

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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JUNE 16, 2021

A Jewish man, Levi Marhabi, is being held hostage by Yemen's Houthi rebels

In Yemen, emboldened Houthis continue to persecute religious minorities, including the dwindling Jewish population

By Gabby Deutch

Jews have lived in Yemen for nearly two millennia. A thriving community, which less than a century ago was 50,000 strong, has dwindled to single digits in recent months. In another few years, Yemen will be a country without a single Jew.

In March 2021, the majority of Yemen's tiny Jewish population was expelled from the country. Months later, the circumstances of the departure of these 13 Jews are unclear — reports have said they were forced to flee the country in exchange for the release of Levi Salem Marhabi, a Jewish man who has been imprisoned by the Houthi rebels since 2016. But Marhabi remains imprisoned, one of the only Jews remaining in the country.

Marhabi was part of a small group of "people that love Yemen, and had no desire to leave whatsoever," said Jason Guberman, executive director of the American Sephardi Federation, which has spearheaded a campaign on Marhabi's behalf, in conjunction with the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

Marhabi was arrested for the crime of smuggling a national artifact out of the

country, after he helped a group of departing Yemeni Jews bring an ancient Torah, said to be 800 years old, with them to Israel. Human rights organizations claim he now remains in prison solely because of his religion, and that his health is rapidly deteriorating.

According to a March 2021 report from the INSAF Center for Defending Freedoms and Minorities, a Yemeni NGO, Marhabi was arrested along with three Muslim men who were also accused of playing a role in removing the Torah from Yemen. But the other men have since been released, and a 2019 decision from an appeals court ordered that Marhabi also be released. Yet he remains imprisoned. INSAF reported that he "suffers from bad conditions, deterioration in his general health, health problems in the kidneys and lungs, in addition to losing all his teeth."

Now, the only Jews left in the country, aside from Marhabi, are four elderly co-religionists with no families to continue propagating Jewish life in the country. But the departure of those 13 Jews in March also demonstrates how Yemen has, under Houthi rule, essentially stamped out all forms of religious diversity: Jewish life in

modern-day Yemen, which has survived for thousands of years, will soon come to an end, and the Shi'ite Houthis — themselves a minority in the country — have persecuted Yemen's Baha'i minority and forced their beliefs onto the country's much larger population of Sunni Muslims.

"The Jews are a very small number in Yemen, and it's important to keep in context the level of persecution and hatred of this [Houthi] ideology towards other people, towards Baha'is, towards women, towards African migrants [and] towards other Muslims," Guberman explained.

The Houthis, an Iran-backed rebel group, are part of a Shi'ite sect that trace their roots to the Prophet Mohammad. "Because their ideology privileges the descendants of the Prophet, their own group, over others, they're willing to use violence and torture and imprisonment and so on against their enemies," explained Bernard Haykel, professor of Near Eastern studies at Princeton University. "They have a very radical religious and political ideology that is summed up in this thing called 'The Shout,'" he explained, referring to the official slogan of the Houthis: "God is great, death to

America, death to Israel, damn the Jews and victory to Islam.”

In 2014, the Houthi rebels invaded and later took control of Sa’ana, Yemen’s capital. They now also control the northern part of the country, where Yemen’s Jewish community has historically been based and where the majority of the country’s population lives.

“I would say in that area, at least half of the population is Sunni,” said Haykel, “and they’re being forced — educationally in terms of propaganda and ideology, and political mobilization and indoctrination — they’re being force-fed an ideology that’s not their own.”

In response to the Houthis’ takeover, a coalition of several Arab countries, led by Saudi Arabia, began a military campaign in 2015 to help Yemen’s former government regain control of the country, leading to a yearslong bloody civil war and subsequent humanitarian crisis. A vast majority of people in Yemen — 80% — receive humanitarian aid or protection assistance, and the country is on the verge of a famine.

Former Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump were criticized by politicians across the political spectrum for supporting Saudi actions in Yemen. Earlier this year, President Joe Biden announced a new American policy on Yemen that sought to promote a diplomatic solution to the conflict, earning praise from Democratic lawmakers including Rep. Ro Khanna (D-CA) and Sen. Chris Murphy (D-CT) and Republicans such as Sen. Mike Lee (R-UT). He appointed a special envoy to the region and cut off U.S. support for the Saudi-led offensive. Biden also removed the designation of the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization in the hopes that they would come to the negotiating table.

But after Biden’s announcement, the Iran-backed Houthis felt emboldened. “What happened after the president’s announcement is that the Houthis went on the offensive,” said Gerald Feierstein, a former U.S. ambassador to Yemen who now serves as senior vice president at the Middle East Institute. And while the Biden administration has earned praise for its renewed focus on diplomacy, it is not clear what a diplomatic solution to the conflict would look like. “It’s never clear, to be

honest, where the Houthis are coming from and what their objective is. They’ve never actually been able to articulate what their end goal is in this conflict,” Feierstein told JI.

Financial backing from Iran has had a significant role in the Houthis’ rise, U.S. officials have said. In April, U.S. special envoy on Yemen Timothy Lenderking told lawmakers that “Iran’s support to the Houthis is quite significant, and it’s lethal.” As the Houthis have recently advanced an offensive on the city of Marib, a Saudi stronghold, the U.S. has engaged in indirect nuclear talks with Iran.

It remains unclear if the issue of Iran’s support for Yemen will play a role in America’s decision to renegotiate the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. Biden administration officials have said that the president seeks a “longer and stronger deal” that also focuses on Iran’s support for terrorist groups like the Houthis and Hezbollah. When asked about this pledge at a Senate hearing last week, Secretary of State Tony Blinken said, “We have to look at specific aspects, whether there are areas where we can get even stronger commitments from Iran,” without providing detail on the “specific aspects.”

Iran’s approach to negotiations seeks to restore the deal first and then get to other issues later. “From the Iranian perspective, the JCPOA has to be rehabilitated for broader issues to be discussed,” said Sanam Vakil, deputy director of the Middle East North Africa program at Chatham House, a London-based think tank. “But simultaneously, the U.S. and Europeans are thinking about the broader regional issues that have to be tackled this time around, and it’s the regional sphere that was neglected in 2015 that really needs urgent attention. So Yemen is linked. The question is more about sequencing,” and whether Yemen is brought up during the negotiations or after an initial agreement is reached.

Earlier this week, Republican Sens. Jim Risch (R-ID), Todd Young (R-IN), Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Mike Crapo (R-ID) wrote to U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield, expressing concern regarding the “systematic and widespread human rights abuses perpetrated by the Iranian-backed Houthis” and highlighting the Houthis’ “mass indoctrination of

Yemenis” through a “brutal, theocratic style of rule.”

At an April meeting of the U.N. Security Council on Yemen, Thomas-Greenfield raised Marhabi’s case, stating that the U.S. calls “for the Houthis to immediately release Levi, and stop their human rights abuses. And we ask that the international community also join us in that call.” She explained that Marhabi “has been wrongfully detained by the Houthis just for his religious beliefs. For years he has sat behind bars without cause,” and noted that his mother remained in Yemen while he was imprisoned — until March, when she was among the group deported from the country.

It is unclear whether other officials in the Biden administration, such as Lenderking, have raised the issue of Marhabi’s imprisonment in meetings with representatives of relevant nations.

“We continue to advocate for the release of Yemeni Jew Levi Marhabi. We have raised his case repeatedly at the U.N. Security Council and the former secretary of state released a statement calling for his immediate release,” a State Department spokesperson told JI, referring to a November 2020 statement made by former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo “calling for [Marhabi’s] immediate and unconditional release.”

When asked whether Blinken would comment on Marhabi’s imprisonment, the spokesperson said, “We don’t preview statements,” but noted that “throughout his tenure, Secretary Blinken has been very outspoken about his and the Biden administration’s commitment to human rights and the plight of unjustly detained individuals.”

Guberman, of the American Sephardi Federation, argued that Marhabi’s situation warrants more attention not just from the U.S. government, but also from U.S. and global Jewish organizations. “It’s really surprising that the Jewish community has not taken this on in the same way that we have [in] past cases of abuse and imprisonment,” said Guberman.

Yemen’s Jewish population dates back to well before the founding of Islam. Jews have been allowed to practice their religion in the country, under the condition that “they were second-class citizens who had to obey

very strictly a set of laws whose purpose was to humiliate them,” said Paul Fenton, a professor at the Sorbonne who specializes in the history of Jews in Arab lands.

In 1949 and 1950, the vast majority of Yemenite Jews fled the country for the newly established State of Israel. In Operation Magic Carpet, organized by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, some 48,000 Yemenite Jews were airlifted to Israel by American and British planes. Just a few thousand Jews were left in Yemen after the operation, and most of them left in smaller operations that took place over the next decade. By the time the Houthis took over, fewer than 200 Jews remained in the

country.

For the most part, the Jews that remained in Yemen after the waves of immigration to Israel ceased were not interested in moving to Israel. “The group that’s left were heavily influenced by Satmar Hasidim,” said Guberman, referring to an ultra-Orthodox sect that is opposed to the state of Israel. Because of this connection, Yemen’s remaining Jews “were made to be distrustful of Israel, unlike Yemenis, traditionally, who have this great connection with the people in Israel.”

In recent years Israel has come under heavy criticism for the disappearance of more than 1,000 Yemenite Jewish children

who immigrated there in the years after the country’s founding.

Now that the number of Jews in the country has dwindled to single digits, there are fewer people to advocate on Marhabi’s behalf inside the country. And for the Jews who were forced to leave earlier this year, speaking out is not necessarily the best option.

“They’re very concerned. They’re scared to speak out. They don’t want to cause any problems for Levi, or the situation,” Guberman noted. “These are the forgotten refugees being forgotten in real time.” ♦

JUNE 9, 2021

Andrew Yang, Eric Adams and the battle for Orthodox Jewish support

The two frontrunners have jockeyed for the backing of the city’s varied Orthodox Jewish communities ahead of the June 22 primary

By Matthew Kassel

Before Andrew Yang announced his bid for New York City mayor in January, upending what until then had seemed like a fairly stable Democratic primary field, the favorite candidate for Orthodox Jewish support throughout the five boroughs was, by most accounts, Eric Adams, the brash and outspoken Brooklyn borough president.

Adams, a former police captain who is building his campaign around a public safety message amid an uptick in violent crime across the city, has maintained long-standing ties with Orthodox leaders, particularly in Queens as well as Hasidic enclaves of Brooklyn like Borough Park and Crown Heights, a neighborhood he represented as a state senator from 2007 to 2013.

Having set his sights on Gracie Mansion after decades of public service, Adams is now depending on those relationships as he builds a coalition capable of propelling him past his opponents in the crowded June 22 primary, for which early voting began

on Saturday. “I have a lot of credible messengers that know me,” Adams, 60, said in a February interview with *Jewish Insider*, predicting that he would pull in strong support from the Orthodox community, certain sects of which represent powerful voting blocs in local elections.

But Yang’s candidacy has tested that expectation. The 46-year-old mayoral hopeful, a former presidential contender who rose to national prominence last election cycle on a widely popular pitch for universal basic income, has aggressively courted the Orthodox vote with a similarly straightforward message.

Early in his mayoral campaign, for example, Yang forcefully denounced the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement as antisemitic while expressing his steadfast support for Israel. “Not only is BDS rooted in antisemitic thought and history, hearkening back to fascist boycotts of Jewish businesses, it’s also a direct shot at New York City’s economy,” Yang

wrote in a January opinion piece for *The Forward*. “Strong ties with Israel are essential for a global city such as ours, which boasts the highest Jewish population in the world outside of Israel. Our economy is struggling, and we should be looking for ways to bring back small businesses, not stop commerce.”

Jewish leaders have appreciated Yang’s views, even as they have garnered criticism from progressives.

“Looking at the field, I felt he was the best person for New York City and the best person for the Jewish community,” said Daniel Rosenthal, an Orthodox assemblyman in Queens, who offered an early endorsement for Yang in mid-March and values his opposition to BDS. “In a time when some people in the Jewish community felt like they were being shunned, he was proudly standing with us.”

Perhaps most consequentially, though, Yang’s unequivocal defense of the yeshiva education system has given him a unique advantage within the

Orthodox community. He has vowed to take a hands-off approach to imposing state-mandated instruction on secular subjects at the Jewish religious schools, many of which have been found to be lacking in that regard, according to an investigation by the Department of Education.

"People feel that a lot of the candidates were fumbling and dancing around" the yeshiva question, said Alexander Rapaport, a Jewish community leader in Borough Park who runs Masbia, a network of soup kitchens. Yang "was the only one who was ready to just say it everywhere," Rapaport told JI. "So for the people who are in the trenches about this, they notice something."

Over the past few months, Yang has succeeded in peeling away several key endorsements that would likely have gone to Adams — if not Scott Stringer, the city comptroller, who also developed ties with Orthodox leaders while in office.

But Stringer, whose campaign has been hobbled by allegations of sexual impropriety, alienated large swaths of the Jewish community when, in an effort to shore up progressive support not long ago, he endorsed a string of left-leaning candidates who were backed by the Democratic Socialists of America. Stringer has since failed to pick up any meaningful support from Orthodox leaders.

"I know of the frustration or anger," said Ezra Friedlander, a Democratic consultant who is backing Stringer. "Sometimes putting together a winning coalition could leave an aftertaste, so to speak," he added. "I think Scott would have been able to navigate his many allies, both old ones and new ones, and everybody would be happy."

But Leon Goldenberg, an Orthodox real estate executive and talk radio host in Midwood who has maintained a personal connection with Stringer for years, disagreed. "He's not going to be getting any support from the Orthodox community," Goldenberg told JI. "You can't endorse DSA candidates."

Instead, it is Yang and Adams, two of the leading moderates in the field, who have battled it out for the Orthodox vote — a fierce and occasionally chaotic rivalry that has only intensified in the final weeks of the race as the candidates have pivoted to attack

mode.

Until recently, it seemed as if Yang — whose campaign did not respond to repeated requests for comment — had all but locked up Hasidic support in Brooklyn. In April, after placing first in a number of public polls, Yang earned the support of a coalition of Hasidic sects in Borough Park, followed by endorsements from two influential Orthodox elected officials — Assemblyman Simcha Eichenstein and City Councilman Kalman Yeger — who represent the neighborhood.

"The relationship that Andrew has built with Orthodox communities around the city in a relatively short time, the concern in very real ways that he has demonstrated to us about the challenges that we face in the city, surpasses any other candidate in this race," Yeger told JI in a blunt assessment.

Then, in late May, Yang announced that he had scored a coveted dual endorsement from leaders of Williamsburg's rival Satmar factions, a rare and significant development his campaign touted in a triumphant email blast.

There was indeed cause for celebration. "The haredi community is the best opportunity for a candidate to win votes wholesale," said David Pollock, director of public policy and security at the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York. "You're talking about the potential for 6,000 votes-plus in an election which might have low turnout," he added, speaking only of the majority Satmar faction. "Show me a union that can turn out that many voters."

"I like him because he speaks his mind and says what he has to say and he's not thinking twice," Rabbi David Niederman, a Satmar leader and president and executive director of the United Jewish Organizations of Williamsburg, said of Yang. "When I say 'not thinking twice,' that's a bad statement," he clarified. "In other words, of course, he speaks what he believes in, doesn't go back. He fought for the issue of the education, which is the most important issue for us."

For Adams, the endorsements were a notable snub given his well-established presence in the borough, notwithstanding questions — amplified by Yang — over the location of his permanent residence. Throughout his tenure as an elected official, he has helped secure funding for bullet proof

vests and cameras, while standing with the Orthodox community against antisemitism, despite having praised the antisemitic Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan at an earlier point in his career.

The two-term Brooklyn borough president has since explained that such praise was aimed at the Nation of Islam's approach to public safety and had nothing to do with Jews. "I'm not a Muslim, I'm a Christian," he said in the interview with JI. "I'm never supportive of any antisemitic statements and would never be supportive of that. I don't believe in that philosophy."

Still, some leaders felt as if Adams had not gone far enough in supporting the community, particularly on more substantive issues like affordable housing. "On photo ops, he was good," said a Hasidic leader in Brooklyn who asked for anonymity to speak freely. "Always to get a picture, he was here."

Tensions seem to have culminated during a meeting with Satmar leaders in which Adams spoke threateningly after it became clear that he would not be earning their support, according to sources familiar with the discussion. Adams's campaign denies this account, which was first reported by *Politico* and confirmed by JI.

Last week, however, the minority Satmar faction suddenly reversed course and went with Adams — a decision coinciding with new polling indicating his emergence as the apparent frontrunner with just over a week remaining until the primary. "If you have a chance, we want to join," said Rabbi Moishe Indig, a leader of the Aroni Satmar sect who is credited with boosting Mayor Bill de Blasio's longshot bid for mayor in 2013.

Indig denied backpedaling, even though he had signed his name to a recent ad clearly positioning Yang as the top pick in a ranked endorsement including Adams and Stringer. He said he had never explicitly endorsed the order, adding that his loyalty to Adams motivated his decision above all other considerations. "If you have a friend that helped your community, who was here for you," Indig reasoned, "it's not fair to just dump him and throw him under the bus and just take a new guy."

"Yang may be better, I don't know," Indig told JI. "If he wins, we would like to have a good relationship with him."

Such uncertainty underscores the difficulty of navigating a race that is still very much in flux: Kathryn Garcia, the former sanitation commissioner, has seen a late wave of momentum thanks to endorsements from The New York Times and Daily News, while Maya Wiley, a former de Blasio aide and MSNBC commentator, is hoping for a last-minute surge of progressive enthusiasm after a recent nod from Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY).

Yang, for his part, has recently fallen behind after months of promising polling, making his endorsements within the Orthodox community, should they hold, all the more essential if he has any hope of pulling off a victory despite no prior history of involvement in New York City politics.

Adams appears to have upped his Orthodox outreach in recent months, running an ad in Yiddish casting him as a Jewish community stalwart with a long history of helping yeshivas and other institutions. He has managed to rake in a number of endorsements from Orthodox groups in Queens, Staten Island and now Brooklyn, where he earned the backing of the Flatbush Jewish Community Coalition as well as the Chabad community in Crown Heights.

"Eric is making his gains, which was part

of his original plan just to bring everybody in," said Menashe Shapiro, a consultant on the Adams campaign. "He's all over the community. Every corner of the Orthodox community from Hasidim to Far Rockaway and all in between are coalescing around him."

"We feel like the right thing to do is work with our friends that we have come to know and respect over many years," Josh Mehlman, chairman of the FJCC, said of Adams, commending his approach on several issues including public safety, small business and addressing antisemitism.

Rabbi Chanina Sperlin, a leader in the Hasidic community of Crown Heights, echoed that view. "He's a friend," Sperlin told *J*, noting that he has never met Yang despite having communicated with his campaign. "I just hope I made the right pick, and then we go from there."

A Hasidic community member in Brooklyn who requested anonymity because of the sensitive nature of the discussion believes that Yang's endorsers are making a strategic error and that they have abandoned a reliable ally in Adams. "I look at Yang like another Trump," he told *J*, referring to the Orthodox community's vociferous support for the former president. "He'll say today whatever it takes to get

elected. It just shows that the leadership has lost its way, and just like they supported Trump, they're supporting Yang."

"They're not looking at long-term relationships and long-term supporters of the community," he added.

But Yeger, the city councilman in Borough Park, offered a more nuanced reason for backing Yang.

"For me, it's not an abstract question of who the mayor of our city is going to be. It's actually looking at the day-to-day work. I need to know for myself, my constituents and for my city that on the other side of the building is a mayor who is going to treat us equally, fairly with every other community in the city," he said, offering what might be interpreted as a veiled critique of Adams. "With Andrew, I believe I have that. I believe we all have that."

Still, whether such endorsements from the Orthodox community will help carry Yang to victory remains to be seen.

"This is an attempt to show their power, and that will be tested," said Hank Sheinkopf, a veteran Democratic consultant in New York. "They'd better hope that Yang wins. That's the other side of it. Because if not, nobody owes them anything." ♦

JUNE 17, 2021

On the streets of Manhattan with two leading DA candidates as concerns over crime spike

Alvin Bragg and Tali Farhadian Weinstein differ on policing strategy as uptick in violent crime comes to define the election

By Matthew Kassel

Most of the eight Democratic candidates running for Manhattan district attorney in New York City's crowded June 22 primary election believe that the office is in need of a makeover, even as they have put forth competing visions — some more sweeping than others — for enacting change.

The open-seat race to succeed outgoing District Attorney Cyrus Vance, Jr., whose record has drawn scrutiny as

he prepares to retire after more than a decade in office, represents a rare and unique opportunity to advance a new criminal justice agenda amid a national reckoning over racial inequality, mass incarceration and police accountability.

Some candidates in the race advocate for relatively measured reforms, including calls for restorative justice, prioritizing major crimes over low-level offenses that distract from more meaningful casework and revamping

a variety of units. But three outspoken progressives are vowing to reshape the office by slashing its budget and reducing staff, among other measures. The candidates — a civil rights attorney, a public defender and a state assemblyman — have no prosecutorial experience but wear that distinction as a point of pride, claiming that the system is excessively punitive and in need of an outsider's perspective.

But with just under a week remaining

until Manhattanites cast their ballots — and with early voting already underway — voter enthusiasm instead appears to be coalescing around two center-left establishment candidates: Tali Farhadian Weinstein and Alvin Bragg, former federal prosecutors with years of experience working within the criminal justice system. In one of the few publicly available polls on the race, released Monday by the progressive think tank Data for Progress, the two were tied for first place with 26% among likely Democratic primary voters in Manhattan surveyed between June 7 and 13.

Though 21% of respondents were undecided, suggesting that the race is somewhat fluid, the third-place candidate, Lucy Lang, a former assistant district attorney for Manhattan, was trailing by double digits with just 8% of the vote. Tahanie Aboushi, the left-leaning attorney who recently earned a major endorsement from Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT), was a point behind Lang in fourth place. Despite describing herself as “the leading progressive” in an email to *Jewish Insider* earlier this week, Aboushi has struggled to break out, as have Dan Quart and Eliza Orlins, who fill out the roster of non-prosecutors eyeing one of the most high-profile prosecutorial jobs in the country.

The apparent lack of enthusiasm for a staunchly progressive Manhattan district attorney in some ways mirrors the dynamic at play in the mayoral race, whose contours are being increasingly shaped by the uptick in violent crime across the city. Most of the left-wing mayoral candidates have been overshadowed by moderates like Andrew Yang, Kathryn Garcia and Eric Adams, the Brooklyn borough president and former police captain who has surged to the top of the polls while aggressively promoting a public safety message.

Farhadian Weinstein, who most recently served as general counsel to the Brooklyn District Attorney’s Office, has sought to allay such fears, casting herself as one of the few candidates in the race who is willing to address crime

with a sense of practicality. “Isn’t that interesting that in the mayor’s race, the candidates are, as a group, by and large, speaking about it much more sensibly and realistically than the candidates for the chief law enforcement officer of Manhattan?” she wondered rhetorically last Friday afternoon at a campaign stop outside a kosher market on the Upper West Side.

“People want to feel safe, and they know that safety is connected to the recovery of the city,” Farhadian Weinstein, 45, told *JI*. “When I stand outside of subway stations, as political candidates often do in order to try to meet a good flow of voters, it seems to be an invitation for people to talk about how they feel about the subway, and people are talking about how their chests are tightening up when they’re going in. There’s just this sense of insecurity that is affecting people’s choices and is really degrading, and we have to do something about that.”

Farhadian Weinstein, who says that women in particular have often expressed such anxieties to her, proposes establishing a bureau of gender-based violence, while pledging to prosecute subway crimes “where appropriate” as well as appointing a gun violence coordinator and opening a courtroom in Manhattan dedicated to gun cases.

Her message seems to be resonating. “I responded to her immediately,” Thomas Kopache, an actor who lives on 93rd Street and Columbus Avenue, told *JI* outside the kosher market.. “It just seems like the gun violence has gotten out of control, and I just feel like we need a stronger stance on that. I applaud what she’s going to try to do.”

A woman who approached Farhadian Weinstein last week near the intersection of 90th Street and Broadway expressed a similar concern. “I’m concerned about what’s going on with the police, not that they’re doing bad things — it’s just the opposite,” she said. “This business of defunding the police, an 11-year-old being shot, a father being shot — where do you stand on this?”

Farhadian replied without hesitation. “So I am alone, almost, in my field in not being for defunding the police,” she averred. “Six out of eight people in my race are defunders of one kind or another, and the other one besides me, her name is Liz,” Farhadian Weinstein said, referring to Liz Crotty, a former assistant district attorney in Manhattan and now a practicing criminal defense lawyer who has carved out a somewhat more conservative path than her opponents. “But she’s not a viable candidate.”

Crotty, who has indeed failed to gain traction in the crowded field, does reject calls to defund the police, though she has also noted, correctly, that the district attorney has no authority over the police budget.

Not that candidates are shying away from the subject: Bragg, for his part, is in favor of trimming the budget for homeless sweeps, mental health responses and policing in schools — proposals he believes rank-and-file officers will agree with. But in terms of what he will be able to do in office, Bragg emphasizes a need for more rigorously investigating allegations of police misconduct if he is elected.

Bragg, who has been described as a “pragmatic progressive,” opts for an evenhanded approach that is informed by his own lived experience as well as his background as a career prosecutor.

“My whole life has been talking about both safety and fairness,” Bragg, 47, told *JI* on Tuesday afternoon in Harlem, where he lives with his wife and two children, as he campaigned on Frederick Douglass Boulevard and 116th Street, just a block from a group of volunteers distributing flyers for Farhadian Weinstein. “More people started talking about police accountability this past year because of the uptick in gun incidents,” he said. “So I’ve talked to people about them, but about how they’re inextricably interwoven. Places where we have the most acute police accountability issues are also where we have the most acute public safety issues, and everyone wants both.”

Bragg, a former civil rights lawyer who worked as New York's chief deputy attorney general from 2017 to 2018, where some of his most notable cases included suing disgraced movie mogul Harvey Weinstein and the Trump administration, would be Manhattan's first Black district attorney. He often speaks about growing up in Harlem, where he was wrongly held at gunpoint by the police on numerous occasions — injustices that influenced his decision to become a lawyer while adding a personal dimension to his candidacy.

Gwen Barton, a retired healthcare worker in Harlem, told JI that she is voting for Bragg because she appreciates his story. "Being from the area, raised in the area, I like that, because I've been in the same neighborhood," said Barton, a member of Local 1199 of the Service Employees International Union, the largest union in the city, which has endorsed Bragg. "He would really know the experience, and he sees what's been going on here with the police and all of that."

"I'm going to vote for him," said Santiago Almonte, a retired correctional officer who lives in the neighborhood. "He's going to do better than the one that's in there right now," he added, referring to Vance, who has faced accusations of going easy on powerful figures in recent years.

While Bragg and Farhadian Weinstein have crafted differing strategies for addressing such matters as violent crime, gun control and incarceration, the two candidates are more aligned than it may seem on those issues, though there are some subtle distinctions, according to Rebecca Roiphe, a professor at New York Law School.

"These two candidates are not wildly different in their approach to violent crime," Roiphe told JI. "Alvin Bragg's approach focuses on cutting off the flow of illegal guns to the city, community programs and prosecution targeted at the most violent crimes. He does not want to use incarceration as a primary tool to address violence. Tali Farhadian Weinstein proposes similar programs, but she is more interested in

creating specialized gun courts, which will accelerate prosecutions and is more open to prosecuting gun possession in certain circumstances."

Both candidates "see a role for incarceration in crime control, but for Bragg it is more of a last resort reserved mostly for people who have committed violent acts and are unlikely to benefit from community and other social programs," Roiphe added. Farhadian Weinstein, on the other hand, "seems more willing to use it as a deterrent in some cases."

Bragg and Farhadian Weinstein have also vowed to increase the office's focus on hate crimes as attacks against Jews and Asian-Americans have surged over the past year.

As the primary draws near, Bragg and Farhadian Weinstein have pulled ahead in the race, thanks to a series of high-profile endorsements that have buoyed their candidacies. Bragg was recently endorsed by Rep. Jerry Nadler (D-NY), the powerful chair of the House Judiciary Committee, as well as The New York Times, a stamp of approval that is likely to lend him credibility among the newspaper's conventionally liberal readers in Manhattan. Farhadian Weinstein, meanwhile, has earned the support of the city's two major tabloids, the Daily News and The New York Post — which do not usually align politically — and on Tuesday was endorsed by former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Farhadian Weinstein has also benefited from boosting her campaign with \$8.2 million of her own money, which she has used to blanket the city with TV advertising and campaign mailers in the final weeks of the race. The massive personal donation has raised some eyebrows, as have contributions from a number of Wall Street-affiliated donors. Farhadian Weinstein, who is married to the hedge fund owner Boaz Weinstein, has maintained that such apparent conflicts of interest will not hinder her ability to perform in a job whose duties include prosecuting white-collar criminals. The next district attorney is also expected to inherit

Vance's current ongoing investigation into former President Donald Trump's taxes.

Farhadian Weinstein has continued to face scrutiny as she has emerged as a frontrunner. A recent *ProPublica* investigation found that Farhadian Weinstein and her husband paid no federal income taxes in 2013, 2015 and 2017. They paid just \$6,584 in 2014.

Recently, Farhadian Weinstein has gone on the offensive, commissioning a poll that was accused of spreading misleading information about Bragg as well as releasing a new attack ad alleging that Bragg and Quart "won't protect women" when it comes to rape and domestic violence cases. Both campaigns have rejected the characterization.

Bragg has raised \$2.35 million, according to a spokesperson for his campaign, which has also garnered \$1 million in outside spending from a national progressive political action committee. Despite being outspent, however, he may still have an advantage in a primary where identity politics is likely to influence the race, particularly at a moment when Adams is vying to be the city's second Black mayor, says Eli Valentin, an author and political analyst. "You have the below-96th Street dynamic and the north-of-96th Street dynamic, and I think in this election that may actually play out," he told JI. "High Black turnout may favor someone like Bragg."

If she is elected, Farhadian Weinstein would be the borough's first female district attorney. A Persian Jew, she fled Iran at the age of 4, settling with her family in New Jersey before pursuing a law degree and scoring clerkships with Attorney General Merrick B. Garland, who was then a judge, and former Associate Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. Farhadian Weinstein worked in the Justice Department during the Obama administration and went on to serve in the Brooklyn District Attorney's Office under Eric Gonzalez, where she helped publish a comprehensive study analyzing wrongful convictions and

filed a successful lawsuit in partnership with New York State Attorney General Letitia James against the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency.

On the Upper West Side last week, Farhadian Weinstein seemed to be enjoying her status as a leading candidate competing in a primary whose victor will be all but assured safe passage in the general election given the partisan makeup of the borough. Between conversations with potential voters, she stopped to chat in Hebrew

with an elderly man who had just recently returned from Israel, while her mother and daughter, one of three, hovered nearby for moral support.

Likewise, Bragg was in his element days later as he pounded the pavement about 30 blocks north, engaging potential constituents and reflecting with locals about Harlem during the crack epidemic in the 1980s. Standing on the corner of 116th Street and Frederick Douglass Boulevard, he took a brief pause from campaigning when a

man he recognized rode by on a bicycle without a helmet on. Bragg seemed mildly alarmed at the sight.

“Joseph!” Bragg yelled from across the street. “You out here on a bike? Is that Marley? I love it. Be safe! Helmet! Helmet!” ♦

JUNE 18, 2021

Ester Kurz reflects on four decades on Capitol Hill for AIPAC

After nearly 40 years, Kurz recently retired from AIPAC — and talks history, the Iran deal, and why the Squad can't be convinced on Israel

By Gabby Deutch

Picture this: Israel is at war. Op-ed writers and major TV personalities are blasting the country's actions. Members of one party in Congress are opposed to some U.S. aid to Israel, threatening to hold it up unless Israel acts in a certain way.

But instead of last month's 11-day conflict between Israel and Hamas, it's 1982, and Israel is at war with Lebanon. Rather than a handful of far-left Democrats who were urging Congress to limit aid to Israel, it was Republicans who criticized foreign aid to Israel. Months after the war ended, President Ronald Reagan held up the sale of F-16 fighter jets to Israel because he disapproved of Israel's actions in the Lebanon war.

For Ester Kurz, who retired last week after 39 years at AIPAC, serving most recently as the lobbying organization's director of legislative strategy and policy, the current partisan wrangling around Israel is nothing she hasn't seen before.

“It feels very much the same,” Kurz told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview from her vacation home in Bethany Beach, Del. “We didn't have social

media, but you had the nightly news... I can't even begin to relate what it was like to watch every single night, on the nightly news, these pictures of bombed-out hospitals and schools in Beirut, and what the Israelis had done and the devastation and the critique that came out from some of the mainstream media to the nightly news to top opinion makers, *The New York Times*, I mean, you name it, you had a stream of the most hostile verbiage against Israel.”

As Kurz looks back on nearly four decades at one of the most prominent pro-Israel organizations in the country, she argues that history shows that the current rise in anti-Israel sentiment will be another passing fad, and that the bipartisanship promoted by AIPAC will largely remain the norm.

“America basically is a centrist country,” she claimed, although polling shows that Americans have grown more polarized in recent years. Kurz does not discount that Americans have grown more divided — including on Israel — but she takes a hopeful view of the situation. “I'm optimistic that there will be a coming together in terms of the center,” she noted.

However, she also acknowledged that certain politicians — including former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former President Donald Trump — have at times allowed partisanship to affect the U.S.-Israel relationship, at times presenting a challenge for AIPAC. When asked whether Netanyahu's 2015 speech to Congress, when he accepted an invitation from Republican House Speaker John Boehner without informing then-president Barack Obama before it was announced publicly, made AIPAC's work more difficult by challenging the bipartisan nature of the U.S.-Israel relationship, she said yes. (Ron Dermer, who was then the Israeli ambassador to the U.S., said on a *Jewish Insider* podcast recently that Boehner had told the Israelis that he was going to inform the White House.)

“We did hear about it for a long time afterwards,” Kurz said of the speech. “Even today, a lot of new members raise that as a turning point for them.” Reports at the time said that AIPAC had urged Netanyahu not to give the speech, but Kurz said she was unaware of such conversations.

Here, too, Kurz opted to point to history to show that Netanyahu is not the first Israeli prime minister to openly clash with politicians in the U.S. In the early 1990s, in clear opposition to then-President George H.W. Bush, Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir flaunted his support for settlement growth. In a 1992 speech, Shamir told supporters that he would “tell the Gentiles of the world” that “no force in the world will stop this construction” of Israeli homes in the West Bank and Gaza.

At the time, Bush said he would not sign off on loan guarantees for Israel until it halted settlement construction and entered peace talks with the Palestinians. AIPAC and other pro-Israel organizations lobbied Congress to urge Bush to drop his conditions, which he did not; AIPAC stopped fighting it. Kurz described this as an obstacle past which AIPAC swiftly moved, because in 1992 Bush ultimately gave Israel the loan guarantees: “That turned into a success story,” she argued.

In Kurz’s view, as long as AIPAC and pro-Israel advocates can get facts about Israel to lawmakers, they can win people over. “I’m a firm believer in facts. I think facts, at the end of the day, and reality [are] what turn things around,” said Kurz. Here she pointed to a small number of Republicans, led by Sen. Jesse Helms (R-NC), who were critical to foreign aid as a U.S. policy goal: “Republican opposition in the ‘80s was not fact-based, in terms of being so anti-foreign aid.”

Kurz believes traveling to Israel is a vehicle to change critics’ minds. She mentioned that Helms shifted his position after visiting Israel in 1985. (And after narrowly beating a pro-Israel Democrat in 1984 who won the support of most of North Carolina’s Jews.) “They showed him a different side of Israel, and they presented him with the reality of Israel and why Israel is such an important ally and why foreign aid played such a key role, and he turned around,” she recalled.

But when she looks at “the Squad,” the Democratic members of Congress who have been critical of Israel since

taking office in 2018, and who criticized the country during its recent war with Hamas, Kurz sees little opportunity to change minds. “I’m not saying the Squad can be turned around. They come at this from a certain perspective. And as I say, they’re not interested in the facts. But the vast majority of members of Congress, for them, facts do matter,” she said.

Kurz has not met with any members of the Squad personally, claiming they would not agree to meet with her or AIPAC. “We divide up areas of responsibility among different lobbyists, and so I had one or two of the Squad members,” she said, though she did not name who were in her portfolio. “They did not want to meet with us. I think that’s one of the frustrating things — that they obviously speak out frequently on the subject, and yet are unwilling to really listen to other voices.”

“They don’t know the facts. They spout things that don’t make any sense,” Kurz noted. A 2019 Pew poll found that nearly three-quarters of American voters believed Republicans and Democrats disagreed about “basic facts,” and often people on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian issue present different sets of facts.

Ultimately, Kurz believes the members of the Squad, including Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) and Ilhan Omar (D-MN), don’t have much sway over Democratic positions on Israel, and that their hostility toward the country — referring to Israel as an “apartheid” state — will be just another bump in the road of the long history of strong U.S.-Israel relations. “I think that they have, really, very little influence in the day-to-day workings of Congress,” Kurz stated. “But they are loud.”

She attributed the increase in anti-Israel sentiment among far-left Democrats to several factors: the growing influence of progressives in Democratic politics, social media, intersectionality and increased involvement from human rights groups like Amnesty International and arms control groups. “They got engaged

during the Iran debate, and they’ve stayed engaged, so they’re pushing hard in a way that we hadn’t seen before, and affecting lawmakers,” said Kurz.

AIPAC’s approach to Iran’s nuclear program has alienated some Democrats who viewed the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) as one of Obama’s top accomplishments. The organization spent the summer of 2015 urging Democrats to vote against approving the JCPOA. Four Senate Democrats and 25 House Democrats opposed the deal.

In the years that followed, many Democrats rallied around the Iran nuclear deal. In 2018, after Trump pulled America out of the JCPOA, Democrats prioritized reentering the deal, and President Joe Biden’s administration is engaging in indirect talks with Iran to rejoin the agreement.

“It’s never easy to go against the president of the United States on an issue, especially a foreign policy issue. But I’ve learned, again, through my many years at AIPAC, that it’s not always about winning a particular legislative fight, seeing what happens as a result of that fight,” Kurz observed. “We may not have won the battle, but we’ve sort of done better with the war.”

She called AIPAC’s actions in 2015 a victory, even if the Obama administration still entered the deal. “We also were able, in the midst of that fight, to convince the American public that this was not an agreement that was particularly in America’s best interest,” Kurz noted. Several months after AIPAC’s lobbying campaign, a February 2016 Gallup poll found that 57% of Americans disapproved of the deal.

In public comments on the Biden administration’s goals for renegotiating the Iran deal, Secretary of State Tony Blinken has said that the president seeks a “longer and stronger deal.” Kurz believes AIPAC deserves some credit for this stance. “I think they’ve internalized and understood the point that [the original] agreement was insufficient,” she said. “I’m not sure that would have happened if we hadn’t put up the fight.” Kurz has no regrets about AIPAC’s

handling of the JCPOA in 2015; when asked if AIPAC should do anything differently if it chooses to oppose a renegotiated deal, Kurz said, “I don’t think so.”

Trump’s decision to leave the Iran deal was widely criticized by Democrats, but AIPAC said the move “provides an important opportunity to apply further diplomatic and economic pressure on Iran,” while also noting the need for a “bipartisan consensus” on keeping Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. That approach characterized much of AIPAC’s handling of Trump’s presidency — praising his policies that advanced pro-Israel priorities while also looking for ways to remain bipartisan.

“It was difficult in many ways, because there was what Trump was doing domestically and the opposition that engendered, particularly among Democrats,” said Kurz. “From the Israeli perspective, they didn’t see the domestic impact that Trump had in this country. They were just viewing

it from the impact it had on the U.S.-Israel relationship, and from that point, it was very positive. So it was a tough time, because you have the two tensions coming at each other.”

But even while Trump was president, Kurz noted that Congress continued to pass bipartisan legislation on Israel. “It’s been tough all around, but we’ve gotten through it, and I think that [we’ve] come out stronger for it,” she said.

As Kurz begins retired life, she is planning a month-long trip to Israel. She hasn’t visited since February 2020, the longest she’s ever gone without traveling to the country. She can’t count how many times she’s been to the country — at least twice a year with AIPAC; four years as a student at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where she earned her bachelor’s degree; and childhood visits to family in the country. “Hundreds of times and it’s never enough,” Kurz remarked.

One trip in particular stands out to her, when she visited Israel with an

AIPAC delegation just after the Oslo Accords were signed in 1993. The group had a meeting with the speaker of the Palestinian parliament — “that was when the parliament actually existed and met,” which it hasn’t done since 2007, Kurz noted — and he invited them to sit in the gallery and watch the parliamentary proceedings. “He said, ‘and I want to welcome our guests from AIPAC,’ and he pointed to the visitors gallery, and the whole place clapped. We were like, ‘Oh, my God, what a moment,’” Kurz recalled.

The idea of a Palestinian legislature cheering for a group of AIPAC staffers seems unfathomable today. “It embodied the hopes and the possibilities that existed,” Kurz noted. “I actually thought during Oslo, I said, ‘Wouldn’t it be great? We wouldn’t need AIPAC anymore.’” ♦

JUNE 15, 2021

MacKenzie Scott donates to Repair the World and HIAS

Mackenzie Scott is known for her rapid distribution of big, unrestricted grants

By Helen Chernikoff

MacKenzie Scott, known for her record-setting charitable donations, has now become — with her husband, Dan Jewett — a supporter of two American Jewish organizations, Repair the World, a service corps for young people, and HIAS, the immigrant support and advocacy group.

These are Scott’s first gifts to U.S.-based Jewish groups. HIAS CEO Mark Hetfield did not disclose the details of HIAS’ gift, but said it would enable the group to ramp up its capacity as an emergency responder to refugee crises around the world in addition to continuing its work as a resettlement agency. Scott, the ex-wife of Jeff

Bezos, gave almost \$6 billion away to nonprofits and charities last year. After their divorce, she signed the Giving Pledge, which commits signatories to giving at least half of their wealth to charity. Repair the World, whose annual budget, according to its most recent tax filing, was \$5.9 million, will receive an unrestricted grant of \$7 million from Scott and Jewett, CEO Cindy Greenberg told eJP.

When Greenberg was approached by Scott and Jewett’s representatives, she did not suspect the identity of the donors, she said. She shared with the representatives the organization’s three-year plan and its mission, which is both to make service a defining element

of what it means to be Jewish in America and to enact social change. A few weeks after that conversation, about two and a half weeks ago, she got the call letting her know about the gift. “I lost my breath; I made the representative repeat herself,” Greenberg said. “I said, ‘You’re either an angel or a prank caller.’”

“It’s a game-changer for us,” Greenberg said. “It’s a stamp of approval which we hope will catalyze additional investment in us.”

Scott also made a gift to Africa Tikkun, an aid organization in South Africa founded by the chief rabbi there. ♦