

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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JUNE 28, 2021

Israel's new diaspora affairs minister visits a Jewish community in crisis

Nachman Shai's trip to Surfside is the first foreign trip for the diaspora minister set on building strong ties with American Jews

By Gabby Deutch

In his first international trip as Israel's minister of diaspora affairs, Nachman Shai arrived early Sunday morning in Surfside, Fla., as part of a joint delegation with Israel's foreign affairs and defense ministries to help with relief efforts following the collapse of a condominium.

"There's a message here that I believe should be delivered, that when you're in trouble, we are there to help," Shai told *Jewish Insider* in an interview on Sunday night. "When we are in trouble, you are coming to help us. I remember that every single opportunity that is needed any assistance, any help from the United States with any administration — by the way, Republican, Democrats, in general — you're always there for us."

The delegation was organized at the urging of Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett following the collapse of the oceanfront condominium in the heavily Jewish area north of Miami Beach. "He called me a few times since [Friday], to make sure that I'm going, that I know what to say, that I know what message I'm going to carry," Shai said. "It seems like he's really

interested in this trip."

Shai met yesterday with public officials including Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, Sen. Rick Scott (R-FL) and Miami-Dade Mayor Daniella Levine Cava, as well as leaders from the Miami Jewish community. He plans to stay in Florida until Tuesday and will meet with Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL) and additional Jewish organizations.

A team of engineering and rescue specialists from the IDF went directly to the disaster site. One member of the IDF crew answered questions from people whose family members remain unaccounted for. "They feel helpless. Our representative, one of the rescue team, came also, though, to talk to them. He told them, first of all, he said that the Americans are doing their best," Shai recalled. He did not address the families as a group, though he has spoken to some individually. "If it comes from a politician's mouth, it's one thing. When it comes from professionals, it's a different thing."

The Israeli search-and-rescue team explained to the families that while the likely outcome was grim, there have been past instances in which survivors have been found days after a disaster. "He told them

that... there were two or three cases that people were found after four days — so they should give it a chance, that they shouldn't lose hope," said Shai.

Contrary to earlier news reports, Shai told *JI* that there are not believed to be any Israeli citizens among the dead or missing. But as many as 40 Jews are among the more than 150 people that are missing or dead. Soon after arriving, Shai visited the scene where many Jewish families had gathered, and prayed with them.

"I was told that they raised the question, 'Will Israel come to help us?' I don't think Italians will ask this question when it comes to Italy, and I don't think Irish will," Shai said. "But when it comes to Jews, they look at Israel as a source of hope, power."

In the past, Israel had relied on the assistance of Jewish communities around the world during times of crisis. "That world has changed," said Shai. Now, Israel is "relatively safe, and much less dependent on world Jewry. So it's now time for us to give, not only to get."

The trip to Florida was Shai's first abroad in his position, which he began two weeks ago after a coalition led by Bennett and Yesh

Atid leader Yair Lapid ousted former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu after 12 years in power. Some Jewish organizations in the U.S. have expressed hope that a government led by Bennett, who also once served as diaspora minister, could forge better relationships with all Jews around the world.

Shai has already prioritized recognizing and respecting non-Orthodox forms of Judaism. Reform Judaism is “not in the back any longer,” said Shai. “All three denominations are accepted and recognized by the State of Israel, but now for a change the full spectrum is equal.”

Still, he had hoped to begin his position in Jerusalem, to better get to know the role and the organization. “I wanted to stay in

the country for at least three, four months, to learn the ministry,” said Shai, before adding: “No one knows the Jewish world. It’s so complicated and big. But I know. I’ve been to many places in my previous capacity.”

He spent the last two years teaching at Emory University and Duke University, living in Atlanta and Durham, N.C.; before that he served in the Knesset for 10 years representing various iterations of the Labor party. Earlier in his career he served as an IDF spokesperson, and worked for a time at the United Jewish Communities, the predecessor to Jewish Federations of North America.

Shai may have knowledge of Jewish life outside of Israel, but he is aware that many Israelis don’t.

“The challenge,” Shai explained, “is, how do you convince the Israelis that the diaspora or the Jews living out of the country are relevant to them, they are part of the integral part of their life, that whatever happens here is our business? That we have to think about world Jewry with whatever we do?”

He pointed to Israel’s recent war with Hamas as an example. “Antisemitism depends very much on the relationship between us and the diaspora,” said Shai. “We should be aware that when we hit — I will say I don’t like it — but when the Israeli Air Force targets Hamas targets in Gaza, that has implications on other fronts, and Jews sometimes pay for it because they live all around the globe.” ♦

JUNE 30, 2021

The hurricane-chasing Jewish chef who is feeding first responders in Surfside

Daniel Arshadnia is used to working at disaster zones. They aren’t usually in his backyard

By Gabby Deutch

The night the Champlain Towers South condo collapsed last week, Daniel Arshadnia was staying with a friend in Surfside, across the street from the disaster. The next morning, he was at the scene.

Arshadnia isn’t technically a first responder, but as a chef whose business involves going to disaster zones — “chasing storms,” as Arshadnia puts it, since he usually travels to places hit by hurricanes — he is often one of the first people at the scene of a crisis, setting up a grill or a smoker to feed the survivors of the latest tragedy.

“I called all my guys up first thing in the morning, and I said, ‘Everyone, this is a volunteer opportunity. We’re not making any money doing this,’” Arshadnia told *Jewish Insider*.

When he arrives on site in the aftermath of a natural disaster, he feeds survivors and first responders for free, while setting up

contracts to feed the employees of the clean-up companies handling the destruction. His work has taken him to Tennessee, Louisiana and Northern Florida, but this is his first time working a disaster so close to home.

“Everybody was there on one site working for the same goal, so it’s nice to see that,” said Arshadnia. “It sucks that it happens in my own backyard.” He lives nearby in North Miami Beach, another small municipality in the patchwork of communities that make up Miami-Dade County.

The response reminded him of the aftermath of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, he said. Arshadnia was a teenager at the time, and living outside of New York City. “Everybody was at one location and all the world’s resources were there, and I almost feel like the same thing happened now,” said Arshadnia. “Everybody came together — by 8:30 in the morning, you had ambulances lined up down the street, almost like Ubers

at an NFL game waiting to pick people up and take them home.”

In his work in Surfside, he has been feeding mostly first responders, not the family members of victims. “I haven’t met anybody yet that was affected by this,” said Arshadnia. But he called a friend of his over the weekend whose brother lived in Surfside.

“She said her brother actually lived in the building. Lucky for him, he was in Israel getting engaged,” Arshadnia recalled. “His fiancée asked him to stay for two weeks. That two weeks saved his life.”

He and his team have been adapting as they go, picking a menu on the fly and trying to increase their daily output. “We pumped out on the first day, I think, close to 100 sandwiches, with Cajun turkey wraps for all the police officers on the perimeter,” Arshadnia said. “And then the second day we made homestyle roasted chicken and

fried rice with coleslaw for all the police officers in the morning shift and the night shift. And we increased our capacity.”

Arshadnia is always on the move — both a night owl and a morning person, someone who can’t spend too long in one place. Three days after graduating from the Culinary Institute of America, he joined the military. “I just needed some kind of structure in my life, and [the military] provided it for me,” he explained. He served as a food service specialist and joined the Army Reserve Culinary Arts Team, which competes against teams from other branches of the U.S. military.

He intends to continue working in Surfside for at least two weeks. “I’m committed until the last person has gone. Well, until there’s a storm,” he explained. He is currently in his “off season,” before late

summer, when hurricanes usually pick up.

When not sleeping in his truck in the parking lot of a rural Walmart on the way to an area impacted by a hurricane, Arshadnia works as a private chef in South Florida. That has helped him this week, as he and his employees are working as unpaid volunteers on the scene. His family and friends have chipped in to help cover costs, but Arshadnia has also been able to call on some of his private clients.

“Everything has been done for free, and if I have to raise money from the public, I just reach out to a few clients and say, ‘See what I’m doing — you guys want to fund it? Yes or no?’ I’m lucky to have really cool people around me,” said Arshadnia.

Working in Surfside, a heavily Jewish town where 40 Jews are known to be among the dead and missing, Arshadnia has shown

his employees his Jewish side.

“It brings me a lot of joy for my people that work with me to see it, because it kind of defines some of the qualities that I think that I have in myself, but they just don’t get,” Arshadnia said. “Like, ‘Why do you have to be so nice all the time? Why do you have to be so helpful?’ Because [these are] the things that are instilled upon us. When things happen, you stay together, you work together, you support your law enforcement, you support your local officials.”

He told JI that one of his employees commented to him recently that it was strange that so many volunteers seemed happy and friendly, even when working in the shadow of tragedy. In response, Arshadnia turned to Judaism: “Why should anybody be upset? They’re all here to help. It’s a mitzvah,” he told his colleague. ♦

JULY 1, 2021

Adam Serwer on the ‘Jewish divide’

In his new book of essays, the ‘Atlantic’ writer meditates on a tension, exacerbated by Trump, between American Jews and their Israeli counterparts

By Matthew Kassel

In his new book of essays, *The Cruelty Is the Point: The Past, Present and Future of Trump’s America*, released this week by One World, the journalist Adam Serwer, 39, examines what he views as a central, abiding tension between former President Donald Trump and the American Jewish community.

While Trump repeatedly touted his administration’s achievements in the Middle East during his time in office — including relocating the American embassy to Jerusalem, recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights and brokering a series of historic agreements between Israel and a number of Arab nations — the former president was often frustrated to find that the majority of American Jews did not support him.

Trump, who was closely aligned with

Israel’s then-prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, viewed this dynamic as unconscionable. “I think any Jewish people that vote for a Democrat, I think it shows either a total lack of knowledge or great disloyalty,” he huffed to reporters in 2019, using language that was widely criticized as antisemitic.

Serwer, a staff writer at *The Atlantic*, argues that liberal Jews in the United States resisted Trump’s entreaties, notwithstanding his effort to cast himself as a champion of Israel, because the American Jewish civic tradition is rooted in an ethos of liberal pluralism that was fundamentally at odds with the former president’s political project.

“Trump’s enthusiastic reception from the Israeli right misled him into believing that American Jews would be a natural addition to his nationalist coalition,” Serwer

writes. “But the majority of American Jews, despite their support for Israel, identify with the cultural and political pluralism that has allowed them to live relatively safe and prosperous lives in the United States.”

That dynamic underscores a broader tension, Serwer says, between American Jews and their Israeli counterparts — what he refers to as “the Jewish divide.”

“Trump and Netanyahu’s relationship,” he writes, “forced American Jews to confront the contradiction between the pluralism they support at home and the Jewish nationalism they have made peace with abroad.”

Serwer, who is Black and Jewish, addresses this issue with a sense of urgency supported by a deeply informed historical perspective that is typical of his writing, which often focuses on the intersection of race and politics.

“What I can do is offer a historical argument for why pluralism became so central to the political identities of American Jews and why it remains so resistant to pressure from the conservative movement and from their Israeli cousins abroad,” he writes. “Seeing that commitment as a kind of weakness and failing to appreciate how well it has served American Jews is one reason why its opponents have not succeeded in undermining it.”

In a recent interview with *Jewish Insider*, Serwer expanded on that topic and more. The interview has been lightly edited and condensed for clarity.

Jewish Insider: *I want to focus on the essay in your book about what you refer to as the “Jewish divide.” I thought it was interesting and made note of some choice quotes I might mention. But I’m wondering, first off, what motivated you to take on this subject?*

Adam Serwer: That essay was actually started years ago when Trump first made his comments about Jews being disloyal for not being more supportive of Israel as he understood that. But I never quite finished it because there was a lot that I felt like I wanted to say in it, and so I decided to put it in the book. It gave me more time to think about it and more carefully approach the subject.

Jl: *Were the ideas that you put forth in the essay floating around in your head for a while, or did you kind of bear them out as you were writing?*

Serwer: As I write in the piece, I think, like a lot of American Jews, my feelings about the situation in Israel and Palestine have evolved with the political situation there — and that the political discourse in the United States has not, in my view, really reflected Jewish diversity of opinion on the subject.

Jl: *Why do you think that is?*

Serwer: On the political level, because Americans in general are so supportive of Israel and both parties tend to be very supportive of Israel, the perception is that this is as a result of what American

Jews think about Israel, which I feel is not actually the case. And Trump’s unqualified support for the Netanyahu government was revealing in the sense that it showed that what American Jews thought on the subject was not really what was driving American policy.

Jl: *In the essay you hit on an interesting historical undercurrent that I was unaware of — how liberal pluralism is embedded in the Jewish American ethos, which you suggest has made Jews sort of impervious to invocations from the right. I’m not sure if you agree with that characterization, but the history you brought up was enlightening.*

Serwer: That was why I wrote that essay, because I feel like, very often, liberal Jewish pluralism is presented as a sort of weakness or squishiness by our right-wing counterparts, and I wanted to show that it has actually been historically a source of strength for American Jews that they found in allying with other people who are maybe unlike them but who have convergent interests. They’ve found strength that way. It’s a question of idealism, but it’s also a question of pragmatism. But what it is not is a reflection of weakness or naïveté, and the history there was meant to illustrate that.

Jl: *Jews have not necessarily had it easy in the United States, facing discrimination, violent attacks, education and immigration quotas. Why do you think that American liberal Jews gravitated toward this certain notion of pluralism while, as you seem to argue in the book, the same thing doesn’t seem to have happened in Israel? Israelis are surrounded on all sides and may have a different mentality than American Jews, of course, but American Jews have also, in many ways, experienced a sense of being hemmed in.*

Serwer: I think that’s partially what the essay is about. I think what you’re seeing in that divergence is just a fundamental difference in strategies for survival that are both the outgrowth of and have produced a different ideological sense of values.

Jl: *On a personal level, as a Jew, how would you describe your connection to Israel? Have you been?*

Serwer: My grandmother spoke fluent Hebrew and Yiddish, and lived in Palestine under the mandate. She had a very strong personal connection to Israel, both in a spiritual sense and as an ideological project. The last time I went was at a very different time politically for Israel. It was in the early aughts. I think, like most American Jews, I was raised with what I would describe as a liberal Zionist background. My current position is that I favor any settlement that leads to full political rights for all people between the river and the sea, and I am agnostic as to what format that takes, whether it’s two states or one state, as long as it does not result in further violence or denial of fundamental rights.

Jl: *And what were your thoughts on the recent conflict between Israel and Hamas? It’s been a divisive issue within the Democratic Party and within the Jewish community. It seems to have altered the dialogue on Israel, at least a bit, in American politics.*

Serwer: I think that the conflict necessarily exposed certain contradictions about American Jews by and large strongly opposing Trump on the grounds that they do not want to live in a country where citizenship is defined by race or religion and, as a result, questioning their support for a country that has formalized its identity as a nation state for a particular group of people and that continues to deny political rights to another group of people under its authority.

Jl: *One thing that I had in mind while I was reading your essay was the new unity government in Israel, which I know you couldn’t take into account while you were writing — and obviously Bibi still remains a powerful force in Israeli politics. But what do you make of the diversity of the new coalition? Do you think it bodes well for the type of future you’d like to see in Israel?*

Serwer: There are people who cover Israeli politics professionally who are unable to handicap the political situation in Israel, so I will not even make an attempt. But I will say, and what the book is substantially about, is that very often in a democracy, religious and ethnic minorities play a very important role in ensuring that countries

live up to their stated values. So to the extent that Ra'am's involvement in an Israeli governing coalition for the first time can bring the conflict to a just end, or may push the situation in that direction, I think that's a positive development, and I hope that's the case.

Jl: *You said you grew up with the values of liberal Zionism. Would you still characterize yourself as a Zionist, or do you reject the term now?*

Serwer: As I said earlier, I support full political rights for all people, Jews and Palestinians, between the river and the sea, and I'm agnostic as to what arrangement that takes. I don't have a personal preference. To me, it's what the people there want and can live with in a peace that is just. But even though I was brought up that way, I no longer feel like it's my place to decide what that arrangement should look like, or to defend a particular arrangement that the Israeli government would like to see.

Jl: *I thought it was kind of interesting that you bring up Reps. Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib and the effort by some on the right to cast them as antisemites. But you also seem to suggest in the book, sort of disapprovingly, it seems, that Trump has also echoed Omar's talking points. The implication, as I understand it, is that Omar and, I guess, Tlaib are not undeserving of criticism. I thought you made an interesting point with this quote: "A left that treats anti-Semitism the way the American right treats racism, as a largely imaginary phenomenon exaggerated by bad-faith actors, is a left that has failed to oppose bigotry in all its forms."*

Could you expand on that? It does seem as if the left sometimes dismisses legitimate accusations of antisemitism, and I'm curious if you have any thoughts on what's going on there.

Serwer: I think there are a lot of complicating factors here. One is that, for American Jews, despite antisemitism that they face in the United States, the primary dividing line in the United States has always been the color line, and that has been more accepting of American Jews than the antisemitism of old Europe. With Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar, whenever they are

criticized, they come in for an avalanche of racism and anti-Muslim invective. Nobody is above criticism, and they have apologized for things that they've said. But the apprehension comes from the fact that nobody wants to be responsible for making them targets of incredible hatred, which they are constantly being faced with both online and in general.

I think that there are times when the left is too dismissive of antisemitism precisely because it does not fit into the ideological frame that American politics has usually tilted on — that is, the question of the color line. And that's a real problem. But I don't think it's an insurmountable problem. And it does not surprise me that American Jews want to be — or liberals in general want to be — very careful about how they criticize Omar and Tlaib, even when they think they're wrong, because they want to make sure that they are not aiding what is fundamentally a gross, racist hate campaign against them that is being waged by the right. They symbolize populations that Trump, in particular, demonized, and so nobody wants to be involved in assisting efforts to set them apart from American citizenship, as much of the rhetoric often does, for condemning them on the basis of their ethnic background or religion.

That's the way these attacks on Omar and Tlaib are often framed — that their citizenship is conditional and that they should be grateful for being allowed to be here or something as though they're not as American as everyone else. And it is very understandable to me that liberal Jews do not want to amplify that, even when they have criticisms of things that they've said or done that they want to make. And that is a difficult tightrope to walk.

Jl: *How do you navigate that? Do you have thoughts on the way in which legitimate criticism can be leveled but without sort of instigating racist attacks?*

Serwer: I think it's basically impossible to do on social media, but I think it is possible to do in other mediums. Social media is just not a place for nuance. It's a place where people blow fire at each other.

Jl: *Are you observant? What's your denomination?*

Serwer: I'm a Reform Jew.

Jl: *I read in a separate interview that you go to temple more than just on the High Holidays.*

Serwer: I do. I pray. I believe in God. My faith is very important to me. It would be very difficult for me to do my job and sort of be in the world without it.

Jl: *Has your connection to Judaism deepened as you've grown older?*

Serwer: It was inculcated in me at a young age. But I think that it definitely became more important to me as I got older. But I don't think I ever really felt like it was not important. I just think when I was in my early 20s, I was not quite as disciplined about going to temple.

Jl: *How does it inform your politics? Are you speaking for yourself in this new essay, where you describe the American Jewish connection with liberal pluralism?*

Serwer: I certainly feel connected to that tradition. But in the essay, I am trying not to describe necessarily my perspective of what I understand about the American Jewish community from our history and from public opinion surveys. Obviously, my position on Israel is not the mainstream one in American Judaism at this point, and I'm well aware of that, and I don't want to represent it that way. So in the essay, I don't. The piece is meant to describe a dynamic that I think is occurring in the Jewish community without imposing and describing what I think about that dynamic, without imposing my own positions on other American Jews, if that makes sense.

Jl: *In terms of the history you examine, I thought the look at antebellum Charleston was interesting, as were the details about Jewish slave owners and abolitionists. What was the process of researching that like for you?*

Serwer: I spend a lot of time reading about the Civil War and Reconstruction,

but in the seminal works of that era, there's not a tremendous amount of stuff on what American Jews were doing at that time. And it was a pleasure to research that piece, because it was wonderful to learn about all the varied experiences of American Jews in this period in which other texts that I have read on Reconstruction simply didn't go into. I'm still reading books about it.

JJ: *Do you think it's something that you'll write more about?*

Serwer: Possibly. I mean, I think it's a really fascinating subject, and part of why I wrote the essay was that I think that American Jewish liberal ethos is widely shared, but I don't think it is widely known how far back it goes or where it comes from. I think we sort of generally think of it as emerging from the New Deal coalition and civil rights alliance. But it's older than that, and it evolved organically out of historical conditions in the United States. I think it's a fascinating history. We didn't just get here in the 1930s, and so it was fun for me to learn

more about that period.

JJ: *Definitely. Elected officials I interview often refer to the alliance forged between Jews and African Americans during the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel is often invoked. But I guess what you're saying is that's not where that coalition originated.*

Serwer: It's an alliance of mutual interests. As I mentioned earlier, if you're a religious or ethnic minority in a democracy, you have an interest in universal rights, regardless of background, being upheld. One thing I think is a problem is — I have gotten hate mail about this — where people present the civil rights alliance between Black Americans and Jews as sort of like a gift that Jews gave to Black people, and that's really not the case. It was an alliance of mutual interests that had mutual benefits, and has somewhat eroded compared to its height, but which is still a crucial part of the progressive coalition for the same reasons.

JJ: *This is sort of a non sequitur, but I'm*

wondering if you've immersed yourself at all in the Jewish American literary canon, and if so which authors you like.

Serwer: Here's the honest truth: I have not read a work of fiction in a very long time. I largely read for work, so almost everything I'm reading is a history book or a sociology book or something like that. I would love to regale you with my knowledge of Philip Roth or Bernard Malamud, but unfortunately, it's been a long time since I've been able to sit down and enjoy fiction.

JJ: *Is there anything else you'd like to add?*

Serwer: I feel like regardless of how we feel about each other, the fates of Jews around the world are linked regardless of their level of observance or their political views. I don't think that that obligates us to defend a particular political arrangement in the State of Israel. But I do think that, whether or not we like each other, history says that our fates are linked. And I think that's important. ♦

JUNE 30, 2021

Pro-Israel House Democrats endorse Shontel Brown in heated Ohio race

With progressives backing Nina Turner, the primary will underscore the deep schisms in the party as Israel emerging as a key issue

By Matthew Kassel

Four pro-Israel House Democrats are collectively endorsing Shontel Brown, a Cuyahoga County councilwoman and party chair, in the heated open-seat race to represent Ohio's 11th Congressional District.

The group of lawmakers — including Reps. Josh Gottheimer (D-NJ), Ted Deutch (D-FL), David Trone (D-MD) and Brad Schneider (D-IL) — will each announce this week that they are throwing their support behind Brown with just over a month remaining until the Democratic primary on August 3, according to a spokesperson for

Brown's campaign.

The race, in which Israel has figured prominently, is viewed as a test of the relative strengths of the moderate and progressive wings of the Democratic Party well ahead of the 2022 midterms.

The new slate of endorsements, coming in the final weeks of the race, represent a significant boost for Brown, a moderate Democrat who is widely viewed as a top contender in the crowded field of more than a dozen candidates.

"I am proud to endorse Shontel Brown for Congress, a dynamic leader who is

a strong and passionate voice for our Democratic values," Gottheimer explained to *Jewish Insider* on Tuesday. "She has a distinguished record of bringing people together and delivering for her community, especially during COVID. That will make her an especially valuable partner in Congress as we recover from the pandemic and move our country forward."

Earlier this month, Brown notched a major endorsement from former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. She has also earned support from Reps. Joyce Beatty (D-OH), who chairs the Congressional Black Caucus,

and Pete Aguilar (D-CA), the chief deputy whip in the House Democratic caucus.

And on Tuesday, Jim Clyburn (D-SC), the House majority whip whose pivotal endorsement of Joe Biden helped swing the presidential primaries in his favor last election cycle, announced that he was endorsing Brown as well.

Such support strongly indicates that the Democratic establishment is coalescing around Brown as she competes to succeed former Rep. Marcia Fudge (D-OH), who in March vacated her seat to become secretary of housing and urban development. Brown, a Fudge protégé, casts herself as a center-left consensus builder who is eager to advance the policy objectives of the Biden administration in Congress — a message that appears to have resonated with her supporters.

“Shontel Brown knows what it means to work hard — as a member of the Cuyahoga County Council, she’s delivered again and again on behalf of her constituents,” Trone, who represents Maryland’s 6th Congressional District, told JI. “I know Shontel will come to Washington ready to work with our House majority and the Biden administration to deliver for Northeast Ohio and the American people.”

In recent months, however, Brown has struggled to keep pace with her main primary opponent, Nina Turner, a well-known progressive in the district thanks to her tenure as an Ohio state senator from 2008 to 2014 representing parts of the Cleveland metropolitan area. During the 2020 presidential election, Turner worked for Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) as a national campaign co-chair and previously led Our Revolution, his left-wing political group.

On Tuesday, Turner earned an endorsement from Rep. Ayanna Pressley (D-MA), who joined a growing list of “Squad” members backing the congressional hopeful. Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), Rashida Tlaib (D-MI) and Ilhan Omar (D-MN) have also endorsed Turner.

Turner has led the pack in fundraising, raking in millions of dollars, and recent internal polling from Turner’s campaign put her in first place with a commanding lead over Brown.

Whoever wins the Democratic primary will be all but assured a seat in Congress

next term given the partisan makeup of the solidly blue district, which includes a large portion of Cleveland as well as a sliver of Akron.

The race, in many ways, has come to embody a growing rift between moderates and progressives — particularly on Israel. Brown, who visited Israel on a trip sponsored by the AIPAC-affiliated American Israel Education Foundation, identifies as a strong supporter of the Jewish state.

Turner, by contrast, supports conditioning foreign aid to Israel and hasn’t shied away from voicing criticism of the Jewish state.

Both candidates oppose the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement targeting Israel.

But the recent conflict between Israel and Hamas has underscored the candidates’ divergent views. In comments to JI amid the violence last month, Brown condemned “Hamas’s massive rocket attacks” while emphasizing Israel’s “right to defend its citizens.”

Turner, meanwhile, took a different approach, positioning herself firmly on the side of the Palestinians. “Solidarity is a verb,” she said in a briefly worded Twitter missive, adding a raised-fist emoji for emphasis.

Her message was included above a separate tweet from the far-left Jewish group IfNotNow. “NOW: American Jews are joining with Palestinians and others in front of the State Department to say #SaveSheikhJarrah and #EndApartheid,” the group wrote.

That Turner had amplified an accusation of Israeli apartheid was controversial in the district, which is home to a sizable and politically active Jewish population.

“By promoting the attack that Israel engages in ‘apartheid,’ Nina Turner does nothing to advance ‘solidarity’ and only furthers division,” Rob Zimmerman, a Shaker Heights city councilmember who knows Turner from her time as an Ohio state senator, told JI at the time. “Her views are uninformed and out of step with the Jewish community she wishes to represent.”

Turner’s approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is also a source of concern among pro-Israel advocates nationwide, who are aggressively rallying behind Brown as she seeks to gain ground in the competitive primary. Pro-Israel

America, a bipartisan advocacy group, and Democratic Majority for Israel (DMFI) have both endorsed her.

On Wednesday, DMFI’s political action committee will release its first ad in Cleveland’s media market, according to a spokesperson for the group. The 30-second spot, to be distributed on broadcast and cable TV, will highlight the councilwoman’s accomplishments in the district. The spokesperson did not respond to an inquiry about the cost of the ad buy.

“Shontel Brown or Nina Turner?” the ad’s narrator says. “Who can we trust to deliver on President Biden’s agenda? Shontel Brown: a proven leader who will work with Biden and Harris to get results. Brown made history as the first Black woman to lead the county Democratic Party. She added over a hundred beds to our health center, caring for the most vulnerable. Shontel Brown: For Biden. For us.”

The ad makes no mention of Middle East foreign policy, but in an email to JI, Mark Mellman, who chairs DMFI PAC, commended what he views as Brown’s strong pro-Israel credentials.

“Councilwoman Brown is an effective and experienced community leader who’ll be a tireless advocate for her district,” he said. “She’ll work closely with the Biden-Harris administration and support Speaker Pelosi in advancing the Democratic agenda, which includes strong support for the U.S.-Israel relationship. When 4,500 rockets rained down on Israel last month, Councilwoman Brown called for Hamas’s rocket attacks to stop and voiced support for our ally.”

Turner, on the other hand, “has strong anti-Israel positions,” charged Mellman, a longtime Democratic pollster.

The group of four Democratic representatives backing Brown this week have no doubt been encouraged by her support for Israel, which has been a subject of intense debate within the House.

On her campaign website, Brown makes clear that she will be a friend to Israel, showcasing a series of glowing testimonials from pro-Israel activists.

Trone, a co-founder of Total Wine & More — which he says is the largest retailer of Israeli wine in the U.S. — has established a reputation for himself as a vehement critic of the BDS movement. He has also been an

AIPAC “minyan” donor, which requires a minimum annual gift of \$100,000, in the past.

Just a few weeks ago, Deutch, Gottheimer and Schneider — all of whom are Jewish — spoke out against Omar, accusing their fellow Democrat of likening the U.S. and Israel to Hamas and the Taliban in social media comments.

In a Tuesday interview on CNN, Omar was asked if she regretted her remarks, which were accused of being antisemitic. “I don’t,” she said.

In a statement, Deutch emphasized

that he was eager to see another pro-Israel Democrat enter his party’s ranks next term. “In Congress, Shontel will work to strengthen the U.S.-Israel relationship and advance Israel’s security,” the Florida congressman told JI. “Shontel will promote security in the Middle East, work to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon and fight efforts to delegitimize Israel on the world stage.”

Schneider, for his part, spoke more broadly of his support for Brown. “Job number one for lawmakers is to ensure everyone has the opportunity to earn a

good life in America,” he told JI. “Getting that job done requires bold, pragmatic and collaborative leadership. That’s Shontel Brown.”

“I am honored to have the backing of these incredible members of Congress,” Brown said in a statement to JI. “Today, Jewish Americans are increasingly the victims of hate crimes and violence — and in office, I will stand with the Jewish community against these attacks. In Congress, I will work to build a brighter, stronger union for all of us.” ♦

JUNE 28, 2021

‘Mayor Mohamed,’ battling Islamophobia and high property taxes in New Jersey

Filmmaker and political scientist Jeffrey Togman first met Syrian American Mohamed Khairullah at a synagogue. A new documentary tells his story

By Gabby Deutch

Jeffrey Togman wanted to make a documentary about the bloody civil war in Syria. He found his subject at a synagogue.

In May 2016, the Seton Hall University political science professor saw that Congregation Shomrei Emunah, a Montclair, N.J., Conservative synagogue five blocks from his home, would be hosting a discussion on the Syrian war and refugee crisis. At the time, Togman was actively looking for a subject to profile in his film. “I was looking for Syrian Americans who could tell the story of Syria,” Togman told *Jewish Insider* last week.

After hearing Mohamed Khairullah — a Syrian American activist and the mayor of nearby Prospect Park, N.J., a town of nearly 6,000 — speak at the event, Togman knew he had found his documentary’s main subject. “He’s a real American, Jersey guy. I thought he’d be a great character, and a great person to bridge these two worlds, to let many Americans understand what was happening in Syria,” Togman said.

After three years of filming Khairullah’s day-to-day life as mayor, including the

Islamophobic hate mail that frequently lands in his inbox, Togman released “Mayor Mohamed” earlier this month at the Brooklyn Film Festival, with plans to bring the film to more audiences later this year. The goal of the film was twofold, Togman explained: to showcase the story of a long-serving Muslim elected official and the discrimination he faces, and to highlight Khairullah’s humanitarian work on behalf of Syrians trapped under Bashar al-Assad’s brutal rule.

“This basic notion that we’re all human beings, and that we have to stand by each other, is what people walk away with most strongly,” Togman said of the initial response he has received to the film.

Khairullah, a Democrat, has long been vocal about his Syrian heritage and his criticism of the Assad regime. He also is not shy about describing the racism he faces as a Muslim public servant. “There’s a lot more people who don’t speak about it, who just take their punches and roll through life, through the pain and suffering, sometimes missing opportunities — or sometimes just having to take the pain, that humiliation,”

Khairullah told JI. “It’s just not acceptable, so I don’t mind exposing it. That’s why I chose to share my story.”

The feature-length movie shows life for Khairullah and his family in northern New Jersey. “The town itself is just a microcosm of American diversity,” Togman said of Prospect Park, where more than half the residents are of Hispanic origin. But, Khairullah said, “just like any New Jersey community, everybody complains about property taxes. We pride ourselves [ourselves] on our community and our quality of life.” He has been mayor since 2006 and plans to run for another term next year.

At the heart of the movie is Khairullah’s story of becoming an American. “There are all these barriers to integration for the Muslim American community,” said Togman. “It reminds me very strongly of the Jewish American experience. In fact, one of the characters in the film equates the two. And it’s really a story of this community that is often looked at in a suspect way, that’s often excluded.”

Khairullah left Syria in 1980 as a child.

He was not officially a refugee, but his father was known to be a critic of Hafez al-Assad, the current leader's father. The Khairullah family first went to Saudi Arabia, where they lived for 11 years, before coming to the U.S. when Khairullah was a teenager.

Compared to the conservative Saudi Arabia, America was a culture shock. "I had to get adjusted to the freedoms that we had," said Khairullah. "I could never become a firefighter in Saudi Arabia — and that was a passion for me — because I'm not Saudi. But here, they told me, 'Look, you couldn't be a firefighter, but we could change the local ordinance.'" He was not used to seeing rules changed without the permission of a king.

In most ways, Khairullah's life is unremarkable: He spends time with his wife and kids, he goes to work as a teacher (his day job), he roots for the Giants. But he also deals with the discrimination that comes with being Muslim in America.

"I wasn't fully aware, certainly, at the type of hatred that Muslim Americans face," said Togman. "The hate mail was atrocious: wishing them all dead, saying that all Muslims were animals. Things that many other groups, including Jewish Americans, are very familiar with."

One sequence in the film shows different scenes of Khairullah with his wife and children — eating dinner, hanging out on the couch — while the text of hate mail he has received is overlaid on the screen. His wife holds their baby, smiling and laughing with their older children, as Khairullah looks down at his phone. The message, "I cannot wait till Trump takes this nation over and sticks his foot up your Syrian scumbag a**" appears on the screen.

Khairullah said he received anti-Muslim hate mail before former President Donald Trump was elected in 2016. But after Trump issued an executive order banning travel from seven predominantly Muslim nations a week into his presidency, Khairullah said the hate ratcheted up. "To my knowledge, it has become more common and people have become more daring. Those who had some kind of racist vein in them, they just expose themselves."

The hostility increased following his response to Trump's policy. "We issued our executive order saying that everybody is welcome into town, and our municipal

employees cannot ask for legal status while providing services. This is when we started receiving extra hateful messages," Khairullah recalled.

The documentary also features the story of a Republican challenger who drew accusations of Islamophobia. Khairullah had been speaking at a Board of Education meeting, and the woman spoke over him, saying, "This is not Sharia law, this is an orderly session."

"She refuses to apologize, and then she runs against him," said Togman.

The Syrian civil war that prompted Togman to make this documentary still rages on. "History is not going to look kindly upon us," said Khairullah, arguing that neither former Presidents Barack Obama nor Trump took strong action on behalf of Syrians. "I hope that the Biden administration shows a little more leadership here and works more toward helping the Syrian people towards aspirations, towards freedom and self-determination. But I'm not very hopeful at this point."

One scene in the movie shows a clip of Khairullah during a visit to Syria, one of several he took to the country as a relief worker. He stands in Aleppo amid the ruins of a bombing, ambulances speeding by all around him. "Syrians are not radical. They're not terrorists. All they want is their freedom, their democracy," Khairullah says in speech at a protest back in New Jersey.

Togman and Khairullah traveled together to Turkey in the course of making the film, where they visited Khairullah's extended family and attempted to enter Syria together. They were barred, and Khairullah has not gone back since 2015.

Now, after a decade of trying to get Americans to pay attention to the brutal actions of the Assad regime, Khairullah has changed his tactics and lowered his expectations. "It's more focused. You go and speak now to people who want to listen, rather than try to project it to the entire world," said Khairullah. The same principle holds for the movie: "If someone goes to watch the movie, they know they're going to watch something about Syria."

But they will also learn something about their Muslim friends and neighbors here in the U.S. "It's been something of an eye-opener. People have been shocked about

the experience of the Muslim American community," said Togman. Muslims who have watched the movie have taken something special from it: "I think that they really enjoy seeing a Muslim American as a hero in a film." ♦

Leah Goldin's years-long crusade to bring her son home

Goldin believes negotiations on rebuilding Gaza provide an opportunity to pressure Hamas into releasing the remains of her son, who was killed by the group in 2014

By Melissa Weiss

The last time Leah Goldin spoke to her son Hadar, a soldier in the elite Givati Brigade fighting along the border between Israel and Gaza during Operation Protective Edge in 2014, she was planning to visit him during his unit's downtime. Hadar waved her off of the idea, sure that rumors of an impending cease-fire meant that he would be home soon.

"He said, 'Mom, don't worry, don't worry. Tomorrow, it's over. I will be home for Shabbat.'"

Hadar Goldin did not come home for Shabbat. Hours after the declaration of a 72-hour U.S.-brokered cease-fire between Israel and Hamas following several weeks of rocketfire and a ground invasion of Gaza by IDF troops, Hadar's unit was ambushed in a tunnel that ran from Gaza. He was taken by Hamas, while two fellow soldiers in the unit were killed. Israeli authorities soon concluded that Hadar did not survive the attack. The conflict would continue for several more weeks until a more permanent cease-fire was brokered in late August.

For seven years, Hamas has held onto Hadar's remains. And for seven years, Leah Goldin has fought to get them back. Her journey has taken her to the U.S. countless times, as she has sought to pressure successive administrations to work to retrieve her son's body.

Goldin traveled to New York and Washington this week for more meetings, including with U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Linda Thomas-Greenfield and U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, with whom she met alongside outgoing Israeli President Reuven Rivlin.

"Hadar is actually a victim of a cease-fire, rather than a victim of a war," Goldin told *Jewish Insider*. "And since this cease-fire was

brokered by the United States and by the United Nations, supported by the E.U., they should bear responsibility to rectify and to bring him back. Otherwise, what is the meaning of having a cease-fire?"

As world and regional powers begin discussions on rebuilding Gaza following last month's 11-day conflict between Israel and Hamas, Goldin argues that the U.S. should condition any aid on the return of the bodies of Hadar and Oron Shaul, another soldier who went missing after an attack by Hamas and is presumed dead, as well as two Israeli civilians who went into Gaza in the months after that summer's conflict and have not been seen or heard from since.

"We are now in a very narrow window of opportunity," Goldin explained. "Because we are now [a month] after the last war, and it's the same — the Americans are leading a cease-fire, along with the Egyptians that are the mediators, and the Qataris that are the money providers. And America decided to invest money in Gaza. So I keep saying the stars are aligned. The same players are doing the same... So now is the time and the opportunity to put the return of my son Hadar as a confidence-building measure to any agreement they do."

Because a cease-fire had already been called at the time of the ambush on Hadar Goldin's unit, the soldiers lacked the equipment necessary to defend against a surprise attack.

His mother alleges that Hamas knew that the unit was vulnerable and strategically planned the attack. "Hamas violated the cease-fire, knowing the IDF protocol is not to shoot," she said.

Several years after her son's death, Goldin found an ally in then-U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley. Goldin connected with Haley, whose husband was an officer in the

South Carolina Army National Guard, on a personal level. Haley, Goldin explained, "got the ball rolling."

"My heart goes out to the Goldin family who have persevered through such hardship. The withholding of remains is one of many barbaric practices of the Hamas terrorists. We must always keep that in mind when dealing with them," Haley told *JL*.

In December 2017, Goldin spoke at an Arria-formula meeting of the U.N. Security Council. The gathering, named after a Venezuelan U.N. ambassador in the 1990s who invited witnesses and others involved in global conflicts to meet informally with members of the U.N. Security Council, was convened by Ukraine and provided Goldin an opportunity to share her plight.

Also speaking at the 2017 meeting was Irwin Cotler, the former Canadian justice minister and founder and chair of the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights. Cotler laid out a number of violations of human rights and international humanitarian law that Hamas was committing in refusing to repatriate Hadar Goldin's remains. Among the violations were Hamas' refusal to provide information about the soldiers' situation and status and refusal to allow their families to provide a proper burial.

"Hadar Golden, in particular, was abducted and murdered in the course of a U.N.-mandated, E.U.-supported, U.S.-brokered humanitarian cease-fire," Cotler told *JL*. "So the very abduction and murder was itself a standing violation, and a violation of U.N. principles regarding protective international peace and security."

In 2019, the U.N. Security Council adopted a resolution specifically addressing individuals who go missing during armed conflict. UNSCR 2724 sets forth a number of requirements of parties to armed conflicts,

including that they should “enable the return of their remains, and to account for persons reported missing without adverse distinction and to put in place appropriate channels enabling response and communication with families on the search process.”

UNSCR also calls on parties “to respect the remains of the dead... to return them, whenever possible, to their relatives, consistent with applicable obligations under international humanitarian law and human rights law.” The resolution also requires the U.N. secretary-general “to brief the Security Council every twelve months on the implementation of the resolution, within the annual briefing on the protection of civilians.”

To date, such a briefing has not occurred,

and Hamas has given no indication that it is willing to return the remains of the soldiers or civilians who have been presumed dead for nearly seven years.

In addition to those requirements, the language states that “the steps set out in this resolution can contribute to the process of confidence building between parties to armed conflict, expediting peace negotiations and settlement, transitional justice processes, reconciliation, peacebuilding and sustaining peace.”

That clause, Goldin argues, gives the U.S. an opening to use the return of her son’s remains as a tool in handling talks with the Palestinians.

“This is our norm of doing business in the Western world,” she said. “When you’re doing [an] agreement, you ask for

confidence-building measures. It’s normal.”

In her meetings she talks about Hadar, the art enthusiast who worked to see the good in all people and to take care of others. “I’m just a mother,” Goldin told JI. “I’m not a diplomat, I’m not a lawyer.”

Cotler is hopeful that Goldin will be successful amid a change in both Israeli and U.S. administrations. “There’s enormous pain and suffering, [there’s] human faces behind all this,” he said. “So we can talk about resolutions... The Goldin family suffers every day. And it is true, also, for Oron Shaul’s family, and it’s true for the civilians’. So we’re talking about human tragedies here. Families should have a right to be able to bury their sons in dignity, according to Jewish law.” ♦

JULY 2, 2021

The battle raging over antisemitism and Israel in the kid’s literature world

A major industry organization appeared to walk back a statement on antisemitism. Jewish writers say it’s part of a bigger problem

By Gabby Deutch

“It’s a bunny eat bunny world.”

This is an oft-repeated, only sort-of-joking phrase in the world of kid’s literature — or “kidlit,” as those in the business call it — a vast category that includes novels for children, toddlers and young adults, in genres ranging from fantasy to romance to sports. Loosely translated: The adult authors who write books for kids can, and often do, tear each other apart on social media.

The siloed drama of the kidlit industry was blown into the mainstream this week, after the leading membership organization for children’s book writers issued a controversial statement that appeared to walk back an a June 10 condemnation of antisemitism that was released in response to an uptick in harassment and physical attacks on Jewish communities and institutions around the country, in the wake of last month’s war between Israel

and Hamas. “I would like to apologize to everyone in the Palestinian community who felt unrepresented, silenced, or marginalized,” read the June 27 letter from the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators’s executive director, Lin Oliver. “SCBWI acknowledges the pain our actions have caused to our Palestinian and Muslim members.”

Multiple Jewish authors who write for children and young adults told Jewish Insider that they were disappointed to see what felt to them like a reversal of SCBWI’s previously strong stance against antisemitism. “This statement was ‘all lives matter,’” one writer told JI.

“I was shocked and dismayed because the apology letter to the #StopAntisemitism statement distracted from and diminished their support,” Liza Wiemer, an award-winning author whose most recent book, *The Assignment*, addressed education

surrounding Holocaust and tolerance, said in a statement. “Just like all their other statements they’ve made against hatred toward marginalized people, the #StopAntisemitism statement deserves to stand alone.”

Oliver’s apology made it appear as though SCBWI had concluded that condemning antisemitism was antithetical to condemning Islamophobia, or that antisemitism could not be addressed without also referring to politics in the Middle East. But SCBWI’s initial statement on antisemitism had not mentioned Israel. (After exchanging numerous emails with JI, senior leadership at SCBWI stopped responding without offering a comment on recent events.)

Oliver’s letter also noted that SCBWI’s first diversity chief, a Black Jewish woman named April Powers, had resigned. Rumors spread online that she was forced out, a

claim that turned out to be incorrect.

Some coverage of the incident has “irresponsibly suggested that SCBWI has apologized for its statement against antisemitism. That is not true. The statement stands and is still available on their site as of now,” said Tzivvia MacLeod, a Canadian-Israeli author who is one of the leaders of SCBWI’s Israel regional chapter. “It is not true that SCBWI fired or demanded the resignation of April Powers.”

What happened in the two weeks between the two statements was more complicated than some initial news reports let on. A Palestinian American writer and activist named Razan Abdin-Adnani expressed concern that anti-Muslim hatred was not addressed by SCBWI, but in the process, SCBWI’s accounts — helmed by Powers — deleted some of Abdin-Adnani’s comments on an SBCWI Facebook post and blocked her on Twitter.

MacLeod and other Jewish writers expressed concern that some of Abdin-Adnani’s comments were hostile to Israel and at times antisemitic. “It’s upsetting. Our entire team has had our stomachs in knots all week, reading the hate she is spewing about our organization, its ‘Zionist’ ties and more,” MacLeod told JI.

In one tweet, Abdin-Adnani criticized Powers for calling herself “pro-Israel” in an interview she did several months ago. In a Facebook comment on SCBWI’s page, Abdin-Adnani wrote, “I had no idea this was a Zionist/politically motivated organization that doesn’t serve ALL children,” and asked for a refund on her membership. In another tweet, she insinuated that Jews in Israel should go back to Europe: “I hear Germany & Poland are quite nice these days,” she wrote. When other Twitter users pointed out that her tweet could come across as antisemitic — telling Jews to go back to the countries where their ancestors were murdered by Nazis — she wrote, “I stand by every last thing I said in these tweets.”

SCBWI’s June 27 letter apologized to Abdin-Adnani by name. Her Twitter thread alleging mistreatment and an anti-Palestinian bias by SCBWI has been retweeted hundreds of times, including by several prominent authors with a combined hundreds of thousands of followers.

Some Jewish writers viewed SCBWI’s handling of its antisemitism statement and the attacks on it that followed as a symptom of a larger problem in the industry: a focus on diversity that often does not include Jewish writers and books.

“I started to notice with the wonderful movement to support more diversity, that Jewishness was not included in that diversity, despite the fact that many of us have always felt othered and different, to varying degrees,” said Gae Polisner, an author of young adult and middle grade books.

Polisner has been outspoken on Twitter about antisemitism both in general and in the publishing industry. “How come when I tweet anything about hate/violence against Jewish people, no one in my twitter feed even acknowledges it? It is NOT the same when I tweet hate against any other group. #crickets #antisemitism #erasure,” she tweeted in January. “Oh wait, I know. The book industry will care and stop erasing us and include us in important diversity lists when it’s woke & popular to do so, and will sell books.”

Multiple writers told JI that they have been told by agents or mentors to make characters less Jewish if they wanted to reach wider audiences. “I was told Jewish books don’t sell, and I was even told by one agent — not my present one, who’s been nothing but supportive — to make something less Jewish,” said Jonathan Rosen, who writes fantasy novels for kids.

Yet while some writers have experienced overt or implicit antisemitism at various points in their careers or in the context of the broader kidlit industry, this is not the case for everyone — and the Jewish publishing industry is thriving, in part through the work of Jewish literacy organization PJ Library. “Through forces like PJ Library, through the great Jewish publishers who are still very much committed to supporting Israel ... through people who are committed to bringing diversity and inclusion to Jewish kidlit — I honestly think we’re in great shape,” said MacLeod.

Still, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has gained outsized attention in the kidlit world. This mirrors conversations and debates playing out in other industries and other online communities: A growing anti-Israel

orthodoxy has emerged on social media, leading some Jews to fear expressing any support for Israel, or even their Jewish identity, online.

In recent years, mainstream books that are set in Israel or reference the country have occasionally received pushback. The author of *Red, White, and Royal Blue*, a bestselling 2019 romance novel, pledged to remove a line about Israel after facing social media backlash. The line in question involved one character, a politician, making a single comment about having to deal with foreign policy related to Israel. One Twitter user wrote that “All mentions [of Israel], even ones that don’t outwardly seem bad, are wrong.”

A book called *Once More With Chutzpah*, a debut novel from writer Haley Neil that is set to be released next spring, has faced an onslaught of criticism because it takes place in Israel, where Neil has family. The novel features a brother and sister grappling with mental health issues, adolescence and the Jewish diaspora while on a road trip in Israel. A reference to Birthright Israel was removed from the book after a social media outcry, but a number of people on Twitter have continued to call for the book’s boycott.

Though it has not yet been released, Neil’s book has already received a slew of negative reviews on Goodreads, a social network for readers. One comment that came with a zero-star review on the book that is still several months from being released read: “no thank you, in this house we do not support books passed off as fun romps through an apartheid, settler state that routinely murders, displaces and subjugates palestinians. :)”

Other Jewish authors who write contemporary young adult fiction set in the U.S. worry that if they were to comment on Israel — even on social media — their careers would be at risk. “If I were to stand with Israel, for example, I’d be canceled tomorrow. That would be it, my career would be done. I’ve worked a long time to get here. That’s a hard reality to come to grips with,” said one writer who requested anonymity for fear of professional backlash.

“Everybody’s afraid to speak up. There’s a whisper network of Jewish authors, and the ones who have spoken up, they get a swarm of Twitter attacks,” said another

author who asked to remain anonymous and has let their SCBWI membership lapse.

But this writer acknowledged that the organization cannot simply be abandoned. “Really, that’s how people break in. It’s very much networking. It’s how you meet agents and editors, and how you learn the trade,” the writer explained.

Getting SCBWI to put out a statement on antisemitism in the first place required a coordinated campaign spearheaded by Jewish writers. “[SCBWI] had to be urged to do it because they were being silent. Once they did it, of course, the inevitable controversy came up,” said Rosen. The organization had previously put out statements in support of the Asian American community after a spate of violent hate crimes over the past year, and an “Equity and Inclusion” page on its website highlighted “anti-racism” as a central value.

Polisner, who was one of the lead writers on the letter, told JI that someone she knew professionally had “asked me to co-author a statement against antisemitism, just as we had done in the book industry for so many other forms of hate.”

The letter began to circulate in early June, requesting that the “book community” come together and “unite with us against anti-Jewish hate,” according to a copy of the letter provided to Jewish Insider. “We are asking for support to stop antisemitism. Antisemitism is wrong. There is never justification for any form of hatred. On behalf of Jewish authors, illustrators, editors, librarians, agents and others in the kidlit community we ask that you issue a clear and unequivocal statement against antisemitism.”

The letter also referred to concerns about Jewish representation in diversity efforts. “In addition, we are asking that organizations that advocate for diversity in children’s books speak out about the importance of Jewish representation and non-stereotypical and intersectional depictions of Jewish life,” said the letter.

As of June 10, the day SCBWI issued its statement condemning antisemitism, the letter had 159 signatories. A similar petition from last year, called the “Book

Community Statement Of Solidarity Against Antisemitism,” got more than 2,000 signatures.

Some non-Jewish writers and illustrators “very willingly did sign” last month’s letter, Polisner told JI. But not everyone. “People said they weren’t comfortable. People never responded. People never spoke to me again after it. People very near and dear to me in the industry either didn’t see it or pretended they didn’t see it,” Polisner recalled.

“There were people who just stayed silent,” said Stacie Ramey, whose most recent book, *It’s My Life*, is about a Jewish girl with cerebral palsy. “I think the worst part is no one will stand up for me and for my people.”

In past moments when the book community has sought to respond to hate, including Jews has sometimes come as an afterthought.

“Right after Charlottesville, when people on the right protesting were shouting ‘blood and soil,’ which is a Nazi chant, and carrying Nazi flags, the children’s book industry did what we do best — which is tried to rise to an occasion to make book lists and things that might help to educate younger people,” Polisner said. “The first book lists that came out included a lot of books about brown and Black characters and issues and failed to have any Jewish books or Jewish characters on the list.”

After she and others reached out to the organizers of the lists, they added a number of books on Jewish topics. “I don’t think it was an act of blatant antisemitism,” Polisner acknowledged. “I think that’s part of the problem with antisemitism, or what I’ve learned by reading is more often called erasure, which is it not even occurring to people that we need the understanding and the protection.”

What’s next for SCBWI remains unclear. Another statement issued by the organization Wednesday night — presumably meant to put an end to the infighting that has marked its online channels for weeks — did not seem to please anybody.

“The SCBWI mission is to be an inclusive creator-focused organization serving

writers, illustrators, and translators as they create a body of literature for ALL children. As an apolitical literary organization, it is not our mission to promote any specific political viewpoint or policy,” the statement said in part.

“Interesting again to me, that they were able to issue statements condemning racism and anti-Asian hate, but condemning antisemitism becomes ‘political,’” one Jewish writer said. Meanwhile, the activist who had called out SCBWI for its pro-Israel stance viewed the “apolitical” line as a tacit embrace of the pro-Israel position of its now-former diversity chief.

“Art and literature has always been political. Art and literature has also always stood up for ‘the other,’ and the persecuted who need protection,” said Polisner. “What surprises me is it feels like there’s some hypocrisy when the industry picks and chooses who is worthy to have that protection, and who’s not, and that feels dangerous.” ♦