

THE WEEKLY PRINT

Meet the best friends introducing Middle Eastern date syrup to the wider world; Accounting for childhood hunger in Baltimore; Shontel Brown defeats Nina Turner with support from Cleveland's Jewish community; The Israeli startup CEO who wants to make American government work; Deborah Copaken uses her 'Ladyparts' to talk gender, money and Judaism; and Ashlee Bond is show-jumping for joy

AUGUST 5, 2021

Meet the best friends introducing Middle Eastern date syrup to the wider world

David Czinn and Brian Finkel's date-syrup company is expanding at a time of growing business ties between Israel and Arab states

By Jacob Miller

As teenagers, David Czinn and Brian Finkel joked that they would go into business together one day. Little did they expect that their pipe dream would become reality, or that their fledgling business — based on an ancient biblical fruit, and with one foot in the very modern startup nation — would grow into a formidable international operation with private backing and products sold in 7,000 stores across the U.S.

D'vash Organics — whose name comes from the word in the Torah used for honey, which in biblical times referred to date honey — specializes in date syrup and date energy bars. Czinn and Finkel serve as president and CEO, respectively, of D'vash, which currently sells goods in the U.S. and South Korea, with plans to expand to Canada.

Although D'vash is based in California and Czinn resides in Los Angeles, Finkel has lived in Israel since 2013 and works remotely overseas, traversing a 10-hour time difference to communicate with his partner.

With executives on two continents, D'vash lives the premise that it will unite

different groups of people. Two Jews from the Midwest working with partners in the United Arab Emirates and Hong Kong, with a business team based in the Philippines, sell their Middle Eastern-influenced products around the world. For Czinn, D'vash bears the legacy of his grandmother's love of feeding people and the commitment of his parents' — who are doctors — to a healthy lifestyle.

"I think there's something very special with food," Czinn told *Jewish Insider*. "It bridges a lot of gaps... there's nothing better than when you sit down at a table and you break bread together. If there's a good meal, I think it can solve all the problems... [because] you get people comfortable with one another," explained Czinn.

Czinn and Finkel met at Yeshivat Eretz Hatzvi, a gap-year program in Jerusalem, where they bonded over food, and experienced what Finkel called "one of the most formative years of my life."

From there, the two friends progressed to separate colleges, Czinn heading to the University of Maryland to study business and Finkel heading to the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business

to study economics and finance. Although they attended separate universities, Czinn and Finkel frequently saw each other, commuting by train for monthly visits.

The origins of D'vash Organics lie in an innocuous phone call — like the numerous phone calls Czinn and Finkel enjoyed as friends — when Finkel described date syrup's ubiquity in Israel.

"One day... I realized I was eating Silan date syrup all the time. And I kind of just had this epiphany. And I called David, who had been in the food industry already for a number of years, and I said, 'Hey, what do you think about date syrup?'"

Czinn was confident that date syrup could take off in the U.S. He had initially broken into the food industry when he noticed the health-conscious food culture in L.A. and detected a market for an organic fruit snack company, which he then co-founded with his cousin, called Fruigees. Czinn now saw demand for a cheaper, healthier alternative to honey, and date syrup fit the bill.

The two friends were intrigued about bringing date syrup to an American audience, and the timing was perfect:

Finkel was between jobs and Czinn had just enjoyed success with Fruitees. Overcoming the skepticism of friends and family, Czinn and Finkel took the plunge and created D'vash.

D'vash is dedicated to providing a product that is healthy — both for people and the environment. Their syrup is cheaper, more sustainable and contains 25% less sugar than honey; it is also vegan and does not include high-fructose corn syrup. Because pediatricians and parents are concerned about children consuming large amounts of protein, D'vash addresses that worry by manufacturing energy bars without high protein content.

When it was a new company, D'vash endured many rejections before eventually securing vital contracts with sellers and distributors.

"Brian showed me all of the aisles filled with date syrup in the Middle East. We really believed that we had what hummus was 10 years ago, prior to Sabra being acquired by Pepsi," explained Czinn.

"When you think of ketchup, you think of Heinz; when you think of pop, you think of Coca-Cola; [when you think of] tissues, [you think of] Kleenex. All these iconic brands are identified with the product that they make, and are basically synonymous with that product... When people think of dates or anything date-related... we want people to think of D'vash," said Finkel.

With products already sold in three countries, and contracts with major American stores including Whole Foods, Sprouts, Costco and CVS, D'vash has expanded to the skies in a new partnership with Cathay Pacific Airlines, announced last month. The Hong Kong-based airline will provide D'vash's energy bars as refreshments on their flights.

D'vash's success illustrates the broader shifting political climate in the Middle East, and highlights the bridgeable gaps among divided groups. In the company's early days, D'vash relied on dates grown in the Coachella Valley in California, but as the business expanded, Czinn and Finkel needed a larger date supplier, and stumbled upon the United Arab Emirates-based Al Barakah Dates Factory.

"When we started to reach out to alternative suppliers, we did a deep dive

— it was probably a Google search — and we reached out to Al Barakah," recounted Czinn. Although the date company was initially skeptical, its officials were quickly impressed as D'vash's orders grew in size and frequency, and were eager to enter a formal partnership with Czinn and Finkel.

Although Al Barakah did not know that D'vash's founders were Jewish, nor that one is Israeli, they coincidentally floated a potential partnership the same week the Abraham Accords, which normalized relations between Israel and several Arab nations, including the UAE, were announced. By the time Finkel flew to Dubai to meet with his Emirati associates, direct flights had opened between Israel and Dubai, creating a quick option to conduct business.

For Czinn, the Abraham Accords "really made me believe that this entire thing was fate." It also meant business with the UAE was easier and cheaper because Finkel was a short plane flight away.

While visiting Dubai to formalize their cooperation, Finkel and his wife went out to dinner at Armani Kaf, Dubai's first kosher restaurant, with his Al Barakah counterpart and his wife. When Finkel mentioned that he lived in Israel, his new business partner reacted positively and explained that he had long conducted business with Israel using unmarked containers traveling through Jordan; the new peace treaty smoothened his business dealings.

"Now that we're vertically integrated... we can remain nimble, and build what the market desires, and so whatever the market dictates in terms of what type of products people are looking for, we have all the ingredients necessary in order to create the right products," said Czinn reflecting on the benefits conferred by partnering with Al Barakah dates.

For the two founders, the learning curve has been steep, but filled with memorable moments. At first, in a push for product sustainability, D'vash manufactured all of its syrups in glass bottles, but ran into trouble.

"We would get emails on a regular basis. No matter how well we would pad the product — bubble wrap it, put it into stronger, corrugated boxes — FedEx and UPS would manage to break it," related Czinn. In response, the company pivoted to

plastic bottles, acknowledging the necessity of using less-green, but more durable containers.

They also learned the power of persistence first-hand. After sending numerous emails to the buyers at Costco touting their new products without receiving a response, Czinn and Finkel emailed the company's CEO, CFO and COO in a desperate Hail Mary. To their surprise, one of the executives forwarded the email to the company's buyers, and the buyers responded to D'vash to negotiate a contract.

Once the Costco deal was solidified, the first shipment ran into trouble when it was blocked by a large cargo ship stuck in the Suez Canal. "Never in a million years did I think a large news story would impact mine and Brian's life," Czinn reflected.

Although they worried Costco would be upset about the delay due to a "dog ate my homework" type of excuse, the international wholesale company was understanding of the delay. For Czinn and Finkel, the episode reinforced the importance of perpetual resilience.

"We're constantly having to innovate, think outside of the box, get creative and constantly figure out ways to win," reflected Czinn.

The duo hope to roll out more products, expand to more countries and score contracts with brands as an ingredient in other foods.

Despite the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement's slowly growing presence, D'vash has not faced resentment because of Finkel's Israeli citizenship; on the contrary, Finkel's experiences in Israel is a chance to create awareness about the Jewish state.

"I think it's an opportunity to educate. It's an opportunity to have a discussion. It's an opportunity to learn and grow from one another, and hopefully," said Czinn, "that will help build and create more open minds." ♦

Accounting for childhood hunger in Baltimore

Lynne Kahn draws on her expertise and faith to run Baltimore Hunger Project, which feeds vulnerable kids on the weekends

By Gabby Deutch

It's Friday afternoon in Baltimore City, and kids are bounding out of school, excited for the weekend. They had breakfast and lunch that day at school, but their next meal is uncertain — after 10 meals at school that week, some kids are faced with the reality that they might not get another meal until Monday morning.

And there is Lynne Kahn standing in that “hunger gap” breach, like a nutrition guardian angel. (Kids have called her the “lunch lady.”) Tucked inside the needy students' backpacks are sandwiches and snacks provided by her expanding anti-childhood hunger nonprofit. The longtime accountant is now keeping tabs on something more precious than an average CPA's balance sheet.

“It's so rewarding to be able to do what you are meant to be doing,” Kahn told Jewish Insider in a recent interview from the large warehouse that her nonprofit, Baltimore Hunger Project, just moved into.

Kahn graduated from college with plans to teach English in Italy and then join the Foreign Service. But when she needed something to do while waiting for the results of the Foreign Service exam, she joined her father's accounting firm — and never left. (She later met her husband in accounting school.)

Before starting Baltimore Hunger Project, Kahn used to organize friends to meet in her garage on the weekends to make sandwiches for local women's and children's shelters. “Lynne's Garage,” as she named the project, kept her busy for 10 years, but she wanted to go bigger. In 2014, she launched her nonprofit to feed some of Baltimore's most at-risk kids every weekend. Seven years later, Baltimore Hunger Project is a one-woman operation that raises hundreds of thousands of dollars a year and fed more than 1,000 kids over the past year.

Baltimore Hunger Project's mission is

simple — “eliminating weekend childhood hunger,” Kahn explained. “We focus on bridging the hunger gap from Friday afternoons to Monday mornings. The kids we support are the ones who receive free breakfast and lunch Monday through Friday at school. And when they go home, on the weekends, we help supplement what food they may have at home.”

When Kahn started the Baltimore Hunger Project, the organization fed 30 children. She partners with school principals and guidance counselors, who identify the students who are most in need. “We want to preserve the dignity of the kids who receive our food,” Kahn noted. “We bring the food to the guidance counselors, who then slip it into the kids' backpacks before they head home on Fridays.”

Before the COVID-19 pandemic began, the number of children Baltimore Hunger Project supported had grown to 650 students at 24 schools across Baltimore City and Baltimore County. When Baltimore schools shut down last spring and summer, Baltimore Hunger Project began a larger food distribution project, reaching between 1,500 and 2,000 families.

Part of the challenge for Baltimore Hunger Project is making sure people even know about the problem they aim to address.

“Awareness is a really big thing for us. Most people don't know that weekend childhood hunger exists,” Kahn noted. “When the schools closed, all of a sudden, it became something that people talked about, because they were recognizing how many children relied on food at school, in addition to people realizing that was the safe place for many kids.”

Now, the organization's work is on pause for the summer, as Baltimore Hunger Project moves into a new warehouse and prepares to return to its bread and butter this fall: getting kids fed over the weekend.

Baltimore Hunger Project has come a long way from its predecessor in Lynne's Garage, but it is still overwhelmingly powered by volunteers. The organization's only employees are Kahn, who helms the organization full-time while still working as an accountant two days a week, and a part-time assistant. Everything else — collecting the items for distribution, putting together the food bags, delivering them to schools — is done by volunteers.

“It started out as just Lynne doing something and bringing her friends and family together to help her to do that,” said Alexis Seth, a Baltimore Hunger Project board member who met Kahn through their children's PTA and was an early volunteer at Lynne's Garage. “Lynne has a magnetism and a charisma that people are drawn to, so she easily makes connections. You will not be a stranger to her for long.”

For Kahn, this work has always been a passion; she grew up in a service-oriented family with a deep connection to Baltimore — her mother volunteered for years at a soup kitchen when Kahn was growing up — and her roots in the community kept her there even when wanderlust came calling in her 20s.

“I love to travel. But no,” she said, she could never leave Baltimore. “My family's here. That's important to me. My siblings are here. My husband's parents are here. My parents are here.”

“It's kind of a family affair,” Rabbi Steven Schwartz said of Baltimore Hunger Project. Schwartz is the senior rabbi at Congregation Beth El, a Conservative synagogue where Kahn and her extended family belong. “My sister is a regular volunteer. My niece joined us and did her senior project from high school for two months with us. My mother's my biggest fan,” said Kahn.

Kahn's kids connect to the work, too, even if they won't tell her that. “It's not like they think what I do is cool. They never

say anything like that. But it shows,” Kahn stated. Her daughter spent a summer making meals for food insecure children, and this year will be living in a house at her university that focuses on food insecurity and raises money for a local food bank.

The work Baltimore Hunger Project does comes from deeply held values, and not personal experience of hunger or food insecurity. “She feels a deep responsibility, given the privilege she has, given the resources she has — I would also say her faith — guides her in her desire to help,” Seth observed.

“I think a lot of the work that she does through Baltimore Hunger Project, to me, is really kind of mitzvah-oriented work. It just comes from that place of understanding what it means to make the world a better place and the responsibility you have to do that,” Schwartz noted. “Her parents are active and engaged, involved in the shul, they come regularly. Her in-laws as well. Her kids are Jewishly connected also. It just gives you a sense of how those values get transmitted through the generations of a family.”

Kahn grew up steeped in that same Jewish community, with weekly Shabbat dinners and summers spent at Camp Ramah in the Poconos. “Israel is a big part of who I am, too,” Kahn said, adding that she will be visiting Israel next spring with a trip through The Associated — Baltimore’s

Jewish federation — to visit Ashkelon, Baltimore’s sister city, which plans to send a delegation to the U.S. in October.

“The Jewish community certainly has supported our work, for sure, both in talent and treasure,” Kahn noted. Baltimore Hunger Project has partnered with The Associated to find volunteers through the organization’s Jewish Volunteer Connection, which matches interested community members with volunteer projects.

“Since she has started, we’ve promoted the volunteer needs that she has,” said Erica Bloom, deputy director at Jewish Volunteer Connection. “We’ve matched volunteers of all ages, including b’nai mitzvah age for b’nai mitzvah projects. We’ve also created what we call an indirect service project, like an ongoing project that can be done for convenience in someone’s home or in a school, in a small group.”

Some of these projects include writing notes or cards to go in the food bags Baltimore Hunger Project gives out to children, part of a “birthday packs” project. “We have asked the community to help us put these together so that every child we support can have a birthday celebration. It’s a cake mix. It’s icing. It’s oil. It’s a birthday card, it’s candles, it’s paper plates, silverware, all put together,” said Kahn.

“Our tagline is feeding bodies and minds, which means it’s so much more than just the food,” Kahn explained. “How do we

surround these children — who are like my children — with things that they need, [but] that they might not even know that they need?” Baltimore Hunger Project gave out new backpacks at the start of the summer. It also gives out toothbrushes on a quarterly basis and on occasion sends kids home with books. Last year, Baltimore Hunger Project gave everyone a new winter coat.

As the economy has begun to recover in the wake of the pandemic, Baltimore Hunger Project has seen a change. “We were noticing towards the end of our food distribution in June that our numbers were decreasing. The [number of] people who are coming for food was still significant, but it was a lot less than [it] was coming during the height of the pandemic,” Kahn observed.

But she acknowledges that even working beyond maximum capacity, Baltimore Hunger Project cannot meet anywhere close to 100% of the need in the community.

“Forty-eight percent of the students who attend Baltimore County public schools qualify for free and reduced meals, which means there’s like 50,000 students who could use our support,” she explained. “If we’re supporting 1,500 or 1,600 [students], that’s only like 3% in each school. So I would love to be able to see us support all of the kids in the school that need our help.”

Put another way: “Our goal,” Kahn stated, “would be to put ourselves out of business.” ♦

AUGUST 4, 2021

Shontel Brown defeats Nina Turner with support from Cleveland’s Jewish community

In victory speech, Brown thanked ‘my Jewish brothers and sisters.’

By Matthew Kassel

In a remarkable upset, Shontel Brown prevailed on Tuesday night in the hotly contested special primary election for an open House seat in Cleveland, notching a symbolic win for the establishment wing of the Democratic Party while stymying its left-wing flank.

Brown’s come-from-behind victory over

Nina Turner, a former Ohio state senator and prominent progressive, represents an extraordinary turnaround for the Cuyahoga County councilwoman and party chair. Brown, 46, had struggled to gain traction until the final weeks of the race, which played out on the national stage as a tense and high-profile proxy battle between warring Democratic factions.

While most polling suggested that it was Turner’s race to lose, Brown gained momentum near the end of the primary as she accumulated a slew of major endorsements while benefiting from hefty independent expenditures boosting her campaign. The powerful political arm of the Congressional Black Caucus threw its weight behind Brown — who, like

Turner, is Black — in early July, following endorsements from former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton as well as House Majority Whip James Clyburn (D-SC) and several pro-Israel House Democrats.

In an interview with *Jewish Insider* on Saturday, Brown acknowledged that such backing contributed to her late surge. But she argued that her campaign had already built meaningful support within the district “long before any of those folks gave us their” endorsements. “We had over 100 local elected officials, over 50 prominent clergy members, and a number of union leaders, locally, had already gotten fully behind my candidacy early on,” Brown told JI. “We saw that as our path to victory.”

Facing a steep fundraising deficit in competition with Turner’s sizable war chest, Brown’s campaign was also buoyed by outside groups including Democratic Majority for Israel, whose political action committee swept into the race in June and ultimately spent more than \$2 million on TV advertising, direct mailers and other promotional efforts.

The race to succeed former Rep. Marcia Fudge (D-OH), who vacated the seat in March for a Cabinet position in the Biden administration, underscored a growing divide between different ideological factions within the Democratic Party as the 2022 midterms come into view.

Turner, 53, was backed by Justice Democrats, the formidable political group that is already backing several left-wing challengers in upcoming House primaries, as well as leading progressive lawmakers like Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) and Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT), both of whom descended on Cleveland in the final days of the primary.

Brown, a Fudge protégé who cast herself as eager to build on the policy objectives of the Biden administration, drew a sharp contrast with Turner, who once compared voting for Biden to eating a “bowl of shit,” a comment that would dog her campaign throughout the election. Turner downplayed such rhetoric throughout most of the primary, but she came to embrace her combative side as the election came to a close.

“We got some folks rattled,” Turner boasted at a campaign event on Monday.

“But I’m glad they’re rattled. I want them to be uncomfortable.”

In her concession speech on Tuesday evening, Turner was less self-assured but vowed to keep fighting even if she would not be joining her progressive allies in the House. “I am going to work hard to ensure that something like this doesn’t happen to another progressive candidate again,” she said. “We didn’t lose this race, evil money manipulated and maligned this election.”

But her focus on outside money — a source of several controversial attack ads, from supporters of Brown and Turner, that came under scrutiny during the election — obscured other efforts on the ground that almost certainly played a part in influencing the outcome of the race.

Jewish community members in the district, who represent a sizable and politically active voting bloc, were particularly energized by Brown’s candidacy. In May, amid escalating violence between Israel and Hamas, Brown defended Israel’s “right to defend its citizens” in a statement to JI that many Jewish voters appreciated as the conflict coincided with an uptick in antisemitic attacks.

By contrast, Turner, who has called for conditioning aid to the Jewish state, retweeted a social media post accusing Israel of apartheid during the conflict.

“The U.S.-Israel relationship is very important to many of the constituents in the district,” Brown, who was proactive in her outreach to Jewish voters in the district, said in the recent interview with JI. “Having two candidates, one who has been clearly supportive of the Jewish community and one who has not, has been, I think, largely the reason why you see much of the community coalescing around my candidacy.”

Turner’s campaign did not respond to a request for comment.

For many Jewish community members, the race came to signify deepening divisions over Israel within the Democratic Party, and so they sprang into action on Brown’s behalf, engaging voters in traditionally Jewish strongholds like Beachwood, University Heights and Cleveland Heights.

Rabbi Pinchas Landis, an Orthodox Jewish spiritual leader in Cleveland, said he had never been politically active before he began volunteering for Brown’s campaign

last spring, motivated by what he viewed as the high stakes of a race carrying significant implications for the future of American foreign policy toward Israel.

Landis told JI in an interview last week that he had helped turn out 1,000 Orthodox voters, Democrats and Republicans alike, for early voting, which began on July 7. Though Landis was on vacation in the Smoky Mountains on Tuesday, a trip he planned with his family before he was even aware of Brown’s candidacy, he was still promoting her in an effort to get out the vote. “Been canvassing via my iPhone all day,” he said in a text message.

Over the last month or so, Jewish canvassers aggressively targeted the estimated 1,650 Orthodox households in the district with at least one registered voter, making up a potential pool of 3,000 to 5,000 Brown supporters. “We have been encouraging everyone to go to vote and we feel like the message has been heard,” Jessica Cohen, a Brown campaign volunteer who lives in Cleveland Heights, said in a text exchange with JI on Tuesday. “We will keep at it until the polls close at 7:30 p.m.”

The results indicated that those efforts had likely paid off. Beachwood, University Heights and Cleveland Heights were among the cities in the district with the highest turnout, according to the Cuyahoga County Board of Elections. “The local community should be proud of their efforts,” said Howie Beigelman, executive director of the nonprofit Ohio Jewish Communities. “They prove that an engaged, motivated and informed electorate still matters even in an age of hyper-siloed, echo-chambered social media. Perhaps especially so.”

Ron Ratner, a prominent Cleveland philanthropist and businessman, agreed. “There’s all this national noise, but I think this came down to specific issues in terms of what mattered to people in this district,” he told JI in a phone interview with JI on Tuesday night after Brown won. “My guess is that the Jewish vote was significant,” added Ratner, who supported Brown’s campaign. “I wouldn’t be surprised if it was a higher percentage of the primary vote that was cast today.”

“This is a remarkable achievement for the Jewish community as a whole,” Ezra Stark, a Cleveland-based real estate

developer and Brown backer, told JI. “This is the first time as a native Clevelander I can remember Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, non-affiliated Jews joining together for one single cause and showing solidarity behind one single candidate and showing what the Jewish voting power is.”

Jewish groups from outside the district also touted their efforts following Brown’s victory on Tuesday. “Voter turnout in areas with large Jewish populations was — on average — double the overall turnout in the district,” Halie Soifer, CEO of the Jewish Democratic Council of America, said in a statement. JDCA, which endorsed Brown in July, launched a five-figure ad campaign last week targeting the 22,000 Jewish voters who make up about 5% of the electorate in the majority-Black district. “The results speak for themselves and it’s clear the

Jewish vote made a critical difference for Shontel Brown in this close race,” Soifer said.

“Brown’s significant and consistent lead throughout the night proves once again that support for the U.S.-Israel relationship is not only good policy, but good politics,” Jeff Mendelsohn, executive director of Pro-Israel America, said in a press release. PIA’s political arm raised \$800,000 for Brown’s campaign while reaching voters through text messages, phone calls and billboards, according to Mendelsohn. “Brown rejected the divisive politics of her opponent and, as voters learned more about Brown and her policy positions throughout the race, they increasingly supported her campaign,” he said.

Mark Mellman, DMFT’s president, echoed that sentiment in a statement. “Shontel Brown’s victory, as a champion of

the U.S.-Israel relationship, reaffirms that being pro-Israel is good politics as well as wise policy,” he said.

Brown, who defeated a dozen candidates in the crowded primary, will face off against Republican businesswoman Laverne Gore in the November special election. Brown is all but assured victory in Ohio’s heavily Democratic 11th Congressional District, which in addition to Cleveland includes a slice of Akron.

On Tuesday night, Brown recounted her first experience traveling through Israel in 2018, a trip she has described as foundational. “You can appreciate the vulnerability of the state, and that has given me the understanding of the importance of the U.S.-Israel relationship,” Brown told supporters in an enthusiastic victory speech. “I thank my Jewish brothers and sisters.” ♦

AUGUST 6, 2021

The Israeli startup CEO who wants to make American government work

ZenCity’s Eyal Feder-Levy thinks AI is the way to get governments to listen to people

By Gabby Deutch

For people who don’t know or don’t care to know about the intricacies of local government, there’s “Parks and Recreation,” the NBC sitcom starring Amy Poehler as an uber-energetic mid-level parks department employee.

Poehler’s Leslie Knope is an icon to municipal employees and government bureaucrats everywhere, someone whose earnest yearning to make government work is both the joke and the punchline. She is someone to be both laughed at and laughed with.

To employees at ZenCity, an Israeli startup whose technology helps governments better listen to residents’ concerns, Leslie Knope is a folk hero. “All of our Slack icons — the pictures on [the workplace messaging app] — are characters from ‘Parks and Rec,’” ZenCity co-founder and CEO Eyal Feder-Levy told *Jewish Insider*

in a recent Zoom interview from his Tel Aviv apartment.

His arm was in a cast, the result of an electric scooter crash. (He still swears by e-scooters.) The issue of scooters, Feder-Levy said, is an example of the way local governments affect people’s day-to-day lives: “The decision to have or not to have these scooters that is making such a big impact on your life right now is the decision of the local government,” he explained, citing how it is local governments — and not state or national governments — that decide where scooters are legally allowed. “I’m a huge fan of local governments as institutions, and this is probably not something most people would say, but to me, local governments are one of the most impactful institutions in our lives.”

ZenCity announced in June that it had closed \$30 million in new funding from investors including TLV Partners

and the venture capital arms of Salesforce and Microsoft, raising the startup’s total investments to more than \$50 million. Most of ZenCity’s customers are in the U.S., although the company has recently signed contracts in Australia, Canada and the U.K.

The company, which sits in the growing field of govtech, or government technology, collects millions of public data points for local governments to show them what people in their cities are talking about: angry Facebook and Twitter posts, emails to public comment accounts, Reddit questions. It then uses machine learning to provide analysis that governments can act on.

“The problem we’re actually trying to solve is that today in government, there is no way of knowing if you’re doing a good job or not on a routine basis,” Feder-Levy explained. “In the private sector, it’s very easy. You measure everything on revenue: Are we making more money or making less

money?”

For local governments, there are municipal elections every two or four years, but turnout is generally much lower in local races than national elections. In 2020, turnout was 66.7% of eligible voters, the highest in more than 100 years. But in recent years, turnout in even major cities has been strikingly lower in mayoral races — 9% in Las Vegas, 14% in Wichita, Kan., and 30% in Columbus, Ohio, for instance, according to figures from the National Civic League.

Even between those elections, when local leaders are “making decisions around policies, budgeting, you have no way of measuring that North Star of how happy people are with either their community or with the services they’re getting from their local government,” Feder-Levy said.

ZenCity’s goal is to help cities move beyond what Feder-Levy’s team calls the “STP problem,” referring to the fact that it is usually the “same 10 people” who show up to city council meetings or other local hearings. “It’s usually very inequitable,” Feder-Levy noted. Those people are overrepresented in policy decisions, and they are typically also people whose voice is already being heard.

“I loved these meetings because I could make a lot of impact by being one of five people in the room,” he noted. “I would shout the hardest to have a loud voice, and my voice would change decisions in the city. It was great for me. But I’m a privileged white man, Jewish in Israel, which is the majority. So my voice was overcounted a lot because I would just show up.”

It was one of those meetings that led Feder-Levy to a career in urban planning.

“A friend of mine was studying urban planning,” he recalled. He was living in Tel Aviv at the time after serving in the Israel Defense Forces’ elite 8200 intelligence unit. “I was in my early 20s, and she said, ‘Do you want to come with me to a meeting about the future of the city?’ And I was like, ‘Yeah, sounds interesting. Let’s do it.’ I fell in love.”

ZenCity is not just Feder-Levy’s first startup. It is his first job in the private sector.

“After service in the Israeli intelligence, I went as far away as possible from that and led an NGO for three years,” he said. The organization he ran was called the Garden Library, a South Tel Aviv nonprofit providing access to education, arts and

culture in one of the poorest areas of the city. He then worked as an urban planner, first with cities in Israel, before logging a brief stint in academia, teaching urbanism at Tel Aviv University.

After launching the company in 2015 with Chief Tech Officer Ido Ivri — the pair served together in the IDF — ZenCity began approaching municipalities well before they had any functioning technology, or a beta version of the software they hoped to create.

“The first couple of communities in the U.S. took a chance on a concept that we showed them that didn’t actually work,” Feder-Levy explained. “They said, ‘The problem is serious enough for us to consider a new approach. You guys seem legit. Let’s do a pilot and see if it works.’”

At first, ZenCity signed a number of cities in Israel, including Tel Aviv, Beersheva and Eilat. But the company does most of its sales in the U.S. “Israel has 257 municipalities and the U.S. has 20,000. It’s a different scale of market,” he noted. “Also, I think that the separation of powers in the U.S. between federal and local allows more impact to be made by local governments than it is in Israel, which is a little bit more [centralized].”

ZenCity’s software does not just gather data — a number of other companies offer a service like that — but it also provides analysis, so governments can act on what they learn. He offered Fort Lauderdale, Fla., as an example. In a month, the city might gather 100,000 public comments through ZenCity.

“We analyze that big amount of unstructured data with some machine learning to say, ‘Hey, 40% of the conversation is about transportation. It’s 60% negative. And the reason is that the road work on First Avenue is causing traffic jams over the last few weeks,’” he said.

The company recently signed its first state agency, Michigan’s Department of Health and Human Services. “We’re working with them and COVID hesitancy, which is a very big issue,” Feder-Levy said. The company also works with agencies throughout government: “We’re working with some of the bigger police departments in the country on equity and policing.”

ZenCity’s pitch is a civic one, even if it’s also good for the company’s bottom line: Governments should be responsive to the

needs of the constituents they serve. “I have a very strong belief that is based on working with thousands of local government leaders in hundreds of cities, [and] that most of these people get up and go to work everyday because they believe they want to serve their community better,” Feder-Levy said.

Americans’ trust in the federal government in the U.S. remains low — up slightly from the Trump years, but still at just 24%, according to a Pew Research Center poll from April. But at the local level, governments still get things done. They have to.

“If you’re a Republican mayor of a city on a coastline, you better have a plan for rising sea levels,” Feder-Levy said. “If you’re a Democratic mayor on the border, you can be pro-immigration 100%, but you need to have a plan for how to take care of the people crossing the border, and the people that need your services.”

To explain why this is, Feder-Levy offered an axiom that sounds like it could have come from Leslie Knope: “There’s no partisan way to take out the trash.” ♦

Deborah Copaken uses her ‘Ladyparts’ to talk gender, money and Judaism

Taking a page from Nora Ephron’s playbook, Copaken’s new memoir turns tragedy into comedy

By Gabby Deutch

“Everything is copy,” Nora Ephron famously said. “You’d come home with something that you thought was the tragedy of your life: someone hadn’t asked you to dance, or the hem had fallen out of your dress, or whatever you thought was the worst thing that could ever happen to a human being — and my mother would say, ‘Everything is copy.’”

Nothing was off limits for Ephron, the beloved Jewish writer and filmmaker. She wrote about the parts of herself she didn’t like, those she did, and embarrassing encounters with all of them.

It’s this mindset that guided Deborah Copaken in her new memoir, *Ladyparts*, which comes out next week.

“What Nora teaches through her writings and through her films are ways to manage that [and] ways to reframe what’s happening to you in order to move forward with a smile and be able to manage tragedy poignantly, for lack of a better word,” Copaken told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview. Ephron reached out to Copaken following the release of Copaken’s first book, *Shutterbabe: Adventures in Love and War*, about her time as a war photographer, and the two began a friendship that continued until Ephron’s death in 2012.

Ladyparts takes readers through the series of maladies and injuries Copaken experienced as she reached middle age, with each illness standing in as a metaphor for some larger theme in her life. Heart palpitations as she finally opened her heart, post-divorce. A hysterectomy right as Ephron, a surrogate mother, died, and right as Copaken’s daughter first got her period. Removal of her precancerous cervix just when she was looking for romance.

“The scars covering my female body, in

other words, felt like the vague outline of a story begging to be fleshed out, body part by body part,” Copaken writes. The scars provide the outline, but the book dives deep into some of the most personal aspects of her life — her divorce, the debt her ex-husband left in her name, the reality of living paycheck-to-paycheck with no health insurance.

She doesn’t shy away from getting political — when she has to take an UberPool to the hospital during a medical emergency because she can’t afford an ambulance, she bemoans the poor care and massive costs of the COBRA insurance system for people who have recently lost their jobs — but the book is not a political manifesto.

“It became very popular about 10 years ago — there were a lot of recipes online, where you hide the vegetables in your kid’s food by, like, grinding them up and putting them in the pasta...so they would get their vegetables,” she explained. “That’s how I see my writing: I sort of grind up the policy issues into humor and storytelling. But hopefully, because it’s entertaining enough, people pay attention.”

She details horrific scenes with bursts of humor, like the time she woke her daughter — jet-lagged and recently home from Birthright Israel — when Copaken was hemorrhaging large blood clots.

“When the 18th clot emerged from my body, we were counting them, my daughter and I, and I joke, ‘Oh, it’s a chai, right?’” she recalled, referring to the Hebrew word for life, signified by the number 18.

Copaken’s Jewishness percolates throughout the book almost by accident. When she was asked recently to write a blog post about how her faith has influenced her writing, she balked — she thought, at first, that it hadn’t. “Originally I was like, ‘I don’t

know if I can write anything about that.’ And then I re-read my book, and I thought, ‘Oh, my god, there’s so much Judaism here,’” she said.

“I’m not a religious Jew,” Copaken writes. “I’m more of a bagel Jew.” And yet Judaism has been a major force in her life. Growing up outside of Washington, D.C., Copaken had a bat mitzvah, and then did bar mitzvah tutoring to make extra money in high school.

“You can take the Jew out of the shtetl, but you can’t take the shtetl out of the Jew,” Copaken remarked. “I am my grandparents’ grandchild.” Before escaping pogroms in Europe, her grandfather had been tossed from his crib by Cossacks, leaving him with an injured arm for the rest of his life.

“To grow up Jewish is to grow up knowing relatives of yours and people in your circle who know people who’ve been killed in the Holocaust — people who have been abused and discriminated against, and that you can’t separate out your Jewish identity from the history of Judaism,” Copaken explained. “It seeps into everything.”

In Copaken’s first job after college, she worked as a war photographer in the late 1980s and early 1990s. One of her postings was in Ramallah, in the West Bank, where she covered the First Intifada. It was her first time in Israel.

“As a Jew traveling to Israel for the first time as a journalist, it was definitely an interesting way and an eye-opening way of seeing the country,” she said. “I was arrested, my first week I was there, by Israeli forces, the IDF.” She and her colleague were held until they would not be able to get their film in on time, and then the film was removed from the cameras and exposed to the light so they couldn’t get the photos developed, a move she described as “censorship.”

The experience — including spending

a week with a Palestinian family under lockdown orders from the Israeli army — showed her how complicated the conflict is, and the experience did not leave her feeling hopeful.

“We have religious Jews yelling ‘Death to the Palestinians’ recently, I saw on a bunch of YouTube clips. And we have Palestinians yelling ‘Death to the Jews,’ right? This is the basis of war. This is the unbridgeable divide,” she argued.

Copaken left war photography when she wanted to have children. “I got really tired really quickly of the danger,” she recalled. “A friend of mine from my college, who also took photography [classes] with me, was killed in Iraq. That was kind of a watershed moment where I was like, ‘Oh, yeah, this is serious.’ You feel invincible as a 22-year-old.”

She returned to the U.S. and entered broadcast journalism. But by the time she got pregnant, she was working long days, and her company had no paid maternity leave policy. She asked her boss if she could work four days a week, and he said yes; but when the matter moved to his supervisor, it was rejected. “He kicked it up to the vice president at NBC to give their final approval. She had kids and had this big job, and she thought, ‘If I did it, you should be able to do it,’” Copaken said. The request was denied. So Copaken left TV, and found her way into the writing world.

As a contributing writer at *The Atlantic*, Copaken has written often about experiences unique to her, as a woman, that also intersect with big public conversations. She wrote in 2018, amid a slew of anti-abortion bills introduced in state legislatures around the country, about her own experience of abortion — she’s had two, and also has three children. A story from earlier this year detailed the sexual harassment she endured from Ken Kurson, the former editor

of the *New York Observer*, who was pardoned by former President Donald Trump earlier this year after Kurson was charged with cyberstalking and harassment.

She brings her style back to Ephron, her mentor: “In talking about her own personal comedy, stories, tragedies, all of that, she’s able to allow us to see a universal picture of womanhood in America,” said Copaken.

And for Copaken, the personal stories get specific, and graphic. She writes about “vaginal cuff dehiscence,” a dangerous complication that followed her hysterectomy and nearly killed her, but which she had never heard of until it happened to her. This, she argues, is what happens when you’re a woman.

“What is the risk of this? How come I didn’t know what the risk was? How come nobody told me that this could happen to me? It’s a huge, big deal. My 20-year-old daughter just saved my life,” she said. When she turned to Google to assess the risk of the condition, the answers ranged from 0.001% of hysterectomies to 7%, a vast chasm due to poor record-keeping. “They don’t have a registry. That would require money, and nobody’s putting money into anything female health-related,” she noted.

After she left the hospital, a friend who’s a gynecologist told her to stay off her feet, not do any heavy lifting, have people help her. “But I was alone at the time. I didn’t have a partner. My marriage had broken up. My kids were away for the summer. It was just — it was not easy,” she recalled.

In *Ladyparts*, Copaken inserts humor into all of these stories, but she is detailing a reality that millions of Americans understand all too well: What do you do if you need help but you can’t afford it, and you have no one to help you?

“Having no money in your bank account is having no money in your bank account,”

she said. But, she added, “I am much better off than somebody who’s in abject poverty and has grown up in abject poverty. No question. What I’m talking about is not abject poverty. What I’m talking about is the fact that we no longer have a middle class, so that you have to be extremely rich or you can’t survive anymore.”

The book presents a detailed picture of Copaken’s finances: \$3,000 in her bank account. \$2,314 in monthly COBRA fees. Renting out her son’s bedroom when the rent on the apartment rises from \$3,500 to \$5,000. Deciding whether to pay for the \$6,000 MRI to make sure a breast lump is gone. Numbers that many Americans have memorized, and others don’t think twice about.

Writing the book was a way for Copaken to counteract the stigma around money, particularly for people who look like they have it but do not. “I’m not gonna say, ‘I don’t have money,’ because it’s shameful. You’ve had all these advantages, you’ve gone to good schools, why don’t you have money? Well, I don’t have money because I can’t afford my life,” she explained. “That’s partially why I was just so brutally honest about my economic situation, because I cannot be the only one going through this.”

And the way Copaken knew she could make a political point was following Ephron’s example.

“What I kept thinking as I was writing *Ladyparts*,” she noted, is that “your body’s not yours anymore... You’re giving the public your body as a megaphone for everything that can and does go wrong in women’s lives, from childcare, snack foods, to health care absurdities to lack of data and bad medical advice that lead to serious complications and near death. Use what has happened to you for the greater good.” ♦

Ashlee Bond is show-jumping for joy

The Israeli-American equestrian fell short in the individual competition, but still has a chance to medal with her team

By Madeline Solomon

Israeli-American equestrian star Ashlee Bond, who learned to ride in the foothills of the Santa Monica Mountains in Calabasas, Calif., was so jazzed after her third-place finish in Tuesday's qualifier in Individual Jumping at the Olympic Games in Tokyo, she took to Instagram — and spoke directly to her horse, Donatello 141, or Donnie.

Bond, who ultimately fell short in Individual Jumping but will go on to compete with the rest of the Israeli team later this week in the group event, wrote in an Instagram post, "Donnie, you're unreal!! Clear and fast in tonight's Olympic individual qualifier, finishing third — which has us in a great position for tomorrow's individual final! Thank you, Donnie!! And thank you to everyone cheering from around the world!"

Bond, who has been riding horses most of her life, is a member of the first Israeli equestrian jumping team to qualify for the

Olympic Games, along with Daniel Bluman, Elad Yaniv and Danielle Goldstein Waldman. In 2009, at age 24, Bond reached the top 40 in the FEI (Fédération Equestre Internationale, the sport's governing body) world rankings, and was named The Chronicle of the Horse magazine Show Jumping Horseman of the Year for 2009. Now, 12 years later, she's an Olympian with a shot at the gold.

Bond previously competed in the United States and became an Israeli citizen in 2018, allowing her to compete for the Jewish state. Her father, who taught her to ride, was born and raised in Haifa before moving to the United States when he was 12.

"My dad put me on a horse before I could walk," Bond said on "The Equestrian Podcast." She is known for developing young horses to compete.

Despite her love of horses and show jumping, Bond stepped away from the sport after some early success to pursue other passions, such as acting and singing. But the passion returned when she was 21, when she

traveled to New Zealand with her mother, who was there working as a film producer. "I got to fall in love with the animal again and riding in its purest form. It was definitely an 'aha' moment. I got home and got on a horse that day and haven't looked back," Bond, who was a member of Israel's 2018 World Equestrian Games team, recalled.

Bond and her father run the family's Little Valley Farms, which is located in Hidden Hills, Calif., a city in the Santa Monica Mountains right outside of Los Angeles. That's where she grew up, and first became inspired to pursue show jumping. She went to Calabasas High School, along with other notable alumni such as Ezra Butler, a professional football player; Michelle Fields, a Fox News reporter; and Omer Fedi, an Israeli guitarist and songwriter. She's married to Roy Meeus, a former Belgian professional soccer player, with whom she has a daughter. ♦