

THE WEEKLY PRINT

How one congressional candidate evolved her position on Israel in recent weeks; The life and legacy of Menachem Begin; Mapping the future for Israelis and Palestinians from a D.C. rooftop; A great escape, with help from a Ouija board; and The company bringing together female chief executives

MAY 25, 2021

How one congressional candidate evolved her position on Israel in recent weeks

New Mexico congressional contender Melanie Stansbury took a position on conditioning Israel aid two months after shying away from Israel policy questions

By Matthew Kassel

Ed. Note: This article is reprinted following Stansbury's victory in June 1's New Mexico 1st District special election with 60% of the vote.

Until recently, Melanie Stansbury, the Democratic candidate in New Mexico's 1st Congressional District special election, had little knowledge of U.S. relations with Israel. Before clinching her party's nomination, the 42-year-old state representative was unversed even on basic foreign policy matters of relevance to the Jewish state, despite having traveled through the region on a backpacking trip in her early 20s.

In a March interview with *Jewish Insider*, Stansbury said she was unfamiliar with the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, and declined to comment on the 10-year memorandum of understanding with Israel guaranteeing \$3.8 billion in annual U.S. military assistance through 2026. "I haven't dove into this issue," she admitted at the time.

But within the span of just a couple of

months, Stansbury's views have evolved considerably as she prepares for the June 1 election to succeed Rep. Deb Haaland (D-NM), the new U.S. interior secretary. While Stansbury now says she rejects BDS, she tells *JI* that she "would support divestment or sanctions initiatives that work towards the goal of a two-state solution," and she claims to support continued security assistance for Israel, with some caveats.

"That said, I also believe that any U.S. aid must only be used for security and defense and never for actions against Palestine," Stansbury said. "U.S. aid and funding must especially not be used to aid annexation in the West Bank. I support restricting aid if it is indeed being used in any way that goes against U.S. interests and values, endangers Palestinian people or threatens the basic human rights of Palestinians."

If Stansbury's carefully worded statement on restricting aid seems familiar, it is likely because the policy proposal is now being pushed by J Street, the left-leaning Israel lobbying group. The organization, which has endorsed Stansbury, recently began advocating for this approach, having

backed a new bill from Rep. Betty McCollum (D-MN) that seeks to regulate aid to Israel.

It is a new path for J Street, which has long opposed conditioning aid to Israel — as the call to do so has been endorsed by a growing number of progressive congressional candidates around the country. But a spokesperson for the organization argues that this new policy objective is different, maintaining that J Street supports "end-use restrictions" that would ensure Israel uses U.S. aid only for "legitimate security purposes."

Notwithstanding any apparent inconsistencies in J Street's reasoning, the New Mexico race represents the first major election in which the group's new approach to foreign aid is being given a platform by a viable candidate.

"We believe that Melanie, much like this seat's former occupant Secretary Deb Haaland, will be a champion for diplomacy, democracy, and human rights," said Ilya Braverman, J Street's national political director.

Stansbury, who was selected for the nomination over seven other candidates

by the state party's central committee, is expected to prevail in the heavily Democratic district, which encompasses most of Albuquerque. "This district has been leaning blue for quite some time," said Albuquerque pollster Brian Sanderoff.

But Mark Moores, the Republican opponent, believes he has a shot. "I'm probably the first serious candidate in this race for a number of years," he told *JI* in a recent interview.

Moores, a Hispanic former college football player who has been a member of the New Mexico Senate since 2013, ticks off a number of boxes that the GOP seems to be looking for in competitive races. "My family's been here since the 1600s," said Moores, who owns a medical laboratory with his wife that was responsible for COVID-19 testing during the pandemic.

The Republican contender describes Stansbury as a "radical" whose agenda "doesn't meet what is happening here in Albuquerque," citing her support for a bill endorsed by several progressive members of Congress that would eliminate federal funding for policing. "Our crime rate is through the roof."

Moores, 51, also drew a contrast with Stansbury on his support for Israel, though his views were not nearly as elaborate as his opponent's. "There's that unique relationship that goes back since the founding of Israel that is very important to us as a democracy and the relationship we

have," he said, "and I definitely will do all I can do to support that relationship."

Last week, as violence escalated between Israel and Hamas, Moores expressed his firm support for the Jewish state. "I stand with Israel and support their right to defend themselves," he said.

Stansbury's campaign did not respond to a request for comment regarding the recent conflict.

Moores, who earned an endorsement from the Albuquerque Journal in mid-May, has loaned his campaign \$200,000 of his own money, according to the latest filings from the Federal Election Commission, while raking in nearly \$400,000 in individual contributions.

Still, Stansbury appears to be well-situated with just a week until the election, even as she has gone on the attack in recent weeks. She has pulled in approximately \$1.3 million in campaign contributions, per the FEC, and early and absentee voting indicates that Democrats are turning out in larger numbers than Republicans.

"Her policy experience, compassion for others, and ability to bring communities together make her the ideal candidate to take on Mark Moores," said Marg Elliston, New Mexico's Democratic state party chair, emphasizing Stansbury's "long record of working on critical issues such as hunger, food and water insecurity, economic development, public safety, and environmental sustainability."

Stansbury, a social scientist who previously worked on Capitol Hill, has long been devoted to water resource management in New Mexico — an issue that she says lends her a distinct angle on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"My career and life's work on land and water issues and restorative justice," she says in an Israel position paper, "provides me with a unique lens through which I see opportunities for water, infrastructure, science and other exchanges to help build bridges for understanding and cooperation between Israelis, Palestinians and others in a region where water is a complex issue, just as it is in the American Southwest and New Mexico."

While foreign policy has only played a minor part in the race, Stansbury's comments suggest that she could be interested in taking an active role in addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict if she is elected next week — despite her previous lack of knowledge on the issue.

J Street, for its part, seems optimistic that Stansbury will take up its cause in Congress. "It's clear from our conversations with the candidate that she shares our commitment to diplomacy-first, pro-Israel, pro-peace policies," said Braverman, "including a commitment to addressing the occupation and other root causes of the conflict." ♦

JUNE 4, 2021

The life and legacy of Menachem Begin

A new film, 'Upheaval,' explores the leadership of the sixth prime minister of Israel — and how he shaped the modern state

By Amy Spiro

On June 7, 1981, the Israeli Air Force — acting on the orders of Prime Minister Menachem Begin — carried out a surprise airstrike on the Osirak nuclear reactor in Iraq. The operation established what became known as the "Begin Doctrine,"

the Israeli government's policy of preemptive strikes against its enemies.

Forty years to the day after that fateful operation, Jonathan Gruber's new documentary "Upheaval: The Journey of Menachem Begin," which examines the legacy of the late prime

minister, will hold its world premiere on Monday, followed by a virtual release.

"He was a complex person. He's one of the most iconic figures in the 20th century. And I think that people can learn much more and understand the

State of Israel more by watching this film and understanding it through his eyes,” Gruber, who wrote, directed and produced the film, told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview.

Gruber, who previously wrote and directed 2012’s “Follow Me: The Yoni Netanyahu Story,” said he was approached to make this film by Rob Schwartz, the former chief of staff to former -Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-CT) — who also appears on-screen. After reading *The Prime Ministers* by Yehuda Avner, Schwartz was struck that there were no English-language documentaries about Begin, and set out to rectify the situation.

“I knew a little bit about him, about Begin, but I didn’t realize, really, his influence on the whole history of the State of Israel,” said Gruber. “His role as a leader really struck me.”

The film weaves together archival footage, historical interviews with the late prime minister and insights from a range of analysts, thinkers and politicians, including former Ambassadors Ron Dermer and Michael Oren, writers Daniel Gordis and Yossi Klein Halevi, historian Anita Shapira, former U.S. diplomat Stuart Eizenstat, Begin’s former personal secretary Yona Klimovitski and many others.

From his early life in Poland to his activity in the Irgun, his entry into politics, his time as prime minister and the groundbreaking peace deal Begin signed with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, “Upheaval” guides viewers through the experiences that shaped the leader who, in turn, heavily shaped the State of Israel.

The film doesn’t shy away from some of the most controversial events in Begin’s life, including the 1982 Sabra and Shatilla massacre in Lebanon while he was prime minister, the 1948 Deir Yassin massacre while he was head of the Irgun, his role in the Altalena Affair, shortly after the founding of the state, and the deep rivalry with Israel’s first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, which continued for the rest of their lives.

But Gruber — and many of the film’s

interviewees — believe that Begin took responsibility for his actions in a way that few modern leaders do.

“The reason why I wanted to make this film was because I think Menachem Begin is a great model of leadership,” said Gruber. “And leadership means taking responsibility for your decisions, whether for good or for bad.”

Interspersed among the many original interviews, Gruber weaves in three English-language interviews with Begin: on the Christian Broadcasting Network’s 700 Club in 1982; a taped conversation with prominent Reform leader Rabbi Alexander Schindler; and an interview by Barbara Walters in 1977.

“Really he’s narrating his own life, in many ways,” said Gruber.

One piece of footage that wasn’t as easy to come by appears at the end of the film, depicting Begin shortly before his death — eight years after he resigned from office and largely disappeared from public life.

Surrounded by medical personnel and leaning heavily on a walker, Begin is asked by reporters “why haven’t you left your house for all these years?” All Begin would reply was: “personal reasons.”

Gruber said the Israeli researchers on the film combed through the archives to find the short clip, which he called “quick but tremendously poignant.”

The prime minister’s 1983 resignation is largely attributed to not just his feelings of failure over the Lebanon War fallout, but also his deep depression over the death of his beloved wife, Aliza, less than a year earlier.

That aspect of his life is something Gruber knew little about before embarking on this film project.

“One of the things that really was beautiful was his relationship with his wife, Aliza,” Gruber said. “When she died he was really just broken. I think his relationship with his wife was something that a lot of people really don’t know about. They think of a leader and a man and a fighter and a peacemaker — but not a lover as much.”

“Upheaval” was produced without the cooperation of any of Begin’s descendants, though it includes interviews with a handful

of friends and acquaintances. Gruber said Begin’s family members “are very private people” and chose not to participate in the film. Bennie Begin, Menachem’s son and a former Israeli minister and longtime politician, politely declined, said Gruber.

The junior Begin was a longtime member of Likud, the party his father founded, who defected from the party earlier this year and joined the New Hope faction led by Gideon Sa’ar — leveling harsh criticism at Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on his way out.

“He’s his father’s son, so I’m sure he’s influenced tremendously by his father who he clearly loved and admired,” said Gruber of Begin’s views on the current Israeli leader. And the attempts by many political parties of late to claim his legacy, shows that “Begin looms large even today almost 30 years after his death.”

The so-called Begin Doctrine, which has guided Israel’s decision making in taking preventative action against enemy states, can be traced back to the prime minister’s early life in Poland and his experiences in the Holocaust — where his entire family was wiped out by the Nazis.

“I certainly did not know that he spent time in the gulag, that he was on the run, his World War II experiences were all new to me, but really enlightening, because it shaped his whole life,” said Gruber. “Everything was filtered through the Holocaust, through that experience of losing his family and being on the run. And so he said, ‘Listen, if people are going to say that they want to do harm to Jews, they’re going to do harm to Jews — believe them.’”

Gruber said he worked to make the film balanced, and not “hagiographic.” But the movie — which was co-produced by World Jewish Congress President Ron Lauder as well as several figures associated with the controversial Clarion Project — is largely laudatory of Begin and his legacy, even when discussing his failures.

“We were trying really hard to get as many diverse voices as we could,” said the director. “We tried to get interviews from Arabs or Palestinians, and it was unfortunate because only one — Ghaith al-Omari [of The Washington Institute] — agreed to be part of the film. But I really wanted those voices.”

Gruber said he spoke with an Egyptian

academic who “pulled out after we did the interview,” and a Palestinian woman who canceled before they had a chance to film.

“Wanting to get these other people’s voices was such a challenge, but I do think that had they done the interviews they would

have said similar things” as the other figures in the film, the filmmaker said. “Certainly we’re not kind to Menachem Begin for the Lebanon War or Sabra and Shatilla, I think we were pretty fact-based when it comes to Deir Yassin and the expansion of the

settlements.”

“Overall, it is a positive view of Begin,” he added, “but I think it’s complex and nuanced.” ♦

JUNE 3, 2021

Mapping the future for Israelis and Palestinians from a D.C. rooftop

The reception marked the launch of Heart of a Nation, new venture overseen by longtime former AIPAC staffer Jonathan Kessler

By Gabby Deutch

At a rooftop reception near Dupont Circle on Tuesday evening, former longtime AIPAC staffer Jonathan Kessler officially launched his new venture: Heart of a Nation, an organization devoted to bringing together American, Israeli and Palestinian progressives.

Around 15 people gathered on the rooftop of Kessler’s apartment building for wine, cheese and crackers and hummus. For many, it was their first public event since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. People mingled, speaking of their excitement to return to the office or their yoga studios. Every attendee had come at the personal invitation of Kessler.

Sitting on wicker lawn chairs on an unseasonably pleasant June evening drinking boxed wine was a group that included Kinney Zalesne, a former Hillel International vice president now serving as general manager of corporate strategy at Microsoft; Yousef Bashir, a former PLO staffer from Gaza who is now director of research and operations at the S. Daniel Abraham Center for Middle East Peace; Lauren Strauss, a professor of Jewish studies at American University; Joel Rubin, executive director of American Jewish Congress and former Jewish outreach director for Bernie Sanders’s presidential campaign;

a senior Biden administration official; several AIPAC staffers; and a handful of other friends of Kessler’s whose work has to do with Israel or the Middle East.

“It’s good to be disappointed in the way things are [between Israelis and Palestinians]. It’s good to be discouraged. It’s good to be dissatisfied,” Kessler said in a speech to attendees. “Dissatisfaction with Israel and Palestine in America is not the problem. It’s the solution, or it’s the beginning of the solution.”

Heart of a Nation’s message is that the policies that have been pursued in the Middle East for decades are not working — and the first step toward improving the situation is to bring together open-minded Israelis, Palestinians and Americans to form relationships upon which future progress can be built.

Heart of a Nation, which Kessler calls a “community of purpose,” is meant to create a network of progressives who can collaborate, problem solve and discuss issues faced in all three cultures, like racism and the unraveling of democracy. It aims to highlight similarities between all three groups of activists, but it does not take an official stance on any issues, particularly the one that could most divide members: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

“It’s about improving the nations we

love, and fixing the things that are wrong with the nations we love,” Kessler told Jewish Insider. He did not respond to a question about what Heart of a Nation will do if the nations’ plans for progress come into conflict with each other, such as if American or Palestinian activists call for a boycott of Israel.

Heart of a Nation’s mission is “thought leadership,” said Kessler, and not lobbying or advocacy, as he spent the last several decades doing at AIPAC. Under the auspices of the initiative, Kessler intends to produce a podcast and publish an online journal with articles written by the group’s 36-member advisory board, half of whom live in the U.S. and half of whom are Israeli or Palestinian. When asked, he did not reveal the names of any of the organization’s donors, saying only that the support has come from “Jews, Muslims and Christians.”

The recent fighting between Israel and Hamas has put the burgeoning organization to the test. “Not one person of the 36 original [members] quit Heart of a Nation,” Kessler said. “Every single person called privately to say, ‘You know, I’m skeptical. But I’m not gonna quit this. This is very hard and painful.’”

But the escalation and the tensions in Sheikh Jarrah, a Palestinian neighborhood in East Jerusalem where

home demolitions have fueled anger, also seemed to add a sense of urgency to the work.

Sitting in a circle on the rooftop, guests offered toasts extolling the value of dialogue.

“Two weeks ago, people, friends from around the world were calling me asking, ‘How does it feel to be in the most advanced country in the world, vaccinating everybody, and everything is perfect?’ And then a week later, people call me to ask what’s going on in Palestine and the rockets,” said Nir Tsuk, who runs an entrepreneurship program at NYU. “In the Middle East, things change by the minute. But we are all optimists. And we believe in sanity and the power of good people to do good things in a good way.”

Reema Abuhamdieh, a journalist at the broadcaster Al Araby, had just returned from a reporting trip to Ramallah, Hebron and villages in the West Bank where Palestinian protesters

and Israeli soldiers were clashing as rockets were fired just a few miles away between Israel and Gaza. Growing up in Hebron, she saw daily the difference in how Israeli settlers and Palestinians lived. “I kept asking myself one question every time I went through Shuhada Street,” Abuhamdieh said. “What if I was born on the other side? Who would I be? What would I do?” From a young age, she considered the perspective of the Israelis who lived just across the street, even if it felt like a separate world entirely. Kessler had attended an iftar dinner at her home in Washington a few weeks before.

For Kessler, having these conversations involves admitting that there are certain words and phrases he avoided in his previous job — and now coming to terms with why language matters.

“When you talk about Palestine, and you talk about Israel, you know, I spent most of my life in rooms where the word

‘Palestine’ made people uncomfortable. And the rest of my life I spent in rooms where the word ‘Israel’ made people uncomfortable,” Kessler noted. “It opens you up, [you] learn to be comfortable with discomfort. First you’re going to say the words, and then you’re going to meet the people and then you’re going to visit the land.”

On Tuesday, he explained the organization’s plans for the next year: First, Heart of a Nation’s American members will travel to the Middle East this fall to meet Israeli and Palestinian members. Next spring, the group will convene in the American South, to learn about the region’s history and progressive activism.

“There’s a team from here and a team from there, and they’ll come together in Palestine and Israel. Six months later, we’ll bring the team from there together with the team from here to focus on progressive America and everything we’re up against,” explained Kessler. ♦

JUNE 1, 2021

A great escape, with help from a Ouija board

In a historical thriller, former NYT obit writer unearths WWI tale that conjures up the rampant spiritualism of the day

By Matthew Kassel

Like many journalists, Margalit Fox delights in the process of exhuming obscure stories and bringing them to life on the page. Fox, however, proved an unusually skilled practitioner during her 14-year run as an obituary writer for *The New York Times*, where she produced some of the paper’s most elegantly rendered portraits of such uncelebrated but consequential figures as Don Featherstone, who invented the pink flamingo, Herschel Schacter, the first Jewish chaplain at the liberation of Buchenwald, and Leslie Buck, who designed the Anthora coffee cup.

Fox, who is 60, retired from the *Times* in 2018, but her zeal for

unearthing arcane narratives has by no means diminished. In her new book, *The Confidence Men: How Two Prisoners of War Engineered the Most Remarkable Escape in History*, Fox resurrects a gripping drama from the first half of the 20th century that would likely have remained largely unknown to modern readers had she not endeavored to tell it.

“I have never encountered a story like this,” Fox told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview.

The book, a nonfiction historical thriller out today from Random House, is set during World War I and centers on an ingenious escape plan hatched by a pair of British soldiers, Elias Henry

Jones and Cedric Waters Hill, who devise an almost unbelievable scheme to break out of a remote Turkish prison camp using only a makeshift Ouija board.

“How could this preposterous scheme actually have worked?” Fox recalled wondering when she happened upon Jones’s little-known 1919 memoir, *The Road to En-dor*, several years ago. “The book made my hair stand on end.”

To her delight, Fox felt that the story had “really had slipped into a crevice in history.”

“That was exciting,” Fox said, “because if it was in a crevice in history, then I as a 21st-century journalist could have the wonderful privilege of levering

it out again for people to see.”

Fox has long been interested in such tales. “I’m fascinated by procedurals,” she said. “My favorite genre really to read in nonfiction or to see movies about are procedurals, whether they’re police procedurals where you see, step by careful step, the detective amassing the evidence and following the clues that will allow him to solve the crime, or even caper films like a bank heist.”

“All of my books are kind of about procedure,” Fox added. “What could be more procedural than an escape plot that is rooted in a con game?”

Fox wrote three books while working at the *Times*, the first of which, *Talking Hands: What Sign Language Reveals About the Mind*, was published in 2007. *The Riddle of the Labyrinth: The Quest to Crack an Ancient Code*, came out six years later, followed by her last book, *Conan Doyle for the Defense: The True Story of a Sensational British Murder*,

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Fox wrote her new book in just eight months from a study in her Washington Heights apartment, a thermos of coffee at her elbow and a cat on her lap. “If I was doing research, a paperback book propped up in my lap, using the cat

as a bookstand,” Fox said. Free of the crushing deadlines associated with daily newspaper reporting, Fox was in a position to devote herself exclusively to book writing, even if she was also enjoying her new work environment. She finished the book last year at the beginning of the pandemic.

“I’m a long-form writer,” said Fox, who left the *Times* to pursue book-writing full-time. “There’s no better education for being a long-form writer than having to work on a daily paper because, really, all a book is, is a 1,000-word newspaper story gridded up 100 times. I really believe that.”

Fox was raised by secular Jewish parents in what she characterized as “a very rationalist household.” Before she was born, Fox’s parents — whom she described as first-generation Americans and second-generation communists — relocated to Israel during the McCarthyist witch hunts of the 1950s. “My father, who was a physicist, was unable to work in the country,” Fox said. “The only place he could get work was at the Technion in Haifa.”

“I was born on Long Island after things had blown over enough to let them come back to the States,” Fox told *JL*. “But I got the souvenir in the form of my name.”

At home, Fox’s parents spoke both English and Yiddish. But despite her training as a linguist at Stony Brook University, where she studied before pursuing a journalism degree from Columbia University, Fox never mastered her ancestors’ native tongue.

“I regret deeply that I didn’t acquire more Yiddish when I was young because I loved hearing it in the house,” she said. “But of course, it was the language they spoke when they didn’t want me to understand what they were saying. It would have been much smarter to learn it and understand what they were saying. But you don’t really think things through when you’re 5 years old.”

Fox is married to George Robinson, a former longtime film and music critic for *The Jewish Week* who has written two books about Judaism.

Fox had originally wanted to write

about “pathological imposters” when she began rooting around for a new book topic. But she was so mesmerized by the Ouija heist, which she describes in the introduction to *The Confidence Men* as “one of the only known examples of a con game being used for good instead of ill,” that she diverted course.

While Jones’s riveting account was detailed on strategy, Fox believed he had failed to explore the psychological conditions that allowed him to manipulate his captors. “I was determined in my research and writing to find out why,” Fox told *J*.

She believes she’s cracked the code in her book. “To postmodern people in the 21st century, it sounds absolutely mental to say you can get out of a prison camp with the Ouija board,” Fox said. “But it wasn’t so crazy 100 years ago when they did it. Why? Because spiritualism was a really big going concern,” Fox said, particularly during World War I, “where people had loved ones killed in battle who they were absolutely desperate to contact.”

The soldiers, posing as mediums, profited from that vulnerability. “They didn’t have to get people to make a huge mental leap to exploit that,” Fox said, “because those beliefs were already

very much present in the culture and in the air.”

The book includes other supporting characters who could very well have been written about in one of Fox’s obituaries, had they lived long enough.

One was the camp’s interpreter, Moïse Eskenazi, a young and credulous Ottoman Jew, known as “the Pimple,” who imbues an otherwise dark story with some elements of humor as the soldiers use their Ouija board to influence his thinking during séances. At one point, the soldiers slip a potent laxative into Eskenazi’s cup of cocoa after he becomes frustrated with the board. “It was no use sending for the doctor,” Eskenazi says afterward, “because I knew it was all supernatural.”

“I want to get down and kiss the ground and thank the gods for sending me the Pimple,” said Fox. “He is the one who brings all of the comic relief into what could otherwise be a very grim story about captivity and starvation and illness and death and loneliness.”

Fox thinks *The Confidence Men* is ripe for a Hollywood adaptation, and she is hoping her story will be optioned, noting that it cleaves naturally to a classic three-act structure.

“You have the setup in Act One, then

you have everything working towards the escape in Act Two, and then the disaster at the end of Act Two,” she said, “where somebody accidentally rats them out and their whole scheme goes south and they have to quickly get themselves committed to an insane asylum instead, and their time there is Act Three.”

Though the soldiers’ scheme fell apart, they ultimately regained their freedom. “It’s no spoiler to say that, eventually, with a lot of twists and turns and setbacks and unexpected disasters, their plan succeeded,” Fox said.

As for her next book, Fox says she is already working on a new manuscript, due at the end of next year, but won’t reveal much about it. “It’s a book about crime in 19th-century America,” she said. “That’s pretty much all I can say right now.”

Until that book is released, devoted Fox readers can occupy their time with *The Confidence Men*, or consult the *Times*, where the 70-odd pre-written obituaries she left behind after retiring continue to be published on a semi-regular basis.

“It really is in the lap of the gods,” she said. ♦

JUNE 2, 2021

The company bringing together female chief executives

Chief, a professional network for women in senior leadership roles, recently expanded to Washington, D.C.

By Gabby Deutch

When Lindsay Kaplan was promoted to a vice president position at mattress start-up Casper, she experienced what she described as a troubling “inflection point.” In her new role, she had increased responsibilities while also suddenly facing an influx of requests to

serve as a mentor to younger women in the company.

“I needed more support, more guidance, more mentorship than ever. And yet that’s also the moment that I became the de facto mentor for women in my organization,” Kaplan said. “I don’t personally see that as much with

men.”

Together with her friend Carolyn Childers, Kaplan conceived Chief, a company that offers women the type of support they felt they lacked at the senior leadership level: a professional support network offering coaching, mentorship and community, available

only to women working at the executive level.

“What we determined was that there needs to be some sort of organization for women who are in these senior-level positions where they can come together, and in a really confidential setting, network, share, connect and support one another,” Kaplan, 36, told *Jewish Insider* in an interview following Chief’s recent launch in Washington, D.C. “Because if it’s lonely at the top, it gets lonely a lot faster when you’re a woman.”

Women remain vastly outnumbered by men in executive roles. The number of female CEOs at top companies grew last year, but just slightly. In December 2019, 6% of S&P 500 CEOs were women; a year later, at the end of 2020, 7.8% of S&P 500 CEOs were women.

Chief was born in New York City in 2019, and it has since expanded to six U.S. metropolitan areas. Three of Chief’s hubs — New York, Chicago and Los Angeles — have flagship clubhouses where members can schmooze.

“We are not a co-working space. We are not an artists’ community. We even designed our three spaces to feel much more like hotel lobbies, so there are bars, there’s couches,” Kaplan explained. “It’s not that comfortable to work at Chief. It was designed to create connections and foster community and relationships.”

Still, as a feminist organization for female professionals, Chief calls to mind The Wing, the women’s co-working space founded by former Democratic political consultant Audrey Gelman that has struggled amid waves of negative press and pandemic restrictions. But Chief set out from the start to be something different.

“When we launched, The Wing was extremely popular. I think there was a question around where we fit in,” said Kaplan, but “I think it was very obvious to our members, many of whom joined both, that this was really about being in a professional network, and less about developing a co-working space.”

Chief views its competitors as other professional communities and networking businesses like the Young Presidents’ Organization, rather than other woman-

specific organizations. “We really view ourselves as a network devoted to professional development, and what makes us different [are] the connections that we’re fostering between women executives,” said Kaplan. “Our competitor is actually somebody who wants to go to conferences and meet people, somebody who wants to sign up for an executive coach.”

Initially, Kaplan and Childers hoped to raise their seed funding from women investors, but they were unable to find women to lead that round of investment (though some wrote smaller checks).

“I think a lot of women VCs passed, in part because they had seen so many women communities, and that they were already invested in women-led communities,” Kaplan stated, referring to venture capitalists. “You can’t really stack your portfolio full of competitive companies.” Chief’s Series A round had more investment from prominent female investors — Alexa von Tobel of Inspired Capital led the round, and Penny Pritzker, President Barack Obama’s former commerce secretary and founder of PSP Capital Partners, invested.

Chief now has more than 5,000 members, who have an average age of 42 and more than 15 years of professional experience. There is a long waiting list of women hoping to join. The cost is steep, with an annual membership fee of \$7,800 for C-suite executives and \$5,400 for everyone else, although the fee is typically paid by the members’ employers.

Chief is selective about its membership, Kaplan said, and does not automatically accept applicants with “chief” or “vice president” in their title, which she said could be “pretty meaningless.” Kaplan pointed out that she once held a vice president title but did not actually supervise anyone. “We’re really looking for women who have taken on leadership roles in their companies. That can mean they manage a giant budget, that can mean they have massive impact in their organization. It could mean, as a solo founder, that they’ve developed a high-impact startup.”

The vast majority of members belong to what the company refers to as “core groups,” 10-member pods of women from different fields, industries and functions who meet regularly with an executive coach. Kaplan

calls the core groups a “personal board of directors” for Chief’s members.

“It’s a bit like matchmaking. There’s the facts around what someone’s looking for in their career. But a lot of that is understanding the different dynamics that help create great group chemistry,” said Kaplan. Chief has a full-time team devoted to creating these groups, which are the backbone of the Chief experience.

Before the pandemic, the groups met in person, but they became virtual, a change that Chief plans to make permanent. “We found that’s the most inclusive way for groups to come together, because people have commutes. People have caregiving responsibilities. People are traveling. People are pregnant or disabled and can’t necessarily take on the burden of traveling an hour and a half to get to a two-hour meeting,” Kaplan explained.

Chief recruited its initial members by cold emailing hundreds of female executives, many of whom responded and became founding members. “We knew pretty quickly that we had struck a nerve with women in leadership, given that they were responding so positively to cold emails from a company that didn’t exist a few weeks ago,” Kaplan recalled.

As the company expanded to Washington, it set its sights on the capital’s unique base of political consultancies, advocacy organizations and think tanks, while also cultivating ties with more typical business executives in the region. Founding members of Chief’s Washington, D.C., network include Vinca LaFleur, a managing partner at the speechwriting firm West Wing Writers; Tori Taylor, executive director of the progressive political organization Swing Left; Jenna Ben-Yehuda, president and CEO of the Truman National Security Project; and Shannon McCracken, CEO of the Nonprofit Alliance. Other founding members include senior employees at major regional employers including Deloitte and Children’s National Hospital.

“We deeply value different points of view,” said Kaplan. “The commonality that the community shares is changing the face of leadership, it is being a woman in business, and what it means to carry that weight and to wrestle with all of the changes that have come over the last decade of working in

America.”

In Washington, a diverse member base could face potential challenges as women from opposing sides of the political spectrum come together in small support groups. But this degree of across-the-aisle camaraderie could also be a welcome change in Washington, Chief’s co-founders hope. Still, Kaplan says the purpose of the organization — providing professional support — has nothing to do with politics.

“When you’re in your core group, and you’re talking about challenges at work, so much of that is apolitical,” said Kaplan. “So much of that is personal, it is corporate, it is

dealing with these work challenges that we want to normalize, and we want to make sure that we have different perspectives in the room. It’s really helpful to not be always in a room full of what ends up being an echo chamber.”

Chief is a decidedly feminist organization, and the speakers the company has hosted embody that worldview. Kaplan told JI that the first event Chief hosted was about intersectional feminism. But the company does not intend to limit its speakers only to liberal icons. “Our women are used to being speakers, so when we bring in speakers to come to Chief, we bring in what we call just

legendary icons,” said Kaplan, listing some examples: “Stacey Abrams; Ken Chenault, who’s on our board, the former CEO of American Express; [and] Jane Fonda. Just these incredible icons of business [and] of feminism.”

At the moment, Chief has no plans to open a physical space in Washington. Kaplan and Childers’s next goal is to ensure its current members are satisfied with their experience before moving on to the long waitlist of applicants. After that? “I talk a lot about world domination,” Kaplan joked. “I can’t wait to go international.” ♦