

THE WEEKLY PRINT

Interview with Barack Obama; For GOP hopefuls, Israel is the new Iowa; Robert Cornegy's crowning heights; Building an interfaith oasis in the nation's capital; Rookie doctors in the COVID ward push through the grief; and New hope is born for Israeli families at first-of-its-kind pregnancy loss conference

JUNE 7, 2021

Interview with Barack Obama

In written exchange, the former president answered five of JI's 13 questions

By Matthew Kassel

During his time in office, former President Barack Obama maintained something of a hot-and-cold relationship with Jewish leaders, particularly around his administration's foreign policy in the Middle East. Obama first entered the national stage with longstanding ties to the Jewish community that predated his career in politics. Once in the White House, he frequently found himself at odds with communal leaders who took issue with, among other things, his administration's support for the nuclear deal with Iran as well as the controversial decision to abstain from voting on a U.N. Security Council resolution castigating Israel.

Near the end of his recent memoir, *A Promised Land*, the former president conveys a sense of frustration with critics who, he suggests, doubted his commitment to the Jewish state based more on their gut feelings rather than assessing actual policy positions, including his administration's effort to secure funding for Israel's Iron Dome missile defense system and signing a memorandum of understanding guaranteeing \$38 billion in military assistance over 10 years.

"On Election Day, I'd end up getting more

than 70 percent of the Jewish vote, but as far as many AIPAC board members were concerned, I remained suspect, a man of divided loyalties," Obama writes, "someone whose support for Israel, as one of [senior advisor David Axelrod's] friends colorfully put it, wasn't 'felt in his kishkes' — 'guts,' in Yiddish."

However, in a recent interview with *Jewish Insider* — his first with a Jewish publication since leaving office in 2017 — Obama shied away from discussing that tension in more detail. The former president avoided every question touching on Israel and the Middle East that JI posed to him.

Of the 13 questions JI sent to the former president, listed below in full, he provided answers to just five, focusing on the history of Black-Jewish relations, the Capitol siege, the state of American politics and the rise of antisemitism, among other topics.

In the exchange, which was conducted via email, Obama sounded a characteristically hopeful note while acknowledging the deep divisions that have riven the American electorate in the years since he left office. "There's no doubt that the country is deeply divided right now — more divided than when I first ran for president in 2008," Obama told JI. "America has been fractured by a combination of political, cultural,

ideological, and geographical divisions that seem to be growing deeper by the day."

"Until we can agree on a common set of facts and distinguish between what's true and what's false, then the marketplace of ideas won't work. Our democracy won't work," Obama said. "So, as citizens, we need to push our institutions to address these challenges. At the same time, we can't just wait for someone else to solve the problem. We need to stay engaged, and ask what we can do — especially at the local level where arguments are often less heated and everyone who gets involved can make a bigger difference."

Though such work "can be exhausting," Obama admitted, "our system of government has been tested before, and every time people who believe in this country and our founding ideals have refused to let the American experiment fail. The same thing can happen this time if we put in the work."

Amid a disturbing uptick in antisemitic attacks, the former president was equally level-headed, even as he recognized that "some of the negative and divisive trends that we've seen at home and around the world have contributed" to such hatred.

Obama cited a speech he gave at the Israeli Embassy in Washington, D.C., at the end of his presidency. "I said that the seeds

that gave rise to the Holocaust have always been with us. They have found root across cultures, faiths, and generations. And they have reemerged again and again, especially in times of change and uncertainty,” Obama told JI. “When I gave that speech, it was clear that anti-Semitism was on the rise around the world. People’s anger over everything from immigration to inequality was boiling over — and many of them were looking for someone else to blame. And for four years, we had a President in the White House who fanned those flames.”

Still, Obama was optimistic about countering antisemitism and other forms of bigotry.

“In many cases, I’ve been pleased to see these acts of hate countered by far larger expressions of solidarity,” he noted. “People are recognizing that we all have a responsibility to stand together against bigotry and violence, to not be silent but there will always be a need for vigilance against anti-Semitism. We’ll never be able to wipe out hatred from every single mind, but we must do everything we can to fight it. And more people are realizing that. That dynamic, more than anything, is what gives me hope.”

In the interview, Obama suggested that the historic bond between Black and Jewish Americans — one he also alludes to in his memoir — can serve as a guiding light for those seeking instruction from the past.

“Black and Jewish Americans understand the dark side of human nature better than just about anyone,” he said. “We’ve seen people at their worst. But we also know that progress is possible, and that ordinary people can make a difference — not just for those who look like them or worship the same God, but for everyone. That’s the legacy of Blacks and Jews coming together through the civil rights movement to insist upon equal rights — that understanding that injustice should spur people to action and to a sense of solidarity, and that collective activism can succeed in making change.”

“Right now, it’s easy to focus on what divides us, and there are plenty of people out there who benefit from driving us further apart. But our future depends on our ability to actively resist those forces; to look past our differences and understand that we want the same things for ourselves,

our families, and our communities,” Obama told JI. “The new movements for justice in this country are informed by the Black and Jewish experience, as well as many other communities who have come together. The more we can focus on what we have in common — whether we’re Black, White, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or anything else — the better off we’ll be.”

But the question of Obama’s at-times strained relationship with Jewish leaders during his time as president went unaddressed. Though Obama appears to express frustration throughout *A Promised Land* that others too often cast aspersions on his motivations instead of assessing his policy positions, JI asked him to consider a question inverting that dynamic: How would he respond to those who opposed the Iran nuclear deal on policy grounds, for instance, but are characterized as having prioritized the interests of another country? Is there space for disagreement on an issue like the Iran nuclear deal — otherwise known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA — without such accusations?

The former president did not address that question in the interview with JI. (The second volume of Obama’s book, yet to be released, is expected to include his perspective on the JCPOA.)

Our full exchange with the former president is included below, and the questions are listed in the order in which they were sent.

Jewish Insider: *In his commentary on the most recent Torah portion, the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks remarks how “the United States is the only country today whose political discourse is framed by the idea of covenant,” and he cites your second inaugural address in 2013 as one of two textbook examples. “Obama five times begins paragraphs with a key phrase of covenant politics — words never used by British politicians — namely, ‘We the people.’” Rabbi Sacks continues, “That is the essence of covenant: we are all in this together. There is no division of the nation into rulers and ruled. We are conjointly responsible, under the sovereignty of God, for one another.”*

Since that 2013 address, how do you assess the state of our country’s “covenant”? Is our political system and discourse set up in a way

that incentivizes and rewards division (“us vs. them”) that makes “we the people” nearly impossible to achieve? Going forward, what can be done to better strengthen that “covenant”?

Barack Obama: There’s no doubt that the country is deeply divided right now — more divided than when I first ran for president in 2008. America has been fractured by a combination of political, cultural, ideological, and geographical divisions that seem to be growing deeper by the day.

I think a lot of that has to do with changes in how people get information. I’ve spoken about this before, but if you watch Fox News, you’re presented with a different reality than if you read *The New York Times*. And everything is amplified by social media, which allows people to live in bubbles with other people who think like them.

Until we can agree on a common set of facts and distinguish between what’s true and what’s false, then the marketplace of ideas won’t work. Our democracy won’t work. So, as citizens, we need to push our institutions to address these challenges.

At the same time, we can’t just wait for someone else to solve the problem. We need to stay engaged, and ask what we can do — especially at the local level where arguments are often less heated and everyone who gets involved can make a bigger difference.

I know it can be exhausting. But our system of government has been tested before, and every time people who believe in this country and our founding ideals have refused to let the American experiment fail. The same thing can happen this time if we put in the work.

JI: *In *A Promised Land*, you write about devouring “the works of Philip Roth, Saul Bellow and Norman Mailer” in high school, “moved by the stories of men trying to find their place in an America that didn’t welcome them.” Do you still return to these authors, and what lessons do you feel they can impart to new readers approaching their books for the first time? Moreover, are there any contemporary Jewish writers you’d like to mention whose*

works you admire?

Obama: [No answer.]

Jl: *You've had a long and fruitful relationship with the Jewish community, one that predates your career in politics. The book describes your pre-political life and the decisions you made about pursuing community service and organizing instead of a big law career. What was your relationship with the Jewish community in Chicago then and how has it developed since?*

Obama: [No answer.]

Jl: *"I believed there was an essential bond between the Black and the Jewish experiences — a common story of exile and suffering that might ultimately be redeemed by a shared sense of community," you write in the book. What's your advice for building on that bond in the future?*

Obama: Black and Jewish Americans understand the dark side of human nature better than just about anyone. We've seen people at their worst. But we also know that progress is possible, and that ordinary people can make a difference — not just for those who look like them or worship the same God, but for everyone. That's the legacy of Blacks and Jews coming together through the civil rights movement to insist upon equal rights — that understanding that injustice should spur people to action and to a sense of solidarity, and that collective activism can succeed in making change.

Right now, it's easy to focus on what divides us, and there are plenty of people out there who benefit from driving us further apart. But our future depends on our ability to actively resist those forces; to look past our differences and understand that we want the same things for ourselves, our families, and our communities. The new movements for justice in this country are informed by the Black and Jewish experience, as well as many other communities who have come together. The more we can focus on what we have in common — whether we're Black, White, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or anything else — the better off we'll be.

Jl: *In Chapter 25 of A Promised Land,*

you write: "On Election Day, I'd end up getting more than 70 percent of the Jewish vote, but as far as many AIPAC board members were concerned, I remained suspect, a man of divided loyalties: someone whose support for Israel, as one of Axe's friends colorfully put it, wasn't 'felt in his kishkes' — 'guts,' in Yiddish." And earlier in that paragraph, you write, "they attributed these whisper campaigns not to any particular positions I'd taken (my backing of a two-state solution and opposition to Israeli settlements were identical to the positions of other candidates) but rather to my expressions of concern for ordinary Palestinians; my friendships with certain critics of Israeli policy, including an activist and Middle East scholar named Rashid Khalidi; and the fact that, as Ben bluntly put it, 'You're a Black man with a Muslim name who lived in the same neighborhood as Louis Farrakhan and went to Jeremiah Wright's church.'"

Throughout the book, you appear to convey a sense of frustration with folks casting aspersions on your motivations and not assessing your actual policy positions. But to invert that dynamic for a moment, what do you say to folks on the other side who perhaps opposed the JCPOA on policy grounds yet are characterized as having prioritized the interests of another country? Is it possible for there to be disagreement on something like the JCPOA on the merits?

Obama: [No answer.]

Jl: *In her book The Education of an Idealist, former U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Samantha Power takes readers behind the scenes as your administration sought congressional approval for a military operation in Syria, writing that "an important factor in their thinking was Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's vocal support for US military action, along with that of the influential lobbying group AIPAC." AIPAC lobbied Congress in support of your plan. It's clear there were times that you disagreed with AIPAC's positions and other times where you sought to collaborate with the group (for instance, on nominations requiring Senate confirmation). You also addressed AIPAC's annual policy conference more than any other president (your successor did not attend a single time while in office). In your view, what did the pro-Israel community in the U.S. get right and what did it get wrong during*

your time in office?

Obama: [No answer.]

Jl: *During the Green Movement in Iran 12 years ago, you admit to feeling constrained in your desire to support Iranian protesters: "As the violence escalated, so did my condemnation. Still, such a passive approach didn't sit well with me — and not just because I had to listen to Republicans howl that I was coddling a murderous regime. I was learning yet another difficult lesson about the presidency: that my heart was now chained to strategic considerations and tactical analysis, my convictions subject to counterintuitive arguments; that in the most powerful office on earth, I had less freedom to say what I meant and act on what I felt as a senator — or as an ordinary citizen disgusted by the sight of a young woman gunned down by her own government." Now that you are a citizen again — though perhaps not so ordinary — do you feel as if there is any hope for Iran's pro-democracy demonstrators?*

Obama: [No answer.]

Jl: *On Middle East issues, did you feel less inhibited in your second term than in your first? If so, does that partially explain the U.S. decision, in 2016, to abstain on U.N. Security Council Resolution 2334 condemning Israeli settlement construction?*

Obama: [No answer.]

Jl: *Over the past year, Arab countries including the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan have normalized ties with Israel. What factors would you attribute this development in the region to? Was it mutual opposition to Iran? A recognition from these countries of the closeness between the U.S. and Israel? Economic incentives? Or something else entirely?*

Obama: [No answer.]

Jl: *The second volume of your book is expected to include your perspective on the JCPOA. The parties are currently negotiating in Vienna. Does that impact your writing in any way? What should readers expect in your second book on this topic and how do*

you expect it to be received given the ongoing negotiations?

Obama: [No answer.]

Jl: In 2009, you visited the Buchenwald concentration camp with Angela Merkel and Elie Wiesel, an experience you recount in your memoir. Wiesel, you write, “beseeched us, beseeched me, to leave Buchenwald with resolve, to try to bring about peace, to use the memory of what happened on the ground where we stood to see past anger and divisions and find strength in solidarity.” Since that visit, Americans only seem to have become more divided as antisemitic conspiracy theories and attacks appear to be on the rise. A man wearing a “Camp Auschwitz” shirt stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6 and QAnon has gained traction. Did you anticipate these developments when you left office in 2016? And do you believe the country can overcome such forms of hate?

Obama: In my last year as President, I gave a speech at the Embassy of Israel where I said that the seeds that gave rise to the Holocaust have always been with us. They have found root across cultures, faiths, and generations. And they have reemerged again and again, especially in times of change and uncertainty.

When I gave that speech, it was clear that anti-Semitism was on the rise around the world. People’s anger over everything from immigration to inequality was boiling over — and many of them were looking for someone else to blame. And for four years, we had a President in the White House who fanned those flames.

So while I never anticipated what

happened at the Capitol on January 6th, some of the negative and divisive trends that we’ve seen at home and around the world have contributed to a rise in anti-Semitism and other forms of hate. In many cases, I’ve been pleased to see these acts of hate countered by far larger expressions of solidarity. People are recognizing that we all have a responsibility to stand together against bigotry and violence, to not be silent but there will always be a need for vigilance against anti-Semitism.

We’ll never be able to wipe out hatred from every single mind, but we must do everything we can to fight it. And more people are realizing that. That dynamic, more than anything, is what gives me hope.

Jl: Both Democrats and Republicans seem to take inconsistent stands on free speech issues. The right, for its part, supports bakers who refuse to make wedding cakes for gay couples, but draws the line at boycotts of Israel; the left sees things the other way around. Where do you land on this dynamic? What role, if any, should the state play in keeping the marketplace free of bigotry, and how can it do so while safeguarding First Amendment rights?

Obama: I can’t claim to be perfectly consistent, but as a former constitutional law professor, I am pretty firm about the merits of free speech.

Now, that’s not a terribly controversial statement. Most people believe in free speech on principle, especially when the views being expressed are ones they agree with. But the real test comes when someone says something you disagree with, and you have to decide whether to support their right

to free speech as well.

There are obviously limits to free speech, including when it directly threatens someone else. And I think the state has a role to play in keeping people safe. But beyond that, I believe the purpose of free speech is to make sure that we are forced to use argument and reason and words in making our democracy work.

You don’t have to be fearful of somebody spouting bad ideas. Just out-argue them. Make the case as to why they’re wrong. Win over adherents. That’s how things work in a democracy.

Jl: What should readers of *Jewish Insider* be most looking forward to about visiting the planned Barack Obama Presidential Center?

Obama: Our hope is that the Center will have something for everyone. Like other presidential museums, there will be exhibits telling stories about my time in the White House. But there will also be a branch of the Chicago Public Library, an auditorium, a sledding hill for kids, walking and biking trails, a public plaza for community gatherings and performances, and a program, activity, and athletic center.

But what I’m looking forward to the most is the role the Center will play in bringing people to the South Side of Chicago, and the work it will do to help young people discover the change they want to make in the world.

In that way, the Center won’t just be a place to learn about my story. It will be a place where people everywhere can get inspired to write their own. ♦

JUNE 9, 2021

For GOP hopefuls, Israel is the new Iowa

Recent travel to Israel by several 2024 hopefuls is turning the Jewish state into a must-visit campaign stop

By Gabby Deutch and Marc Rod

After the recent round of intense fighting between Israel and Hamas, several Republican politicians have visited Israel or

announced plans to do so. One of the first to announce travel plans was Indiana Gov. Eric Holcomb, who arrived in Israel days after a cease-fire was

announced. Sens. Ted Cruz (R-TX), Bill Hagerty (R-TN) and Lindsey Graham (R-SC) visited on official congressional delegations. Former Secretary of State

Mike Pompeo traveled to Israel last week for a goodbye party for the head of Mossad and former U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley announced plans to visit with a Christians United for Israel delegation — even though neither of them currently holds public office.

It's still two and a half years before any voters will head to the polls for the 2024 primaries, but potential candidates — like Cruz, Pompeo and Haley, who are all seen as likely 2024 Republican presidential contenders — are often trying to position themselves for the next race. Pompeo, for instance, was spotted in Iowa in March.

"I think for Republicans in particular, visiting Israel and being supportive of Israel has now become a requirement," said Elliott Abrams, currently a senior fellow at the Center on Foreign Relations who served in diplomatic roles in the administrations of Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush and Trump.

But Abrams notes that politicians' visits to Israel are not a new phenomenon, even if they have increased in recent years. "This is not new, and I think it's particularly unsurprising right now, because you've got political change happening in Israel, because you just had a war, because you have a new American president who's just setting his policy toward Israel and the Middle East. So it strikes me as pretty normal and predictable."

Jewish Insider reached out to nearly a dozen Republicans who are considered to be potential 2024 contenders to see whether any of them have plans to visit Israel in the near future. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, Sen. Tom Cotton (R-AR), Sen. Rick Scott (R-FL) and former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie told *Ji* that they have no such plans, though all of them have traveled to Israel in the past.

Spokespeople for Sens. Josh Hawley (R-MO), Tim Scott (R-SC) and Ben Sasse (R-NE); South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem; Texas Gov. Greg Abbott; former Vice President Mike Pence; and former President Donald Trump did not respond when asked whether they plan to travel to Israel.

Presidential candidates have a

history of traveling to Israel while campaigning, although such visits usually occur much closer to an election. The late Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) toured Israel on a Senate "fact-finding" delegation in March 2008 during the Republican primaries. A few months later, after clinching the Democratic nomination, Barack Obama visited the country for the first time. Now-Sen. Mitt Romney (R-UT), the Republican who ran against Obama four years later, visited Israel in July 2012. Trump was scheduled to travel to Israel as a candidate in 2015, but canceled the trip after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly criticized Trump's campaign pledge to ban Muslims from entering the U.S.

President Joe Biden did not travel internationally during the 2020 campaign — most of his general election campaigning took place virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic — but he has visited the country on several other occasions, including several times as vice president.

Many lawmakers from both parties have visited Israel on congressional delegations or on biennial trips for freshman lawmakers run by the AIPAC-affiliated American Israel Education Foundation. Pressure from other pro-Israel groups has also highlighted the political importance of these trips. "I think that as America's strongest ally in the region and one of our closest allies in the world, elected officials who are able should make an effort to visit Israel," Pastor John Hagee, the founder and chairman of CUFI, told *Ji*.

Republican visits to Israel might also be linked to the 2022 midterms, when Republicans will seek to regain control of the House and Senate. "It's going to be very important for the Republicans to recapture both houses of Congress in 2022," said Marc Zell, an American attorney who lives in Israel and is the chairman of the Israel chapter of Republicans Abroad. "I think we have a really good chance of doing that, and Israel is part of the formula that many candidates will adopt as they prepare for 2022."

Support for the U.S.-Israel alliance has become a key tenet of Republican campaigns at both the federal and state levels in recent years. "As a state governor, Gov. DeSantis is not in the same position to enact foreign policy as, say, U.S. senators," his press secretary, Christina Pushaw, told *Ji*, but she noted that his "first trip abroad as governor, in 2019, was to Israel for a historic business-development mission to promote stronger ties between Florida and Israel."

This trend is not new. Governors and state officials have traveled to Israel on trade missions for decades. Tim Pawlenty, a former Republican governor of Minnesota, traveled to Israel on a 2008 trade mission ahead of a possible presidential run. But the first Minnesota governor to travel to Israel, Arne Carlson, had done so 15 years prior, in 1993.

One thing that has changed in recent years is the growing affinity between Republican lawmakers and Netanyahu, who has cultivated close relationships with Republicans in the U.S. Netanyahu welcomed Trump to Israel in May 2017 on the president's first foreign trip while in office, and in early 2020, Netanyahu referred to Trump as "the greatest friend that Israel has ever had in the White House."

With a new Israeli coalition set to take control from Netanyahu in the Knesset, Zell suggested that Republican support for the country might falter. Mike Evans, a prominent evangelical Christian, said at a Monday press conference that his followers would "go into the opposition" with Netanyahu rather than support Israel's potential new government.

"I'm not sure that we're going to be seeing the same frequency of visits by Republican legislators and party leaders in the event that the [Naftali] Bennett-[Yair] Lapid government actually is sworn in," Zell noted. "They might come to try to keep Israel in line with what Republicans consider proper U.S. policy, or they may stay away because they don't want to have any friction with the new government on the issues where

this new government may be playing up to the Biden administration.”

However, there is no evidence that this view has been adopted by any prominent American lawmakers. While visiting Israel last week, Sen. Graham stressed that U.S. support for Israel is not contingent upon who governs the country. “No matter who they select to run the government here in Israel, American will be in your camp,” Graham said at the press conference. “If a new government is formed, the relationship will stay the same between us and Israel.”

Recent Republican travel to Israel

could also stem from a desire to signal politicians’ opposition to Biden’s policies in the region. Rather than relating directly to any political campaigns, “I think it has more to do with the critique of the current administration’s foreign policy,” Zell explained.

This might also explain why Democratic senators have not traveled to Israel since the conflict: A number of senior administration officials, including Secretary of State Tony Blinken and Deputy Assistant Secretary for Israeli and Palestinian Affairs Hady Amr, have already done so. Sens. Chris Coons (D-DE) and Chris Murphy (D-CT)

visited the Middle East in early May, before the fighting broke out between Israel and Hamas. Coons visited the UAE to discuss nuclear negotiations with Iran, and Murphy stopped in Oman, Jordan and Qatar to discuss the war in Yemen.

Ultimately, the reason candidates visit Israel is not to influence policy, which many can’t yet do. It “gives you the opportunity, when you’re writing an op-ed or making a speech, to say, ‘I stood there across from Hamas-ruled Gaza,’ or, ‘I could see from the U.N. observation post Hamas 1000 yards away,’” Abrams said. ♦

JUNE 8, 2021

Robert Cornegy’s crowning heights

New York City councilmember is vying to become the next Brooklyn borough president

By Matthew Kassel

With his towering 6-foot-10 frame topped by a bundle of impressive dreadlocks, Robert Cornegy, Jr., a New York City councilmember who until recently claimed the title of tallest politician in the world, was hard to miss as he sauntered into Basquiat’s Bottle, a trendy bar and restaurant on a commercial drag in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant.

“This is one of the restaurants that’s kind of central to the community,” Cornegy, 55, told *Jewish Insider* on a recent Sunday afternoon, settling in at a table in the back while contemplating an order of shrimp and grits.

Cornegy, whose district includes Bedford-Stuyvesant as well as Crown Heights, is now competing for the more high-profile role of Brooklyn borough president — and he has been savoring the opportunity to step away from Zoom, hit the pavement and make a more personal impression on potential voters with just weeks remaining until the June 22 Democratic primary.

“Because I’m such an attraction, I’m used to meeting people and engaging people,” said Cornegy, who wasn’t boasting so much as accurately characterizing his striking height. “I’m on the doors, I’m in the streets, I’m in bars, I’m in restaurants talking to people. When people generally get a chance to speak to me and know me, whether they’re with me or not, they walk away with a solid impression.”

But Cornegy is relying on more than just his memorable presence as he jockeys to succeed Eric Adams, the outgoing borough president and mayoral hopeful. In recent months, Cornegy has established himself as a leading contender in the crowded field of more than a dozen candidates, tying for first place in one poll alongside fellow city councilmember Antonio Reynoso, with Assemblymember Jo Anne Simon, who leads in fundraising, not far behind.

While Reynoso has pulled in support from a number of leading progressives, Cornegy is carving out a center-left

lane, having earned endorsements from several prominent Jewish community leaders as well as influential celebrities including Tracy Morgan and Spike Lee.

Facing term limits in the City Council, where he has served since 2014, Cornegy believes that he is best qualified to usher his home borough into a post-pandemic era, citing his current role leading the housing and buildings committee as well as his prior experience chairing the small business committee.

“During the pandemic, it became incredibly evident to me that whoever was going to lead this borough had to have a solid understanding for the recovery process of small business and job creation and responsible development,” said Cornegy, who is also chairman of the council’s Democratic Conference. “While we try to fight for affordability in an ever-increasing, unaffordable borough, the person couldn’t be just a ‘no, no, no’ person. It had to be somebody who was willing to fight the hard fight around affordability

and who had some acumen within that.”

The borough presidency is largely ceremonial, holding some substantive duties like community board appointments and zoning and land use recommendations. But Cornegy says he is excited by the role because it nevertheless represents a powerful platform.

“We have the largest bully pulpit probably in the state outside of the mayor of New York and the governor,” he argued, indicating that the primary pillars of his campaign are job growth, affordable housing and public safety — perhaps the issue on which he is most passionate.

The city councilman was an active presence last summer at social justice demonstrations in his district, where a Black Lives Matter mural was painted in bright yellow letters onto a block-length stretch of Fulton Street he helped turn into a pedestrian plaza. But while Cornegy advocates for increased policy accountability, he has distanced himself from efforts to defund or abolish the police.

“I don’t think it’s mutually exclusive to demand reform and accountability in the criminal justice system — I’m a Black man in America — while still supporting a platform for solid public safety,” said Cornegy. “I don’t think you have to abandon one for the other.”

He says his constituents are largely in agreement with his views. “My community, the community of Bedford-Stuyvesant and northern Crown Heights, has never demanded abolishing or defunding the police,” said Cornegy, who believes that police officers should live in the neighborhoods they work in and advocates for the establishment of a mental health emergency response unit. “They’ve demanded policing in their communities that didn’t violate their civil and human rights, and I think most people would agree with that as a narrative.”

Still, Cornegy has found himself at odds with progressives who support more sweeping reforms. “He’s trying to signal that he understands policing is a problem, but almost every elected official is saying that,”

said Alex Vitale, a professor of sociology at Brooklyn College and the author of *The End of Policing*. “He does support some small investments in non-police public safety strategies, but those proposals are very small in scale and don’t reduce the burden of policing.”

Cornegy took issue with such criticism, noting that he is deeply engaged in reform efforts, pointing to his sponsorship of a chokehold criminalization bill as well as his support for ending qualified immunity, which has long protected police officers from wrongdoing.

“I can go all the way back where we’ve been witnessing this regularly in our communities and trying to find a substantive way for long-term, substantial change, and have been working towards that,” he told JI. “I think that there was a little bit of a disregard for that hard work that some of us have put in.”

Others have appreciated his approach. “Security is a major issue, especially considering all the antisemitic incidents,” said Leon Goldenberg, a prominent Orthodox Jewish real estate executive and talk radio host in Midwood who, as a member of the Flatbush Jewish Community Coalition, recently endorsed Cornegy.

If elected, Cornegy said he will use the borough president’s office as a “sanctuary” for victims of hate crimes while working to assemble a task force for attacks within Brooklyn. “In order to get a hate crime designation, it takes almost an act of god,” said Cornegy, who adds that he will encourage Brooklyn’s district attorney to act more forcefully on such designations. “This kind of hatred, unchecked, only escalates.”

Cornegy has longstanding ties with Brooklyn’s Orthodox Jewish community thanks in part, he said, to his support for causes like security funding of yeshivas. “My agenda for public safety certainly encompasses the Orthodox community and my narrative around public safety,” he said.

Such relationships, he says, have only accrued over time. “I celebrate the fact that, yes, while I’ve gotten Orthodox support,” Cornegy said, “it has come out of hard work together.”

“I’ve worked on behalf of an issue that was germane to a particular demographic, and so that demographic now feels

confident that, as a Black man, I could still have Jewish issues or Hispanic issues or Polish issues. I have a Polish contingency,” Cornegy told JI. “But those are all forged out of doing work that positively impacted those communities. So there’s this kind of feeling that, ‘OK, he’s Black, but he has a larger view of what the needs of public communities outside of his own are, and potentially can advocate on our behalf as well.’”

“I would say his claim to fame is he’s really a consensus builder,” said David Greenfield, the CEO of the Met Council and a former city councilman who served alongside Cornegy. “In Brooklyn, which is a big, complicated, complex borough, he’s done a good job bringing people together.”

The son of a Southern Baptist minister who grew up in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Cornegy — now a father of six — played basketball at St. John’s University, went to the Final Four and then played professionally overseas for 15 years. He spent some of that time playing in Israel in the early ’90s — while also living briefly on a kibbutz because he wanted to immerse himself in the culture — an experience he describes as formative. “I played on teams where they were professional athletes and still served in the military,” he recalled. “When I would ask why, there was a level of patriotism that existed that I didn’t even think existed in the United States.”

“I’m a patriot,” Cornegy said. “I love the United States of America. But I hadn’t seen that before.”

Cornegy described the recent violence between Israel and Hamas as “incredibly disturbing,” adding: “I was there, and I understand protecting your homeland from people who really have to do that on a consistent basis.”

“Because we’re such a diverse borough, it is always on my mind how to bring peace here, at least, because you’ll see that there are conflicts that are happening on our homeland because of what’s happening there,” Cornegy told JI. “That disturbs me a lot, because for the most part, here in the borough, we kind of live cohesively together, and I’m always thinking about what can I do as the Brooklyn borough president to alleviate some of that pressure that people are experiencing.”

That impulse was on display, on a

smaller scale, at Basquiat's Bottle in Bedford-Stuyvesant the other day, when a kitchen worker approached Cornegy to thank him for providing a free suit for his graduation not long ago. And although the city councilman only had a glass of water, he still bought a round of drinks for the wait staff — he abstained — rather than leaving the restaurant without having ordered anything.

It was clear that Cornegy was enjoying

his status as a kind of community fixture as he campaigns for the opportunity to expand his web of connections.

Cornegy gained some prominence outside of Brooklyn when, having undergone a rigorous vetting process, Guinness World Records deemed him the world's tallest politician a couple of years ago. But he lost his crown after an insurance commissioner in North Dakota beat him by a centimeter. "A centimeter," Cornegy emphasized, sounding

a note of amused annoyance, "and some obscure elective role that I've never even heard of before."

He didn't seem too bothered by it, though. "I'm still the people's champ here in New York," he said. "I'll take that." ♦

JUNE 7, 2021

Building an interfaith oasis in the nation's capital

This fall, Yemeni refugee Mohammed al Samawi will open his second Abrahamic House — home to one Jew, one Christian, one Muslim and one Baha'i

By Gabby Deutch

When the members of the inaugural class of Abrahamic Fellows — one Jew, one Muslim, one Christian and one Baha'i — moved into their shared home in Los Angeles last year, they were preparing for a unique year of interfaith programming, hard conversations and new friends. Instead, the coronavirus pandemic shut down their city.

The fellowship, the culmination of a decade of pioneering interfaith work by Yemeni refugee Mohammed al Samawi, is designed to bring together adherents of the four main "Abrahamic faiths" to promote dialogue and understanding.

"We had plans for them to do events inside the house, but they couldn't do any events inside the house [because of the pandemic]. So basically, then they started doing it on Zoom," al Samawi told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview. "It was such an amazing experience... they became really good friends with each other."

The idea for the Abrahamic House — of bringing together young people to form communities outside of traditional religious institutions — was inspired by a Jewish organization called Moishe House. In dozens of cities around the world, shared Moishe

Houses offer affordable rent to young Jews, as long as they organize three to six social events and Jewish programs a month. When al Samawi, 34, first came to the U.S., he spoke about his interfaith work in Yemen at a Moishe House in Washington, D.C.

"I loved the whole idea about having people living together and doing Shabbat and doing Jewish events," al Samawi recalled. "I thought, 'Why don't I do something similar to that?' But instead of [people] only from one religion, it will be from different faiths."

Al Samawi got in touch with David Cygielman, the founder and CEO of Moishe House. "The first time I met him, he came to stay with me and my family [in Charlotte, N.C.] for three days," Cygielman told *JL*. "I just tried to share with him everything I could in terms of the model, what we learned." Cygielman is now the chair of Abrahamic House's board of directors.

Al Samawi argues that the Abrahamic House is doing something different from standard interfaith programming because its fellows form deep bonds over their year of living together. Members need not be religious as long as they are excited about the mission and willing to put in the work to host

events.

"Abrahamic House is not a traditional interfaith organization. We don't [just] celebrate holidays. We don't just do basic conversations, we actually get into the deep conversation," al Samawi noted. Events might focus on teaching attendees about antisemitism and Islamophobia, or teaching about how women in all four faiths are challenging traditional gender norms and taking on spiritual leadership roles.

Al Samawi is currently recruiting for the organization's second class of residents, for a new Abrahamic House in Washington, D.C., where a religiously diverse group of millennials will host events — this time in person — in the nation's capital. Applications are due at the end of June, with a move-in date of September 1.

The decision to create an Abrahamic House in Washington comes in part from al Samawi's love for the area, where he lived after arriving in the U.S. "The reason why I chose Washington, D.C., is because you can find — almost everywhere — anyone from all the countries," said al Samawi. "You can see the diversity in Washington, D.C., young professionals who really desire to do interfaith [work]."

The riot at the U.S. Capitol on January 6 further convinced him that Washington was the right choice for the next Abrahamic House. Al Samawi watched the events unfold with dread, feeling a startling sense of familiarity.

“It reminded me of what happens in Yemen. You see, in Yemen, the Houthis — they did the same thing in 2014,” al Samawi said, referring to the Houthi rebel militia that took over Yemen’s government in late 2014. “They entered the governmental buildings, and they start taking pictures while they are in the government buildings. They start saying, like, ‘We try to bring freedom and dignity to Yemen.’ As you can imagine, when I saw what happened in Washington, D.C., what kind of memories I’ve had.”

Al Samawi thinks that building understanding — the cornerstone of the Abrahamic House model — is a good place to start at this fractured moment in American history. “It started in my country like this. It started by a group who [has] all the stereotypes about the others, trying to impose their opinion in certain ways,” al Samawi noted. “We are speaking about a culture of ‘othering’ the others. Abrahamic House, this is what we’re trying to fight off: ‘othering’ the others. Because the more that you are involved in interfaith [efforts], the more that you realize, we are actually the same.”

Interfaith work is not just a pastime for al Samawi; it is his life’s work, and it almost killed him. From a young age, he was taught by peers and teachers that Jews hate Muslims. Meeting a Christian teacher caused him to reconsider what he’d learned. Al Samawi gave the teacher a Quran, hoping to convert him to Islam. In response, the teacher gave al Samawi a copy of the Bible.

“I wanted to understand why Jews hate us. Again, that’s what I was really believing,” al Samawi said. He grew curious about Judaism after reading the Old Testament. “From my reading the Torah, I discovered it is so similar to the Quran in a lot of ways, the story of the Prophet, the teachings, almost a lot of things even identical to the Quran — the

book of Muslims — but why didn’t they teach us that in school? They teach us the opposite.”

After connecting with several Jews on Facebook, al Samawi arranged to attend an interfaith conference in Bosnia-Herzegovina for Jews and Muslims, where he had his first in-person interaction with a Jewish person. He also learned that people can practice Islam in different ways; until attending this conference, he had never met a Muslim woman who did not wear a hijab. “It’s not only about the Jews,” al Samawi said. “It’s also about my own faith. It’s about the misinformation that I received.”

Still, it was too risky to tell his family why he was going to the conference; he had never traveled internationally by himself before due to a physical disability. “I had to trick them. I told them, ‘Well, I’m going to present Islam in this conference. If I go to the Muslim-Jewish conference, I might even change a Jew to be a Muslim,’” al Samawi explained.

After the conference, al Samawi began to speak publicly about interfaith work and building relationships with Jews and Christians. At home, where the Houthis were increasing their influence, he received death threats from extremists, including members of al-Qaeda.

“I asked my family and my friends and everyone that they know if they can help me [escape], but nobody was really able to until I asked people on Facebook,” al Samawi said. “Four Americans that I barely knew — they’re strangers — they helped me out, in 15 days, to escape, to cross the Red Sea actually on Passover. It’s like Moses, but in the wrong direction.” He arrived in the United States on May 31, 2015.

He arrived with just a backpack, not knowing that he’d be unlikely to return to Yemen. His first stop was Djibouti, in East Africa. After a month, he got a U.S. visa and permission to do a speaking tour. Once in the U.S., Al Samawi earned refugee status, and he is now trying to help his elderly parents make it to the country.

“They prefer to live in the small, tiny country, because at least that’s their country,” al Samawi noted. “They don’t want to leave it. They feel like if they leave it, then they actually give up for the extremists to take over.” He communicates with family members solely on WhatsApp, because their internet connection is not strong enough for calls, but even a weak internet connection can make it difficult to receive voice messages. “Sometimes I just record a voice message to my family and my heart is pumping fast because I only see one check on WhatsApp, which means it didn’t arrive yet. Are they fine? Are they okay? And then I feel guilty,” he admitted.

Al Samawi’s parents have grown to accept his interfaith work, and when his mother learned that it was Jews who helped him escape to America, she thanked them. “She said, ‘I would love to hug Daniel and kiss him, and I want to say thank you. Jews and Muslims, no different. We’re all the same,’” al Samawi recalled, referring to one of the Americans he met via Facebook who helped him escape Yemen.

Using his network of educators and leaders in the interfaith community, Al Samawi helps facilitate training for the members of the Abrahamic House, on basic tenets of interfaith dialogue as well as education around each faith, and topics including Islamophobia, antisemitism and Black Lives Matter. “The first month we will give them training, thinking mostly about how they can express their opinion, how they should listen to each other, how they can do events. But most importantly, we give them education,” al Samawi stated.

Al Samawi now lives in Los Angeles, where his memoir, *The Fox Hunt*, is being adapted into a film. The movie, which is being produced by Marc Platt and Steven Spielberg, was written by Josh Singer, who won an Academy Award for his screenplay for *Spotlight*.

It made sense for al Samawi to create the first Abrahamic House in L.A., his home base, although he did not live in it himself. In creating his nonprofit and recruiting fellows, he spoke with

Moishe House's Cygielman frequently. The pandemic impacted Moishe House as well, but most of the houses had already been up and running in their communities for several years, so their residents had a base of friends and supporters to whom they could market online events. Abrahamic House had no such network when the pandemic began.

"It's been impressive to see how much they could do in the first year and the first time they did this under COVID restrictions," said Cygielman. "It also makes it very challenging to have

an unproven pilot program launch in conditions that are suboptimal. And I still think they did a wonderful job with it."

The fellows who moved in were looking for a social life, which they struggled to cultivate. "We want them to be having their own life. Abrahamic House is not a job. It's housing. We want them to do their full-time job, or when they can, go to the universities," al Samawi explained. This became even more difficult when some of the fellows lost their jobs during the pandemic, and then had to focus on finding

employment rather than planning interfaith events.

"COVID was really hard for us," al Samawi said. Still, it had some benefits: Instead of promoting events only to people in Southern California, Abrahamic House could have a global reach. The fellows hosted some 30 online events, which reached over 900 people.

"We had people from Israel and Saudi Arabia in the same session," al Samawi pointed out. "That's something that we will not achieve if we did the event in person." ♦

JUNE 8, 2021

Rookie doctors in the COVID ward push through the grief

In 'Life on the Line,' NYTimes reporter highlights six med school grads grinding through the pandemic's first wave

By Gabby Deutch

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, doctors held an esteemed position in American society. Factor in a global pandemic, and suddenly virologists, public health experts and medical doctors of all stripes have become media sensations. When seeking advice on pandemic precautions over the last 15 months, Americans needed only to turn on cable news to find dozens of doctors on primetime. In Washington, "We love you Dr. Fauci" signs — referring to Dr. Anthony Fauci, one of the country's top infectious disease specialists — can still be spotted in some residents' yards.

At the same time that a handful of seasoned doctors were gaining newfound respect and public acknowledgment, a new crop of young doctors entered the field for the first time. Some New York City medical schools graduated fourth-year students a few months early to allow them to provide much-needed support for hospitals and COVID wards as the city struggled through a catastrophic

coronavirus surge last spring.

A new book from *New York Times* reporter Emma Goldberg documents these neophyte doctors' experiences entering the medical field at a time when they were most needed, and most in danger. But *Life on the Line: Young Doctors Come of Age in a Pandemic*, in stores today, is not just a chronicle of how six doctors adapted and served New Yorkers in a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic. Goldberg's book also explores how these doctors sought to draw on their own experiences to bring quality medical care to patients from underserved communities.

"There's so much incredible, incredible coverage of medical research and scientific breakthroughs," Goldberg told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview. "There's not as much coverage and stories about the day-to-day lives of doctors and the cultural forces that affect who gets represented in the field and what working conditions are like for doctors."

Goldberg, 26, does not need to

convince readers that doctors are important. But why should readers care about the working conditions of the members of such an exclusive, highly paid profession? "They are normal people with an outsize impact on whether we live or die," Goldberg argues in the book's introduction.

The six doctors in the book "represent the new face of American medicine," Goldberg writes. They seek to interact with patients in new ways and take seriously the concerns of marginalized populations that have not always received quality medical care. COVID-19 illustrated this fact in dramatic ways: Data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that Black Americans, Latino Americans, and Native Americans have double the risk of white Americans when it comes to the possibility of dying from COVID-19. These six doctors "know the fear that white coats and sterile white halls can so easily provoke. They are intent on remaking the field in their image," writes Goldberg.

Last spring, during the first wave of the pandemic, Goldberg was in regular contact with six doctors as they began their careers and tended to the sickest patients. “Whenever they were free to talk, I would just drop everything and talk with them,” she recalled.

The doctors she chose to feature represent different societies and cultures: among them are a first-generation American whose parents practice traditional Chinese medicine; a Hispanic woman whose parents did not go to college; a gay man who recalled the AIDS epidemic as he fought this new virus; and a woman who had to deal with a serious illness in her own family while treating COVID patients. They were dispatched to hospitals including Bellevue Hospital in Kips Bay, Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx, and NYU Langone’s Tisch Hospital on the East Side. Goldberg delves into the personal lives of each of the six doctors, having decided early on that the book would not only be a historical account of the first wave of COVID and its sickest patients.

“The grief would be so heavy that I felt like it wasn’t fair not to allow the reader to also connect with them as these just brilliant, bright, hopeful people that they are,” Goldberg explained. “I thought people would just be so saturated with stories of loss and grief during COVID that, like, how could they make it through a whole book without feeling really personally connected to the doctors at its center?”

Presenting doctors and medical students through a personal, humanized lens has characterized Goldberg’s approach to medical reporting, which has been a major focus of her work since she joined the Times two years ago as a researcher and fact-checker on the opinion desk. “In medicine, there can be these power dynamics where doctors are seen as just these cold figures of authority and expertise, and not as totally average people who you can relate to,” Goldberg noted. “That’s another goal with any medical reporting I do. I want to show how human the medical field is and what drives doctors

to do the work that they do.”

Life on the Line features a historical accounting of past pandemics and makes the argument that understanding how doctors treated patients in previous crises offers insight into the early, chaotic days of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“One of the things that really did interest me in doing this research was learning all of the ways in which epidemics can bring out a deeper layer of xenophobia, when actually public health crises should show us all the ways that people are bound up together, and the ways in which one person’s health is dependent on the health of their neighbor or their larger community,” Goldberg argued.

Since the pandemic began last year, Asian Americans have reported an increase in violent hate crimes and discrimination. A March 2021 report from Stop AAPI (Asian American Pacific Islander) Hate found that nearly a quarter of anti-Chinese incidents reported to the organization scapegoated China, where the virus originated, for the pandemic. Goldberg pointed to the so-called “Spanish Flu” in 1918 as a precedent: “It was painted as this foreign thing that came in and just affected and beat down the U.S., and just fed into these narratives of isolationism” that were popular at the time, she explained.

In addition to the Asian Americans who began to face this new wave of bias, other vulnerable communities began to bear the brunt of the pandemic’s toll. “I think that story became apparent early on in the pandemic, that the people who were being hardest hit were the people who couldn’t self-isolate, the people who were working frontline jobs, and those were also the people who were getting the lowest quality care,” Goldberg observed. “Inequality doubles down on itself, and I just knew that if I was going to tell any story about COVID, it had to put inequity at the center of it, because otherwise it wasn’t going to be an honest story.”

This pandemic is not the first time underrepresented and underserved communities have had to contend

with poor health outcomes and a lack of investment from hospitals and government institutions. “I think that that is really the story of our medical system, that when a disease or a virus or a condition is afflicting the most vulnerable people, it’s going to get the least investment of resources,” Goldberg argued. During the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, “there were so many patients who were neglected precisely because they were coming from the country’s most marginalized populations, particularly the gay community, but a lot of other marginalized communities as well, like low-income Americans [and] Black Americans,” Goldberg noted. “People were being ravaged by that crisis.”

Goldberg includes two doctors whose connection to Judaism is a key part of their identity. One of those doctors is Sam (Goldberg does not use their last names), whose decision to serve on the frontlines of the COVID pandemic was inspired by the AIDS crisis; he met his boyfriend Jeremy at the New York City AIDS march, which both had attended with their queer synagogue, Beit Simchat Torah. Goldberg writes about how Sam first began to explore and understand his sexuality at a Jewish overnight camp, where he struggled with a hookup culture that seemed to prioritize heterosexual relationships. Sam and Jeremy’s parents were supposed to meet at a Shabbat dinner last March to celebrate Sam learning where he would serve out his residency, but the festivities were canceled with the onset of the pandemic.

Goldberg also told the story of Elana, an observant Jew and Yeshiva University graduate who frequently consults Jewish tradition when making medical decisions. Goldberg recounted the prayer Elana recited the first time she dealt with human cadavers and the teachings she had learned about the sanctity of human life. Early in the pandemic, when she was working in COVID units, she had to decide whether to work on Shabbat if a call came in late Friday or during the day on Saturday. Her father reminded her of the principle of *pikuach nefesh*, which “meant that

saving a life trumped any other religious commandment, including the rules of Shabbat,” Goldberg writes.

For Goldberg, who got her start in journalism at the student newspaper at the Abraham Joshua Heschel School in New York, including these stories was an easy choice. “It’s so natural — as a writer [and] reporter, you bond with people who you have shared experiences with,” she said. “It’s probably very natural that I ended up following these two Jewish doctors and that we found so many personal things to connect over, because, of course, they brought things out that I was like, ‘Wait, I’ve had that experience.’”

At Heschel, her stories focused on topics like kosher food production and how her school’s Orthodox minyan

confronted feminism. “Probably no one read it but my mom,” she joked. Years before, as a fourth grader, she wrote about a pro-choice protest — and earned an early lesson in the importance of using precise medical language. “I was trying to explain to my fellow fourth graders what abortion was,” Goldberg recalled, but the language she used to describe the medical procedure led to a call from the school to her parents to “rein her in,” as she put it.

Goldberg always considered herself a writer, beginning with the journals she filled from a young age. Her father, J.J. Goldberg, was the editor-in-chief of the *Jewish Daily Forward* in the early 2000s. But growing up in media circles through the 2008 recession — and the mass restructuring and downsizing of

the media industry that followed — led her to question whether journalism was really worth pursuing.

Writing this book reminded Goldberg why she decided to give journalism a try. “These are stories about being courageous, and service-minded and inspiring people,” said Goldberg. She doesn’t hide that she cares about them; the book is not shy about its praise for these young people who acted bravely at the height of the pandemic. “I know you’re not supposed to write journalism for the subjects, but it was very much important to me that it was something they were comfortable with and felt that it was the type of story that they were ultimately happy to share,” Goldberg observed. “I love the people in this book. I think that they’re incredible people.” ♦

JUNE 11, 2021

New hope is born for Israeli families at first-of-its-kind pregnancy loss conference

Candles of Hope, brought to life by a mother-daughter team, is taking the painful issue out of the shadows and pointing women to much-needed services

By Tamara Zieve

When Elysa Rapoport lost her first baby girl in 2016, born without breath at 31 weeks, she found herself lost and alone. The Australian immigrant to Israel felt that the health system handled her traumatic experience of stillbirth “horribly,” lacking sensitivity and offering little professional support.

Grappling with waves of grief, it took 10 months after her stillbirth for Rapoport, 37, to gain a spot in a support group in the city of Rishon LeZion, more than a half-hour’s drive from her home in Tel Aviv. She found the experience of meeting other women who had similar experiences, coupled with the moderation of trained professionals, a saving grace. But 10 months of waiting for a spot to open was 10 months too long, and she resolved to help ensure that no more women would have to endure such an agonizing wait for much-needed support.

A year later, Candles of Hope was born. Last month, the NGO, helmed by Rapoport, held its first national conference dedicated to the subject of pregnancy and infant loss, shining a light on an issue often hidden in the shadows — to the detriment of those affected.

Candles of Hope was founded by Rapoport together with her mother Rebecca Dreyfus, who flew from Sydney to Tel Aviv to lend comfort and support to her grieving daughter following her stillbirth. Frustrated by the lack of institutional support available to her daughter at the time, Dreyfus was the driving force behind the founding of the group.

Candles of Hope is acting as an umbrella organization and has centralized information in Hebrew and English about relevant groups, organizations and individuals on its

website. “There are services but it’s all very scattered,” Rapoport told *eJewishPhilanthropy*.

Dreyfus worked tirelessly, traveling between Australia and Israel, and making use of her broken Hebrew to connect with and between frontline professionals on pregnancy and infant loss. She continued to do this while fighting a long battle with cancer, until April this year when she died at age 63, just one month before the conference she and her daughter had worked so hard to make happen. “She is today a candle of hope,” Rapoport said during the opening speech of the online conference on May 26, which was dedicated to her mother.

The conference, which attracted 120 people, featured speakers from various fields including therapy, research, the arts and media, advocacy and public leadership. Nurses, midwives and

people who had experienced loss also participated.

The name of the organization was inspired by the memorial candles traditionally lit for the deceased, and the hope that shines out of the light; for many, that hope is connected to a future pregnancy, and for others it represents hope to move forward to a positive place.

"We see hope as so central and critical to healing," Rapoport explained.

Announcing the conference on May 10, a day after Mother's Day, in a rare personal Facebook post, Rapoport wrote:

"Although Mother's Day is supposed to be a happy day to celebrate mothers, let's take a moment to recognize the sadness of those of us that no longer have our mothers with us, and those of us who may have experienced pregnancy or infant loss, and didn't get to mother those cherished babies. And most importantly, in my mother's memory, and as she always did, let's all strive to turn sadness, loss and adversity into action for good."

Rapoport is far from being a rare statistic, and Candles of Hope seeks to provide a readily available support system to all those who will sadly but inevitably experience loss of this kind.

In Israel, the rate of pregnancy termination is some 10 percent of all known pregnancies, Professor Danny Horesh of Bar Ilan University's psychology department told the conference. Stillbirth occurs in 3.5 to 5 of every 1000 deliveries.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is well-known in Israel, but not its link to pregnancy issues. Horesh pointed out that Israeli trauma studies tend to focus on combat-related experiences, as well as other traumas related to the country's security situation. Only recently have researchers begun to study PTSD following stillbirth and infant loss.

Research co-published by Horesh in 2018 found that pregnancy loss "is a potentially-traumatic experience, entailing a heavy burden of PTSD and MDD (Major Depressive Disorder.)"

"The time has come — and thus this conference — to recognize the potential distress of a stillbirth," he said. "Awareness is the name of the game."

Awareness and recognition of a bereaved parent's need to grieve are also essential.

Former Knesset member Aliza Lavie wrote a law in 2016 that entitles maternity leave benefits to women who give birth to a stillborn baby as early as the 22nd week of pregnancy.

Lavie has also advocated for the Israeli healthcare system to provide timely psychological and social support for women who have experienced stillbirth, from the moment of getting the devastating news through the entire medical process, burial and return to one's community. She spoke at the conference of the importance of a protocol of giving bereaved parents full information and choice about the burial of their baby — but several participants remarked that this was still not being implemented in the hospitals.

Acknowledging that it takes time for changes to be implemented, Lavie told the conference that a united effort by people from various sectors is key: "Working together is the secret to fixing and changing bureaucracy."

Rapoport believes the situation has improved since her stillbirth, but still has a way to go.

"Each hospital is supposed to assign a social worker to manage these cases and they are supposed to be trained in how to delicately handle these cases, but in reality it doesn't necessarily happen," Rapoport told eJewishPhilanthropy.

"It's an ongoing problem that hasn't been sufficiently addressed and that is something that we are working on. We would like to now work with hospitals to try and close the gaps," she adds.

The Candles of Hope board received an overwhelmingly positive response to the conference, with participants noting the void in available services and expressing appreciation for an event focused exclusively on this topic in a dedicated and open forum. The content included a session about men's experience of pregnancy and infant

loss, which is often overlooked.

"People really appreciated it because it gives recognition to their suffering and it's such a taboo subject that is not openly discussed, and people felt like it gave them legitimacy," Rapoport said.

Rapoport, who is now a business consultant and mother to two young daughters, said her mother never allowed her to neglect her volunteer work for Candles of Hope.

"None of it would have happened without my mum. She brought all the board members together. She was a pusher and a fighter, and when she wanted something to happen she made it happen," she says.

"Every time I spoke to her she was always pushing me forward, and now that she's gone there is no way I will drop the ball, because I owe it to her." ♦