world as a static, unchanging creation is something new for Sher. “The basic experience of releasing a film is so weird compared to theater, because you’re going every day, and you’re having audiences respond every night,” said Sher. “We’ve been working on it in this vacuum, and we’re gonna go from 250 to 300 people seeing it to millions.”

The now-global reach of “Oslo” helps introduce the story to people around the world who are unfamiliar with it. But it also means astute and potentially critical Israeli and Palestinian viewers. (The play was staged in Israel, but “I think they cut a lot of it,” he noted.) Ultimately, Sher isn’t concerned. “All the actors were from Israel and Palestine, and they were so extraordinary and so invested in it,” said Sher. “I didn’t feel like I was suddenly just making up my version of the world there, but I was actually participating with people who lived through a lot of this.”

Sher has no obvious connection to the subject matter, but he argues that “I don’t have to live through something to work on it.” Still, he does have Jewish roots: His father was born in a shtetl in Lithuania and fled pogroms in Europe, a fact Sher only learned as a teenager, after his parents had divorced. Sher’s father rejected his faith as a way to assimilate and stave off antisemitism he thought he might face in the business world. He never spoke about it. “My mother was about to marry him and went home to meet his parents, and I think after a few days, she said something like, ‘Is there something you want to tell me?’ Because, of course, they’re speaking Yiddish in the house.”

Sher’s father died relatively young, and he never got to ask about his Jewish background. But it remained a fascination of Sher’s, eventually contributing to his

decision to direct the “Fiddler on the Roof” revival. “Often the first generation holds onto their beliefs. The second generation will reject everything. Then the third generation will become obsessed with the first generation,” said Sher. “I always was kind of obsessed and fascinated myself... It didn’t become a religious obsession. I was most attracted to the culture, the ideas.”

While the topic of the film could, at least in theory, be rather niche, Sher understands that the conflict attracts outsized global attention. “I’ve always had this thing about the Middle East. It’s at the center of a lot of our consciousness in general, and it’s an unresolved thing,” he explained. “It does matter to everyone, so if something happens, like that has happened in the last couple of

weeks, it affects the whole world, because that region is at the heart of so many things. We all have a responsibility for it.”

And while it might not be part of the official marketing campaign, Sher insists that the movie has broader resonance beyond one small corner of the Middle East. “Leaders and people who work in these positions make these efforts and have to do these courageous things. That’s just how it is. I don’t mean just about Palestine, Israel. I mean about everything,” said Sher. “When we first did it, we said it was basically about Republicans and Democrats.”

The play has been staged in numerous cities around the world. Sher said people who saw it in London left talking about Brexit while viewers in South Korea walked

away discussing the country’s enmity with its northern neighbor. Sher met with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) earlier this week, and he said they discussed this “sublayer” of the movie. “What is it going to take — can you get Ilhan Omar and AOC and Josh Hawley and Ted Cruz in the room together? And what would happen?”

It’s an almost laughably optimistic message to bring to Washington. Then again, no one thought anything would come of Mona and Terje’s plucky peacemaking efforts.

“I think that’s the kind of secret message,” said Sher. “If it’s between two opposing forces, can they come to agreement? How do you get that agreement to work? That’s really what we were always trying to do.” ♦

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In a Dallas council race, police politics are dividing the Jewish community

Two Orthodox Jewish candidates face off in a Dallas City Council run-off next week, in a race that is about much more than roads and potholes

By Gabby Deutch

Jaynie Schultz and Barry Wernick belong to the same Orthodox synagogue in Dallas, Texas. Growing up, Wernick earned a scholarship from the Schultz family that helped fund his Jewish education. A few years ago, Schultz cheered Wernick on as he produced a horror film. Their kids go to the same Jewish day school.

Now, they are running against each other for Dallas City Council in an unexpectedly contentious race that will be decided in a run-off election on June 5. In the first round of voting earlier this month, Wernick won 38% of the vote to Schultz’s 36%.

The race is nonpartisan, focused on local issues like property taxes and zoning. But one of the most potent issues in Dallas is public safety, and the race has turned into a full-fledged battle over the movement to defund the police,

with the theatrics and mud-slinging that have become commonplace in national politics in recent years.

“Safety and security is by far the biggest issue in our neighborhood, and Barry has done a very good job of pressing on that issue,” said Bruce Wilke, the president of the Hillcrest-Forest Neighborhood Association, where both Schultz and Wernick live. Wilke has endorsed Schultz in a personal capacity, not in his role at the nonprofit. “It is a pretty evenly matched and heated race, more so than I’ve seen in the past.”

While the race is exceedingly local, it demonstrates how some of the national political dynamics that have flared in the past year can trickle down to elections at other levels. Misinformation about both campaigns has been spread by surrogates, supporters and dark money groups; a conservative is trying to paint

his more liberal opponent as anti-police; and partisanship has erupted in a surprisingly fierce way.

But because both candidates are members of the tight-knit Dallas Jewish community, the campaign feels more personal than most. One local rabbi called the race a “touchy subject in our community,” and told Jewish Insider that he was “taking a hard pass on talking to the media about it.”

Wernick, a lawyer, has successfully positioned himself as the ‘pro-police’ candidate, earning him the endorsement of the Dallas Police Association. He told JI he got into the race after watching Black Lives Matter protests devolve into riots last summer, noting that his wife said to him: “Look, you’ve either got to run, because you can win, or we’re going to have to move to the country. Dallas isn’t the same,” he recalled.

Although Wernick was the last contender to enter the four-candidate race, Schultz has spent recent months playing catch-up and countering the law enforcement-focused narrative being driven by Wernick. “I think Jaynie probably would have been a runaway [victor] if Barry hadn’t entered the race when he did,” said Wilke.

But Schultz said that had their roles been reversed, she wouldn’t have entered the race. “Had Barry already filed to run months before, as I did, I don’t think I would have run against him. I wouldn’t have done that to my community,” Schultz claimed in an interview with JI.

This race marks the first time either candidate has run for public office, although both have been active in civic life for a long time — and for both of them, a connection to Judaism and to Israel has guided their work.

When Wernick was growing up in Dallas, his father was a rabbi at a large Conservative synagogue, but he abandoned his family and his congregation when Wernick was young. “Although my father was a rabbi when he left, he didn’t take our religion with him. My mother always instilled strong faith in us,” said Wernick.

During college at the University of Texas at Austin, he studied in Russia, having learned some Russian from his grandmother as a child. Coming of age during the Cold War, Wernick felt that “learning the language or something of our enemy was something that I thought would be useful,” he said. He later spent time in Israel, working with Russian and Ethiopian immigrants to help them acclimate to Israeli society. When he returned to Texas, he got involved with the Zionist Organization of America.

Now Wernick is a practicing attorney, but earlier in his career he gave acting a try. He filmed some commercials in New York, and for two-and-a-half seasons he served as a stand-in for the Mr. Big character on *Sex and the City*. “It’s an actor who’s actually on the

crew side,” Wernick explained. “You are blocking each scene for the actual actor who comes in later to shoot the scene because they need to get the lighting right. They want to see where their cameras are moving.”

Throughout his life, Wernick has dabbled in filmmaking. He produced a 2007 documentary called “Kosher Chili Cook-Off,” about Jewish identity in Texas, and a 2012 fantasy-horror movie called “Bad Kids Go to Hell,” based on a comic book he authored. (Schultz and her family wanted to support the project, “but it was so violent that I couldn’t watch it,” she said. “We tried to help at the beginning, because here’s someone trying to do something interesting and find a career. And once I saw a little piece of it, I couldn’t watch anymore.”)

Texas eventually called Wernick home. “It was bucolic. Dallas had everything,” he said. “That’s why I moved back here 13 years ago, to find my Texas girl.” He is currently producing a film about the unsolved murder of his wife’s sister, who was 28 when she was killed 19 years ago.

Schultz’s family has deep philanthropic roots in the Dallas community. Her father Howard Schultz — no relation to the Starbucks founder — was a financial entrepreneur who founded the first global audit recovery business, and who has been a prominent donor to Jewish causes.

Schultz inherited an interest in civic life from her parents. “I’ve been interested in and involved with municipal politics and municipal issues since I was 15 years old,” Schultz said. “Through [my] public high school, I got an internship at City Hall.”

After graduating from UT Austin (like Wernick) and then earning a master’s degree in urban studies at the school’s Arlington campus, she worked with her mother to create a retreat center for small businesses to host conferences and events. At the same time, “I also got very involved in the national — rather than the local — Jewish community; I got involved with the early creation of the whole day

school movement,” Schultz said. She was an inaugural board member for Moishe House, a national organization that creates communal spaces for Jews in their 20s around the country.

Her connection to the Dallas Jewish community came naturally. “My family, which has been a very prominent philanthropic family here in Dallas, has been investing in the local community, through the day schools, through the creation of programs,” she explained. “One’s called Schultz Fellows, that takes local Jewish educators and religious schools and day schools — and now this newest cohort will be youth leaders — to Israel.”

Schultz’s involvement with the Dallas Jewish community has included some challenging moments. About 20 years ago, during her time as the board chair of the Akiba Academy, the day school both she and Wernick attended, “there was the split in our community between the Modern and ultra-Orthodox, and I was the board chair,” she recalled. “I saw the pain that that caused, [and] I was determined at that point that everything that I do would be about bringing people together.”

Around the same time, she got a call from an Ethiopian doctor who said that two Ethiopian boys would be coming to Dallas for surgery, and asked if Schultz would host them. She agreed. “We had four other kids, so we ended up with six kids between the ages of 2 and 9. It was the best thing that ever happened to our family. The boys helped us see the world in a different way,” she said. “It helped my kids really understand who true heroes are because those kids who didn’t speak a word of English came to this totally foreign country. They were living on the streets [in Ethiopia], and they got to be part of our family.”

One of the boys eventually came back to live with Schultz’s family when he was in high school, and he recently sent her a video — the now-27-year-old works at a travel company in Ethiopia — saying why people should vote for her in the race. “I was actually sitting at the polling place, and he messaged me on Facebook and said, ‘Ima, are

you okay with me posting this?’ and I just started sobbing,” Schultz noted, using the Hebrew word for mother. “All the other candidates are like, ‘What is wrong with you?’”

The race has not been easy for the Jewish community.

A self-described conservative, Wernick said he views the race as pure politics, and not a knock on Schultz, whom he has known for most of his life. “This is not something personal, and it shouldn’t be,” said Wernick. “It shouldn’t divide the community.”

Yet the race already has. Residents of the North Dallas neighborhood at the heart of District 11 received mailers last month from a dark money group called Keep Dallas Safe that called Schultz a “Radical Leftist committed to DEFUNDING the Police ... Stands With RIOTS, LOOTERS and GANG MEMBERS.”

Wernick denied any connection to Keep Dallas Safe, but he also did not condemn the mailers. His campaign has also sent mailers criticizing Schultz, using similar language and imagery that she says misrepresents her beliefs. “When rioters burned down cities in America, and some looters destroyed small businesses in Dallas, some ‘leaders’ justified the violence,” said one Wernick campaign mailer, which featured an image of a convenience store on fire. It included a screenshot of a post on Schultz’s Facebook page that said “No justice, no peace.”

She said the image was photoshopped to exclude the rest of the post, which she had shared from Moishe House. Schultz has not yet sent any mailers mentioning Wernick by name, but told JI that she plans to before election day.

“These mailers are making people feel like they ought to be scared, and there’s no reason for them to be scared,” Schultz said. Overall crime in the district remained about even from 2019 to 2020, according to Dallas Police Department data, but the category of “crimes against person” — including assault and rape — increased by 10%.

Schultz is well-known in the area for her involvement with both local and national Jewish organizations, including area day schools, the American Jewish Committee and the Jewish Federations of North America. This race is her first time running for public office. “I am a nonpartisan centrist,” said Schultz, “which honestly hasn’t helped my campaign in that sense, because it’s gone very partisan.”

Some conservatives are skeptical of that claim, because she has donated money to Democratic candidates in the past, including \$2,550 last year. “Jaynie is sort of hiding her liberalism, because she knows this is a mostly Republican, conservative district, and she wants to win. So she’s trying to come across as a moderate,” claimed Candy Evans, a local real estate agent and blogger who also ran in District 11 but was eliminated after receiving the fewest votes. She has endorsed Wernick in the run-off, while a fourth candidate who also ran for the seat — Hosanna Yemiru, a 23-year-old progressive — has endorsed Schultz.

But Evans’s claim isn’t quite true, either: The area has moved markedly left in recent years. In 2018, Democratic Rep. Colin Allred beat incumbent Rep. Pete Sessions (R-TX), who had represented the area in Congress for 22 years. (Sessions was elected to Congress again in 2020 in a different district, now representing Waco and College Station.) Allred’s congressional district, which includes much of the council district that Schultz and Wernick want to represent, narrowly voted for Hillary Clinton in 2016; last year, Biden won the district in a 10-point landslide. The shifting politics might work in Schultz’s favor if she were to declare herself a liberal, but she has avoided labels.

“She’s really tried to run in a nonpartisan race that talks about the needs of the city of Dallas, and it’s been sad to watch Barry try to nationalize it and really talk about things that the city council doesn’t even do but that rile up a partisan feeling,” said Betsy Kleinman, a local Democratic activist who grew up with Wernick’s brother and who is supporting Schultz in the race.

Wernick doesn’t deny that he has brought partisanship into the race. “I’m obviously conservative. I’ve never hid from that,” said Wernick.

“I think he figured out very astutely,

by the way, that there’s an appetite for [the politics], even within portions of the Jewish community, which he is seeking to represent,” said Bradley Laye, who served as president and CEO of the Jewish Federation of Greater Dallas until 2019. He is supporting Schultz in the race.

With her recent stint on the City Plan Commission, Schultz is not new to urban issues. Wernick, though, has focused on national politics. “I never really paid that much attention to the local level, but last summer, it hit me, like, wow, you’ve got rioters burning down cities across the country. You’ve got looters destroying small businesses in my own hometown here in Dallas,” Wernick said. Rather than infrastructure, property taxes, or any other issues, “the number one thing that should be taken care of is our public safety,” he said.

Both candidates agree on this. “Neither of us is interested in cutting that public safety budget,” said Schultz. But Wernick insists — without evidence — that she is being disingenuous. “How strong is her conviction toward making public safety a number one priority issue? Or is she doing it simply to get the votes because she knows that’s what she needs to do?” Wernick asked.

“My [opponent] has consistently lied about my stance on public safety,” Schultz claimed. One challenge for Schultz is that the district’s current council member, Lee Kleinman, has endorsed her. (Kleinman is the brother-in-law of Betsy Kleinman.) Kleinman voted not only to cut funding for police overtime in the fall, he also voted against the overall city budget that increased police spending. “In some way she may be paying the price for that endorsement,” said Evans.

Schultz has tried to make the case that she and Kleinman are not the same. “I would not have voted to reduce overtime as my predecessor did last spring,” she said. In fact, Schultz added, “I would support what the new chief requests,” suggesting that she would want to increase police spending.

Still, her detractors continue to paint her as an opponent of the police. “[Wernick] is the pro-police candidate and the other candidate is not,” said Benji Gershon, president and founder of Dallas Jewish Conservatives, a political organization that is supporting Wernick.

Policy positions are not the only matters subject to manipulation and falsehoods in this campaign. Both candidates have accused the other's campaign of stealing their respective yard signs. Schultz said she heard from a rabbi that someone had spread the rumor that she supported the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement against Israel — which both she and Wernick acknowledge is outlandish and untrue. These conversations have played out in conversations on the hyperlocal, neighborhood-focused social media app NextDoor and in Facebook groups both public and private.

"The Jewish community, I would say, 20 years ago was really very united for the most part," said Betsy Kleinman. "With the election of Obama, things started fracturing more. Then with the election of Trump, they

started polarizing more, so I think there's been a realignment. People have sort of gone with the people they're more like-minded with politically in the Jewish community." This is not unique to the Jewish community: A poll released by Pew in September 2020 showed that about 40% of both Trump and Biden supporters had no close friends who supported the other candidate.

Still, both Wernick and Schultz told JI that they don't expect the results of this race to entrench some permanent divide in the community.

"I would never ever hold it against anyone who voted against me, ever, and so I hope that when this election is over, there won't be any further division," noted Schultz.

Wernick echoed those sentiments. "This is a political race. Whoever wins, wins; whoever loses, loses. We won't stop davening together," he said.

Sharon Wisch-Ray, the longtime

publisher and editor of the Texas Jewish Press, said the Dallas Jewish community is unique in its ability to overcome political boundaries.

"I've heard over and over from people that have come from outside of Dallas and gotten involved with the Dallas Jewish community, who are always amazed that people from both sides of the aisle and different streams of Judaism come together and work collaboratively with one another to get things done," said Wisch-Ray. ♦

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Bob Dylan at 80

Among the songwriting legend's many mysteries, a look at his relationship to Judaism and Israel

By Matthew Kassel

Bob Dylan has never made it easy for the legions of fans, critics, scholars and journalists who analyze his music with almost Talmudic fervor. Famously unforthcoming in interviews, which are rare, the protean singer-songwriter and Nobel Prize winner has succeeded in keeping listeners guessing over the course of his nearly six-decade recording career.

Dylan, who turns 80 today, remains a mystifying figure in American popular culture, even as many of the songs from his 39 studio albums — the most recent of which, *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, came out last year — feel as relevant today as they did when they were first produced, including "Masters of War," "The Times They Are A-Changin'," and "Hurricane,"

among countless other hits.

"Bob Dylan displayed the wit and wisdom of an 80-year-old man from the very first time we heard him at age 21 in 1962," Seth Rogovoy, the author of *Bob Dylan: Prophet, Mystic, Poet*, told *Jewish Insider* in a recent email exchange. "The point is not so much age as it is timelessness."

Even obscure works from Dylan's lesser-known albums manage, on occasion, to speak to the moment long after they have been released. "Neighborhood Bully," from Dylan's 1983 record *Infidels*, was released a year after the First Lebanon War and two years after an airstrike in which Israel destroyed an Iraqi nuclear reactor outside Baghdad. But its themes have

clear parallels with the recent conflict between Israel and Hamas. The song, a hard-driving rock number, never explicitly mentions Israel, yet it is widely interpreted as something of a Zionist anthem in the form of a biting satire lambasting those who would fault the Jewish state for defending itself in a hostile region.

The neighborhood bully just lives to survive

He's criticized and condemned for being alive

He's not supposed to fight back, he's supposed to have thick skin

He's supposed to lay down and die when his door is kicked in

He's the neighborhood bully

“It’s so right for this moment, with the whole discussion of Israel being totally hypocritical,” argued Barry Shrage, a professor in the Hornstein Jewish Professional Leadership Program at Brandeis University and the former president of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston.

For Barry Faulk, a professor of English at Florida State University who specializes in 20th century popular music, “Neighborhood Bully” speaks more broadly to what he regards as an aspect of Dylan’s political temperament that in some ways cuts against his reputation as a countercultural icon. “It reminds me that Dylan has long worked outside, even against, the secular liberalism that was the core value of his early audience,” Faulk told JI, describing the song as one of his favorites in Dylan’s extensive oeuvre.

True to form, however, Dylan has kept his distance from “Neighborhood Bully,” a controversial song that has garnered its fair share of criticism over the past few decades — and is, somewhat mysteriously, unavailable on YouTube despite that other songs from *Infidels* can be accessed on the site.

Dylan has never performed the song live, according to Terry Gans’s 2020 book *Surviving in a Ruthless World: Bob Dylan’s Voyage to ‘Infidels.’* The singer only seems to have discussed it once, in a 1984 interview with *Rolling Stone* in which he denied that the song was a Zionist political statement.

“You’d have to point that out to me, you know, what line is in it that spells that out,” Dylan told the journalist Kurt Loder, adding: “‘Neighborhood Bully,’ to me, is not a political song, because if it were, it would fall into a certain political party. If you’re talkin’ about it as an Israeli political song — even if it is an Israeli political song — in Israel alone, there’s maybe 20 political parties. I don’t know where that would fall, what party.”

But when Loder asked if it would be “fair to call that song a heartfelt statement of belief,” Dylan seems to have let his guard down ever so slightly.

“Maybe it is, yeah,” he replied. “But

just because somebody feels a certain way, you can’t come around and stick some political-party slogan on it. If you listen closely, it really could be about other things. It’s simple and easy to define it, so you got it pegged, and you can deal with it in that certain kinda way. However, I wouldn’t do that, ‘cause I don’t know what the politics of Israel is. I just don’t know.”

Despite his self-proclaimed ignorance of Israeli politics, Dylan has nevertheless maintained a connection with the Jewish state throughout his career. He has visited Israel a number of times and played a handful of shows there, most recently in 2011. In 1983, the year he put out “Neighborhood Bully” — released in Hebrew by Ariel Zilber in 2012 — Dylan celebrated his son’s bar mitzvah at the Western Wall.

Still, on a personal as well as an artistic level, Dylan also seems to have demonstrated something of an ambivalent relationship with his own Judaism. Born Robert Zimmerman, Minnesota’s Jewish son briefly flirted with born-again Christianity in the late 1970s and early ’80s — during which time he produced a trio of evangelical albums, the first of which *Slow Train Coming*, is regarded as a classic of the form.

“He put poetry on the jukebox — put the Bible on the jukebox!” said Liz Thomson, a London-based author and Dylan expert.

But while Dylan’s music has always retained something of a Biblical subtext, he has rarely alluded to his Jewish roots, with the exception of some songs such as “Highway 61 Revisited,” “All Along the Watchtower,” “With God on Our Side” and the little-known novelty “Talkin’ Hava Nagilah Blues.”

“For the most part he is not explicit about these themes,” said Elliot Wolfson, a professor of Jewish Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who contributed an essay on Dylan’s “Jewish gnosis” to a new collection, *The World of Bob Dylan*.

In many ways, that approach is in keeping with Dylan’s persistent effort to evade any kind of label, according

to the music historian and critic Ted Gioia. “For me, Dylan will always be the musician who didn’t care about having a personal logo, or attaching his name to a running shoe, or launching a high-priced fashion line,” he told JI. “If you believe his songs, he expected us to have higher aspirations than that. Even now, I’d like to think that’s what he wants his legacy to be after he’s gone.”

Gayle Wald, a professor of English at The George Washington University, echoed that sentiment. “From a certain perspective,” she said of Dylan, “he’s not very satisfying because he’s not intelligible, always, as a Jew.”

One gets the sense, though, that Dylan wouldn’t want it any other way. ♦

Inside the new New Orleans museum telling the stories of Southern Jews

Often excluded from the narrative of American Jewish life, Southern Jews finally get their due in a museum designed to welcome visitors of all faiths

By Gabby Deutch

When Jewish immigrants first arrived in the U.S. from Europe, their first stop was Ellis Island — or at least that's how the narrative goes. But for many, their first sighting of American shores was Galveston, Tex., a port city that welcomed thousands of Jewish immigrants who would settle across the American South. In cities and towns from Dallas to Vicksburg, Miss., to Charleston, S.C., Jews created community and became part of the fabric of this complicated region.

Now, a new museum in New Orleans wants to teach locals and tourists alike the story of America's Southern Jews, a story that does not always make it into the collective memory of American Jews in big cities like New York or Los Angeles.

The Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience (MSJE), which opens on Thursday, had originally planned to open its doors last October but was delayed due to the coronavirus pandemic. The opening is now timed to coincide with Memorial Day weekend, though a larger grand opening celebration is set to take place this fall.

On an exclusive tour previewing the museum last week, executive director Kenneth Hoffman told *Jewish Insider* that the institution aims to fight a common misperception: that people "didn't know there were Jews in the South." The notion mostly comes from "Jews who aren't from the South, because for them, the center of their universe is their own community, New York or Cherry Hill, N.J., or whatever," said Hoffman, who grew up in Baton Rouge, La. "When people think about

immigration, they think about Ellis Island. When people think about Jewish communities, maybe they're thinking about Brooklyn."

The new museum makes the case that understanding the experiences of Southern Jews is essential to understanding the broader story of American Jews — essential, even, to truly understanding the history of the United States, a country of immigrants.

"We want to expand people's understanding of the South," Hoffman explained. "People think of the South in terms of black and white, racially, and that's understandable. It's correct. That is the blanket that covers all of Southern history and really all of American history, the racial issues. But they're not the only stories."

The museum is on the edge of New Orleans's central business district, down the street from the city's acclaimed World War II Museum and less than a mile from the French Quarter. Visitors enter through a small storefront across the street from the streetcar line. "We've got a very small footprint," Hoffman noted. The museum's three permanent exhibitions are on the first floor, with a temporary exhibition space on the second floor. The top three floors of the building house apartments.

MSJE's arrival in New Orleans is a long time coming. The museum itself dates back to the mid-1980s, when it started as an exhibit at the Henry S. Jacobs Camp, a Union for Reform Judaism Jewish sleepaway camp outside of Jackson, Miss. The early MSJE began as "a repository for all the small-town congregations that were disappearing," said Hoffman. People

from small towns across the South who had attended Jacobs Camp would ask Macy Hart, the camp's then-director, "I'm the last Jew, we're selling the building to the Baptist church. What do I do with the Torahs?" Hoffman, who interned at the museum when it was at the summer camp, recalled. "Macy said, 'Bring them here. We'll keep them.'"

The museum was not able to attract many visitors, even as its collection grew. "That's why they closed it and decided to move it to where it could be an accessible museum — not just to the summer campers and their parents dropping them off and picking them up," Hoffman explained. Any other would-be visitors had to call the camp's office in Jackson to make an appointment to go to the camp, in Utica, Miss. When they arrived, a staff member would need to greet them to open the gates.

So the museum's board of trustees decided to relocate it, and after a search process scoured locations across the South, they settled on New Orleans, home to a vibrant Jewish community of about 10,000 as well as a bustling tourism economy.

Hoffman, who had attended Jacobs Camp as a child and wrote his master's thesis on the shrinking Jewish community of Port Gibson, Miss., was tapped to serve as its director after spending nearly two decades as director of education at the World War II Museum. It's his first full-time gig at a Jewish museum: "After I graduated, all my museum work was not with Jewish museums or in Jewish organizations," he said. "I did meet my wife teaching Sunday school, though."

The museum's first exhibit aims to "set

people in place [and] in time,” said Hoffman. Panels provide information about when Jewish immigrants arrived in the South, along with spotlights on a handful of notable Southern Jews from the 18th and 19th centuries. “It’s not everything that happened in Southern Jewish history, obviously, but it shows some touch points where Jewish history intersects with American history and with Southern history,” noted Hoffman.

Though based in New Orleans, the museum’s focus is much wider, and it includes artifacts and history from 13 states. When Jewish immigrants came to the South, many of them became merchants, opening dry goods stores and peddling goods in pushcarts that they brought to farms. In some places, they were serving cotton farmers; in others, like Kentucky, they served coal miners; in Texas, they served cattle ranchers. “When you pull back, there’s a lot of similarities in those kinds of experiences,” said Hoffman.

Some Jews settled in larger cities like New Orleans or Atlanta, but many resided in towns with few other Jews. This was part of what made the Southern Jewish experience unique, though small towns certainly existed elsewhere, too. “When you live in New York, or you live in Cleveland, or you live in Baltimore, when there’s a large Jewish population, there is a kosher butcher down the street. There are 17 temples you can go to,” Hoffman explained. “When you live in Greenville, Mississippi, there is one temple you can go to. There is no kosher butcher.”

Still, despite their relatively small numbers in many municipalities, Jews were involved in local politics, government and philanthropy, the museum explains. One wall shows a map of the South, with stars of David designating cities that have had Jewish mayors. (One of the first defining historical accounts of Southern Jews is *The Provincials*, a 1973 book by Durham, N.C., native Eli N. Evans. Evans’s father Emanuel J. “Mutt” Evans was Durham’s first Jewish mayor, serving during the peak of the civil rights era, from 1951 to 1963.)

Many are quite unexpected: Galveston, Texas, which welcomed thousands of Jewish immigrants from Europe when Ellis Island grew too crowded, has had five Jewish mayors. The first two mayors of

Dumas, Ark., which today has a population of just 4,600, were Jewish. “Why is it that the first two mayors were Jews? How many Jews were there? A handful. But they were prominent citizens, because they were businessmen,” Hoffman observed. “Once they were comfortable in business, they could join civic organizations,” and eventually they ran for office.

The museum takes a nuanced approach to racial issues, aiming to highlight Jews’ assimilation into whiteness while also noting instances of antisemitism. “Jews owned slaves in about the same percentage as non-Jewish white Southerners,” said Hoffman. “Jews acclimated to the racial norms of the days they were living in. This is not our finest hour.” One glass display case features Judah P. Benjamin, the first Jewish U.S. senator. After serving in the Senate, he later held a number of cabinet positions in the Confederacy when Louisiana seceded. A \$2 Confederate banknote with his image on it was on display.

Still, Jews also faced antisemitism, including the 1915 lynching of Atlanta business owner Leo Frank, who was wrongly convicted of murder and then killed by a violent mob. “For Jews who have been here for generations, who were feeling comfortable that they had been accepted as Americans, this kind of violence was a real shock,” Hoffman said. “But I always point out to people, that even though this was an extreme form of violence against this Jewish man, the same year that Leo Frank was lynched in Georgia, 20 African Americans — that we know of — were lynched in Georgia alone. So this was a type of activity of violence that Jews experienced this one time. But it was something that was much more prevalent for African Americans.”

In the first decades of the 20th century, many Jews in the South opposed Zionism and the creation of the Jewish state out of fear that they would appear insufficiently American and disloyal to their communities. “If you’re advocating for a Jewish home, are you Jewish before you’re American?” Hoffman asked. “Up in the Northeast, where your entire community is Jewish, that’s fine, you can feel safe doing that. But when you live in the South, and there aren’t as many Jews around, maybe you don’t feel as safe as that.” When Zionists did meet in the South,

they prominently displayed American flags, as a photograph from a Chattanooga Zionist meeting in 1918 showed.

The museum approaches the Holocaust by examining Southern Jews’ responses to it; Hoffman is quick to note that it is not a Holocaust museum, though as a Jewish museum, it would seem irresponsible to not include the Holocaust at all.

One section shows how Jewish newspapers in the South, such as the *Jewish Floridian* or the *Jewish Herald-Voice* in Texas, covered Hitler’s regime and policies. Another includes information about a group of several dozen Jewish professors who arrived in the U.S. with impressive credentials from top European universities, but who could not find jobs at most American colleges because of quotas on Jewish faculty and students; instead, they found jobs at historically black colleges in the South, such as Tougaloo College in Mississippi.

Visitors can listen to oral histories from Holocaust survivors from across the South reflecting on acclimating to the U.S. after having survived the Holocaust. “They’re talking about their experience moving to the South and learning to farm or trying to find a job or encountering racial segregation,” said Hoffman, noting that one woman discussed the moral disconnect of having “just come from a place where she was persecuted because of who she was, [then] she comes to the South, and she finds that there’s an entire class of people who are persecuted because of who they are.”

A section on the civil rights movement also addresses the complexities of Jewish racial identity, with some Jews taking the side of segregationists — such as a Jewish department store that allowed police to arrest Black students holding a sit-in — and others fighting for integration, such as one rabbi who invited a Black activist to speak at his synagogue when other venues would not host him.

The final panel in the historical section is called “Summer Camp Sweethearts,” with photos of couples who met at Jewish camps in the South. At first glance, the wall seems out of place amid the historical narrative, until reading the explanation reveals that camps were actually a crucial part of allowing Southern Jewish life to thrive.

"People from smaller towns didn't have 50 Jewish boys or 50 Jewish girls to date. But at camp in the summer, they could meet other Jewish kids," said Hoffman.

The museum takes care to make its history relevant to a diverse array of visitors, aware that many will not be Jewish. "This is a human story, and it's an American story. Everybody can find something of themselves in these experiences," said Hoffman.

Part of making the museum a universally welcoming experience involved creating an exhibition teaching the basics of Judaism. Titled "What is Judaism?", the exhibit displays a 19th-century Torah from a Southern synagogue, and recreations of stained-glass synagogue windows hang from the ceiling. An interactive, touch-screen module offers games to visitors, including one that teaches about Jewish

holidays and another that quizzes visitors on their knowledge of Yiddish. If you get the question wrong, a Yiddish-inflected voice — spoken by a voice actor clearly meant to sound like your bubbe — says, "Go back to yiddische school!"

To source artifacts for the museum, Hoffman and the museum's curator, Anna Tucker, contacted Jewish federations across the South and the more than 400 synagogues in the 13 states covered by the museum. Some of the artifacts came from archives, while others were donated by individuals. But Hoffman said that writing the script — the text that appears around the museum — was the hardest part. "We're talking about 13 states and over 350 years of history. You've got to pick and choose what you're going to put up," he said.

One important aspect of recent history that the museum wants to convey is that Jews remain in the South, and in large numbers, too; they just might not be in the same places where their parents or

grandparents once lived. "Small towns started disappearing because of young people going away to college," Hoffman said. But that is not something uniquely Jewish: "That's not just the Jewish story of small towns. It's been all over the place," he noted.

"More often than not, small-town Southern Jews, who left their small towns stayed in the South, but moved to urban areas," Hoffman said. This is reflected in the museum's donors, the majority of whom are Jews who still live in cities like Atlanta, Dallas and New Orleans. Other funding has come from Jews in places like New York, though most of them also have Southern roots, too, or perhaps they went to New Orleans's Tulane University (or their children or grandchildren did).

But the story of Southern Jewish life does not remain in the past. "There are more Jews in the South today," said Hoffman, "than there ever have been before." ♦

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Jonathan Chait on the Israel debate and left-wing antisemitism

The 'New York Magazine' columnist suggests that both Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders pursue a 'no enemies to the left' strategy

By Matthew Kassel

In a recent column for New York Magazine, Jonathan Chait examines how antisemitism, particularly on the left, intersects with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "The existence of antisemitism makes it easier for Israel supporters to depict criticism of Israel as antisemitic," he writes. "The existence of Israel hawks using inflated charges of antisemitism as a cudgel makes it easier for antisemites to pose as victims being silenced."

Chait discussed that dynamic and more in an interview with *Jewish Insider* on Friday. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Jewish Insider: In your column, you

hit on a point that is not often made, which is that the left and right seem to change places on the racism debate when Jews are involved. Do you have any thoughts on why the left might be more skeptical about claims of antisemitism?

Jonathan Chait: I think people on the left are very eager to call out antisemitism by conservatives, but I think they're very skeptical to call out antisemitism by anyone on the left. In that sense, it's a pretty close parallel to the right, which is happy to call out bigotry on the left and not on the right. It's easier for them to do that on the subject of Jews, and especially

Israel, because sometimes you find that kind of bigotry on the left and sometimes you find people using the existence of bigotry on the left as a pretext to dismiss legitimate criticisms that aren't antisemitic at all. So I just think it's the contours of the political arguments that allow both sides to follow their opportunistic impulses to use accusations of bigotry as a sword when necessary.

JJ: You mention Jeremy Corbyn, the former British Labor Party leader who has been accused of antisemitism, in your piece. It seemed as if lot of British Jews associated with Labor felt gaslit

by the experience of being told Corbyn's statements weren't antisemitic or that he wasn't an antisemite. What do you make of that?

Chait: I would argue that the kind of radical politics that Corbyn was trying to advance as a Labour Party model not only allowed but maybe even required defending the antisemites. I think Corbyn's strategy really was, and always has been, "no enemies to the left." He was just going to open his door to as far left as you wanted to be. He was not going to shut you out. And on the far left, you have some real antisemites. What's more, you have a mode of discussing the Middle East that just lends itself very, very easily to antisemitism, and the farther out you get on the extreme the harder it is to distinguish the policies from antisemitism. It doesn't become impossible, but once you get out into "Zionism is racism" territory — it's just, so many people who believe that are antisemites, and it's harder and harder at some point to conceptually distinguish that from antisemitism, maybe not impossible. So I think Corbyn's political model was, ipso facto, a decision to bring antisemites into the coalition and to defend them.

JJ: *Does that carry over to American politics?*

Chait: In a weaker and paler way. I think the thing that really excited a lot of radicals about Bernie Sanders, number one, was the fact that he used socialistic language and concepts in his rhetoric, even though he often just meant it metaphorically, not literally — but also that he had this "no enemies to the left" strategy. Bernie himself has always been, I think, pretty mainstream on a lot of these issues. Certainly, he's a political liberal, he's a free speech liberal, he's not a illiberal leftist on matters of speech. And on Israel, he's certainly much more pro-Palestinian than most Democrats. But he always recognizes the humanity of both sides. However, he does bring in to that coalition a lot of people who are further to the left, and I think maybe

a little — or even a lot — less careful about recognizing the humanity of both sides and drawing a line against antisemitic discourse. So I think, on the edges of this coalition of people who were supporting him or were welcomed as his supporters, you have some people who really pushed the rhetoric in edgy and sometimes dangerous ways, even though he himself, I think, doesn't engage in that at all.

JJ: *Do you think there's any deeper reason, beyond partisanship, why the left can be dismissive of charges of antisemitism?*

Chait: What people said about Corbyn is that, because he's such a doctrinaire Marxist in his thinking, he really can't think of Jews as being a category of people who would be on the receiving end of discrimination, because he thinks of them as being wealthy and therefore privileged and therefore in the oppressor category and not the oppressed category. I think it's a bad idea to divide people into oppressed and oppressor classes, but given that's what you're doing, the Jews can wind up on the wrong end of that formula if you're kind of on the doctrinal left. So I think that is a little bit of a mental block some people on the far left have with recognizing antisemitism. But that said, I do think that most leftists recognize that antisemitism is a thing. I don't think they really are going to just say, "Well, you're Jews, you're rich, therefore, you can't be a victim of any prejudice." That's really not a left-wing view.

JJ: *What are your thoughts on accusations that Israel is an apartheid state?*

Chait: I think calling Israel an apartheid state is a controversial position. I don't think it's an antisemitic one, and I don't think it's an indefensible one at this stage. When the Israeli government has made it pretty clear that they're just not willing to take any steps toward a two-state solution, I think we're kind of past the point where you

could just say, "Well, they're just waiting for the right moment to negotiate the two-state settlement." I just don't think their interests should be taken seriously, and if you accept that their plan is just to hold on to Palestinian land without giving Palestinians equal rights forever, that's pretty close to an apartheid system. Now, the objection is that it's not an apartheid system within Israel, which is fair enough, but it is in Gaza and the West Bank.

JJ: *Does the recent uptick in antisemitic vandalism and violence we've seen over the past few days change the debate at all when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?*

Chait: I think the way to think about that is just the simplistic, banal, but true precept that hatred breeds hatred, and radicalism and extremism breed radical and extremism. I think you can easily look at those events, if you're a critic of Israeli policy, and say, "It's awful that Israeli policy has helped breed radicalism among Palestinians and radicalism among Palestinians has led to this antisemitism, which is itself helping to reinforce perversely hawkish policies among Jews in Israel." It all just seems to feed on itself. ♦

Edward-Isaac Doveire chronicles the ‘craziest election’ in American history

The new book explores the 2020 election season through the Jan. 6 Capitol riot

By Gabby Deutch

The day before Donald Trump’s inauguration in 2017, Edward-Isaac Doveire published a *POLITICO Magazine* article with a grim conclusion for Democrats. He called them a “decimated party,” working on a “not-so-certain revival strategy” after having “their brains scrambled by Trump’s win.” No one in the party could believe what was happening.

The article prompted a book contract, with Doveire pledging to write a reported account of the 2020 campaign. His project could have gone in dramatically different directions — would the Democrats, after a divisive primary with a historic 26 candidates, be able to eke out a victory? Or would they lose again to the historically unpopular Trump?

The result was both predictable and, somehow, entirely unexpected: Joe Biden, a Washington fixture for more than four decades, ascended to the Oval Office by running on what he described to Doveire as the most progressive platform in history. Perhaps the biggest surprise? “The Biden brand was stronger than the Democrats’,” Doveire told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview. Biden won states like Maine, where Democrats lost what were considered competitive Senate races by a landslide.

Doveire was a fixture on the campaign trail, bringing two voice recorders with him to every interview: One that would be used for stories he could publish in real time, for his day job at *The Atlantic*, and another that would store conversations that would not appear or be reported publicly until his book came out. The result is *Battle for the Soul: Inside the Democrats’ Campaigns*

to Beat Trump, which was released on Tuesday.

He pitched the book in 2018 by explaining that “this was going to be the craziest election, and one of probably the most important elections, in American history,” Doveire explained. “I, of course, had no concept that the COVID pandemic was going to hit, that there was going to be an economic crisis, that there was going to be the racial reckoning that started a year ago with George Floyd, and that there would be quite this crisis of democracy that we were in with the [January 6] riot and continue to be in. But it was clear that there would be a lot of this on the line.”

There were several instances in the nearly three years that Doveire spent on the book when he felt things could not possibly get any crazier. In the late summer and fall of 2019, when news broke about Trump’s call to Ukrainian Prime Minister Volodymyr Zelensky and raised questions about his solicitation of foreign involvement in U.S. elections, Doveire thought this was as wild as it would get. “We knew that it was gonna be intense, that it was shaking things up for Biden and for others,” he recalled, “and I was like, ‘How am I possibly going to cover this?’” He had that same thought countless more times in the year that followed.

On Jan. 4, 2021, Doveire spoke with his book editor, and said he would be ready to turn in his final chapter after the Georgia Senate runoff elections the next day. On Jan. 6, he was sitting in Delaware writing that final chapter when the riot happened at the U.S. Capitol — and changed everything for Democrats, and for the ending of his

book. “I had an email from my editor that said, ‘We’re going to push the book back three weeks, because we’re going need you to write on all this,’” he noted.

The book contains lots of juicy campaign gossip — recent excerpts have reported on Bernie Sanders’s travel demands (including king-size beds and a particular temperature) and Biden’s response to then-Sen. Kamala Harris skewering him at an early primary debate — but it also provides an inside look into the hectic infighting that marked the intensely crowded Democratic primary battle ahead of the 2020 election.

Doveire did not set out to write a post-mortem; instead, he reported contemporaneously, documenting key campaign events as they happened. He had declined an earlier offer asking him to write a book assessing where Democrats went wrong in 2016, having found that political operatives have a habit of revising history when reflecting on events that are in the past. “What I’ve learned over doing that is that really, you see how people’s accounts of what happened change when they’re trying to fit things in after the fact,” he said. “After the fact that people are like, ‘It *must* have been that that was the turning point moment.’ So I try to meld that sense together and have the book reflect on what it felt like as it was happening.”

For instance, in hindsight, it’s easy for observers to say that former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s decision to enter the race was doomed from the beginning. But that’s not at all the case. “On the night of Super Tuesday, about an hour before the

polls close, I was in West Palm Beach at what was conceived of as this Mike Bloomberg party that was going to be his big step into the race,” Dovere recalled. Bloomberg never got to take his victory lap; two weeks later, he earned only 8% of the vote in Florida. The only place where he earned more than 15% was American Samoa, where he got 49% of the vote and just four delegates. “There’s a whole chapter on Bloomberg in the book, and what went wrong with his campaign. And part of it is this sense that the money was going to be just all-consuming and all-powerful.”

The book includes a heavy focus on the competing factions within the Democratic Party, but reporting on the events as they happened — and taking notes in a long-running Google doc to help him remember what each moment felt like — was a way to use a narrative to make his point, rather than offering boring analysis. “It became a way of not just telling a dry story of well, progressives need to figure out what they are,” Dovere said.

Dovere’s path to covering the Democrats’ 2020 campaign started in New York City, where he began his reporting career covering City Hall in Democrat-heavy Manhattan. “When I left New York, there were three Republicans of the 51 members of the City Council,” Dovere explained. “In New York, it’s kind of, ‘What flavor of Democrat are you?’ That goes for the Republicans for the most part too. It’s like, ‘Oh, you guys are just like conservative Democrats anyplace else in the country.’”

Many of the people he covered in New York City later rose to national prominence, and as he kept in touch, the scoops he got — first at *Politico*, and now at *The Atlantic* — often involved Democrats. “People in New York end up being a feeder in that way,” he said.

Last spring, Dovere wrote a story that left a major impact on New York politics. It was relatively early in the pandemic, with people still quarantining at home, and New York City was slowly emerging from a devastating coronavirus

surge. Dovere got a tip that then-Rep. Eliot Engel (D-NY) was spending the quarantine period in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C., rather than in his district covering the Bronx and parts of Westchester County. “There were events that Engel and his office were promoting as him attending in his district,” Dovere recalled. “There was a Friday when there was one event in particular, that was handing out supplies for COVID, and Eliot Engel’s going to be there. I checked in and was told he was not actually there, from somebody else who attended.” So Dovere masked up — it was early enough that he did not yet have real masks, and instead tied a scarf around his face — and drove out to Maryland.

Dovere got out of his car, voice recorder in hand, and knocked on the door. Engel answered; Dovere explained why he was there, and Engel tried to pretend he had been both in the district and Maryland. Eventually, he admitted he had not been home during the pandemic. “It was important when an elected official was representing himself as doing something important around the pandemic — he was saying that he was in the district helping with the coronavirus, and he wasn’t.” His story, titled “Why This Democrat Won’t Go Home,” gave Engel’s primary challenger Jamaal Bowman some much-needed momentum, leading to his defeat of Engel, one of the most prominent Jewish members of Congress who served for more than 30 years.

Dovere’s book did not touch on the thorny politics around Israel and the Middle East that have highlighted divisions among Democrats in recent weeks. “Israel did not come up,” he said. But Dovere pointed out that from the beginning, Biden’s campaign took a unique stand against antisemitism, rooted in what happened at the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Va. “Charlottesville is the seminal moment for him. It’s the moment that changes everything for him, when he goes from thinking, ‘Trump is bad, but we’ll get through this,’ to, ‘He really needs to go, and I probably need to

run,’” said Dovere.

Many other candidates talked about the deadly rally in binary racial language: “It quickly got turned into, in most people’s minds as just generally racist, or a Black/white issue. But those were neo-Nazis waving Nazi flags, chanting, ‘You will not replace us,’ which is about Jews,” said Dovere. “Every time that Joe Biden has talked about Charlottesville publicly, he uses the same phrase, and he talks about that they were ‘spewing the same antisemitic bile.’”

In Dovere’s view, Biden’s understanding of antisemitism is central to the way he views racism and hatred in America. “As someone who has been in Democratic politics a long time, he’s worked on a lot of these issues,” noted Dovere. “It’s important to him to talk about Jews, and seeing that antisemitism is a gateway into all sorts of other hate, to not let that just be swept aside.” ♦