

## THE WEEKLY PRINT

*Bill Kristol's evolution; J.D. Vance on Trump, Israel and his chosen faith; Michael Eisenberg is applying the lessons of the Torah to technology and business; and Noah Arbut wants to bring Jewish values to the Michigan statehouse*

SEPTEMBER 13, 2021

## Bill Kristol's evolution

*The conservative commentator's political evolution continues with his recent endorsement of Virginia Democrat Terry McAuliffe for governor*

By Gabby Deutch

In March 2015, William Kristol put a photograph of a young and artfully scruffy Bob Dylan on the cover of *The Weekly Standard* — “the neocon Bible,” as the magazine he co-founded and edited was dubbed. The photo illustrated a cover story, provocatively headlined, “Bob Dylan, Traditionalist.”

As a lonely wanderer in the political wilderness in these days of Trump and Trumpism, an iconic Dylan lyric may capture best Kristol's no-direction-home predicament:

“How does it feel? To be without a home  
Like a complete unknown, like a rolling stone.”

The son of “the godfather of neoconservatism,” and a traditionalist in his own right, Kristol has spent his career making the case for conservative policies and politicians. He spent the last five years trying to rally his fellow Republicans to support his “Never Trump” cause.

It didn't work.

The longtime editor of the now-defunct *Weekly Standard* could not convince enough Republicans to oppose former President Donald Trump, who remains immensely popular among Republican voters nearly a year after losing his reelection bid. And

many of Kristol's fellow Never Trumpers have begun to return to supporting the party, seeing a more palatable opening to support Republican candidates again now that Trump is out of office.

Not Kristol. He raised eyebrows inside the Beltway last month when the McLean, Va., resident endorsed Democrat Terry McAuliffe in Virginia's gubernatorial race.

McAuliffe, a fellow McLean resident who served as governor from 2014-2018, is facing Republican Glenn Youngkin, a former CEO at The Carlyle Group who is viewed by some Republicans as a return to the party's moderate roots. But Kristol isn't swayed: “Youngkin fundamentally is unwilling to break with Trump and Trumpism,” he told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview.

Best known for his proud support for interventionism and the Iraq War, Kristol, who is now editor-at-large of *The Bulwark*, decided that it would be disingenuous not to weigh in on the heated governor's race in his home state. Not to mention that the McAuliffe campaign asked for his support. “I just felt like once I got asked my opinion, it seemed a little ridiculous to say, ‘Well, I'm staying out of it,’” he explained.

In conversation with *JI*, Kristol discussed whether he still identifies as a Republican

(no, not really), what he makes of the growing contingent of Democrats who are hostile to Israel (“it's very foolish to just write off the Democrats”) and whether Iraq was really worth it (“I'm uncertain about Iraq”).

This interview has been edited and condensed for length and clarity.

***Jewish Insider:*** *I'm curious how you would define yourself politically these days. Would you call yourself a Democrat? Or was the endorsement of McAuliffe purely candidate-based?*

**William Kristol:** Some of each, honestly. Virginia doesn't have party registration, so I always use that as a way of avoiding the “What party are you now in” question. But Pete Buttigieg said during the campaign that he hoped he would appeal to, and that he hoped Biden would appeal to if Biden was the nominee, what he called “future former Republicans.” I've used that term a few times to describe myself now. As a friend pointed out, there's only so long you can be a future former Republican. At some point, you have to decide, Are you a former Republican, or are you still? I guess I'm more on the former side.

Even the mainstream Republicans are not willing to repudiate Trump and Trumpism. If the Republican Party were where [Rep.] Liz Cheney [R-WY] was, I would be in a different place. I would still disagree, and I'd probably still be more moderate, or liberal, if you want to compare me to someone like Liz Cheney or even [Rep.] Adam Kinzinger [R-IL]. As a party, no one would have criticized them for not seeing the threat earlier. But most of the Republican Party refuses to come to grips with it and at best is just kind of quiet about it, and at worst endorses it. I think the Republicans I would support today are more the exception than the rule.

I've lived for a long time in Virginia. As I recall, [McAuliffe] was a pretty good governor. He's a moderate Democrat. The Democrats have governed the state for the last two years with control of the state legislature. The state's in pretty good shape. I have no big objections, I would say, to the McAuliffe Democrats running Northern Virginia and to McAuliffe himself, who I think is a serious guy and was a good governor. Youngkin fundamentally is unwilling to break with Trump and Trumpism. Some people can say in response, well, that's just rhetoric. And I think it's a fair point. I think it's easier to vote for a Republican for governor than for Congress, because if you're going to be in Congress, you're going to be supporting [House Minority Leader] Kevin McCarthy. If you're in the Senate, you're going to be voting in conjunction with various Trumpists. That's a more immediate referendum on Trump; obviously, a state-level race is different. If I were in Massachusetts I would vote for [Republican Gov.] Charlie Baker for reelection. Of course, Baker didn't support Trump.

**JL:** *Before Trump was president, were there Republicans of whom you were skeptical? Or did you start to separate out each Republican candidate only after Trump came onto the scene?*

**Kristol:** A little bit of the first, I would say, but much more after Trump came on the scene. I really don't remember what I did in [the 2013 gubernatorial race]. I might have just sat it out. There were other times I didn't vote for individual Republicans. I'd never

been 100% a party person. There were parts of the party I disliked. On immigration in particular, I very much disliked the rhetoric of [former Virginia attorney general and 2013 Republican gubernatorial candidate Ken] Cuccinelli and then [2017 Virginia gubernatorial candidate] Ed Gillespie. Some of the economic policies had become irresponsible. The answer is, yeah, there were parts of the Republican Party I didn't like, but Trump really brought it to a head.

**JL:** *Obviously, most Republicans do support Trump. In this political climate, would you find it possible to support Republicans who speak positively about Trump but who also support policy positions that align with your own? If a Republican expresses support for or praises Trump at all, does that mean you will oppose them?*

**Kristol:** I think there are particular policies of Trump [that] people were totally entitled to praise, and that I myself might agree with, whether it's deregulatory efforts or maybe the push for the vaccine. I have no problem with someone saying that or arguing that or giving Trump credit for that. There are other issues where I agree with things this administration's done, distinct things Biden has done or Biden's proposed. For me, the policies are individual, and you can support them.

The overall governance of Trump — praising that, supporting the reelection, for me that was the real litmus test. You could have supported Trump in 2016. I think it would have been a big mistake, but you could have talked yourself into saying he'll grow into the office, he'll move beyond some of the demagoguery, and it'll be constrained by the Republican establishment both on the Hill and in the Cabinet. To support him for reelection in 2020 really is pretty hard to swallow. I mean, Liz Cheney did — but to her credit, the moment it became really clear, after November 3, what he was doing, she turned on him. And Liz said she regretted supporting him and said she wouldn't support him in 2024. That's a reasonable position that I can live with. People who want to continue to say that it would have been right to reelect Donald Trump, and that it's fine to accommodate Trump and Trumpism going forward — I find that very

difficult to support.

**JL:** *Why did you opt to come off the sidelines in Virginia and endorse McAuliffe, when a lot of other alienated Republicans haven't gone as far in publicly supporting McAuliffe or other Democratic candidates?*

**Kristol:** I don't think I'm going to move a whole lot of votes. They asked. I'm a very big believer in the privacy of the ballot. It's a liberal country, liberal society, in the broad sense of liberal, and one of the aspects of that is you don't have to be involved in every political fight or any political fight if you don't want to be. In my work, I'm claiming to have thoughts about how democracy can be strengthened going forward. It doesn't mean I have to be in every race. But I live in Virginia. I've expressed opinions about Virginia politics in the past. I just felt like once I got asked my opinion, it seemed a little ridiculous to say, 'Well, I'm staying out of it.' I've got opinions about voting rights legislation, I've got opinions about withdrawing from Afghanistan, I've got opinions about the Biden administration, and I don't have any opinion about these two candidates running for governor of my state? I do have an opinion. I'm not saying it's a very important opinion but I do have an opinion. So I'm happy to volunteer it.

**JL:** *Have you or do you have plans to speak out in the same way about your member of Congress in Virginia?*

**Kristol:** I knew Barbara Comstock when she was a member of Congress. And I said publicly in 2018 that I thought it was very important that the Democrats win the House. And I think I said I would therefore vote in my own district [Virginia's 10th Congressional District], for the Democrat [Jennifer Wexton], though I know and like and respect Barbara Comstock. She was not pro-Trump, to be fair. And still, at the end of the day, she was a vote for Republicans in the House, and that would have meant a Republican House that wouldn't investigate, in my view, the Trump administration appropriately. Could it be a little different in 2022? I suppose you could argue that Kevin McCarthy as speaker of the House isn't that terrible, at least he'll check Biden

a little bit, but I think it's pretty, pretty terrible, given the behavior on January 6th, and subsequently. So I expect to vote for the Democratic candidate here in this district.

**JL:** *Now that in some ways you're gravitating towards the Democratic Party, have you changed your views at all or found yourself questioning some of the views you've held on the foreign policy issues that you've been most vocal on throughout your career?*

**Kristol:** Ironically, I'd say I've changed or rethought my views more on domestic policy issues, just because I feel like I've seen some things I didn't want to see earlier on — a little bit on race, a little bit on some of the economic issues. Foreign policy, I haven't really changed my views. And I've been critical of Biden for the withdrawal from Afghanistan. I always had views there that were more — people said it was neoconservative, or whatever — very consistent with liberal internationalism. We supported Clinton's intervention in Bosnia in the eighth or 10th issue [of the Weekly Standard], and we were getting a lot of angry letters: 'You're supposed to be a conservative magazine, what are you supporting Clinton for?' I've always viewed those views as sort of separate from American partisan politics. So, no. The short answer is — of course, there are particulars and errors in judgment and so forth. But not fundamentally, I would say.

**JL:** *Looking specifically at the Iraq War, which most Democrats today would say was a bad idea, has that led you to rethink your views on the Iraq War at all? And whether, looking back now, that war was worth it?*

**Kristol:** Look, obviously, if you supported it you'd be crazy not to have thought, rethought and worried about whether you were right. Obviously it wasn't fought the way we hoped. We supported the surge, which I think, by the end of 2008, had created an acceptable situation in Iraq. Then it led to ISIL, which we then crushed. And now we're back to a not-so-terrible situation, honestly, in Iraq today. Whether it was worth all that is a different question, obviously. So I guess I now would be open to people — I have friends who have said they think it was a mistake, I have other

friends who don't think so. I'm inclined not to think it was. I mean, of course, not having weapons of mass destruction would have changed everything. Knowing that [Saddam Hussein] didn't have the weapons of mass destruction would have changed everything, but I didn't know that, nor did others who were inside government. So I guess the answer is, on Iraq, I'm uncertain what the right choice would have been. It's hard to rerun history and see what it would have looked like if we hadn't intervened. I would say more broadly, on intervention, I will acknowledge Iraq was very difficult, and many things were done badly, if people on the other side will acknowledge that non-intervention in Syria led to hundreds of thousands of deaths and all kinds of terrible consequences, including the refugee crisis, which inadvertently helped to elect Trump in 2015, 2016. So there were costs either way, I guess I would put it. So I'm uncertain about Iraq.

**JL:** *Looking within the Democratic Party, there are members elected in the past few years like Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN) who are not just critical of Israel, but opposed to the State of Israel. What do you make of their influence within the party? And how does that affect your views on the party as you move closer to it?*

**Kristol:** It's very important for Israel to have support in both parties. The Republican Party is quite pro-Israel. It's pro-Israel in some slightly wacky ways occasionally, but whatever, it's OK. Can't complain about it. There's a fight within the Democratic Party. I don't know how much I can help in that fight because I don't exactly have great Democratic credentials. In fact, a group I was associated with did try to make a case in Ohio [in the 11th Congressional District special election]. It was important which Democrat won that primary since it was clearly going to be a Democratic seat, and in fact, the pro-Israel Democrat won that primary. There are plenty of pro-Israel Democrats in Congress, more than the anti-Israel Democrats — and anti-Israel might be a little broad, but the people who don't share my views on Israel, and there are a number of them in the Democratic Party. I don't know if they're really on the ascendancy. They certainly have been on the ascendancy

on college campuses and among some groups, but they don't really control that many seats; they certainly don't control the Biden administration. If you looked in 2019 at the Democratic [presidential] candidates, there were my hawkish pro-Israel, pro-Bibi [Netanyahu] friends who would really internalize that Trump-Bibi connection, [who asked], 'How would you even think about that party?' and I'm looking to Joe Biden and Pete Buttigieg and Amy Klobuchar, and I'm thinking, 'It's not so bad.' Now, [Bernie] Sanders would be a different story. But Biden won the nomination.

And so I say to people who are uncertain about the Democratic Party and Israel, all the more reason to fight to define the Democratic Party on Israel. It's not going to be a happy story if we have a pro-Israel Republican Party and an anti-Israel Democratic Party. Republicans are not going to win every election, though they'll win most of the elections, probably, based on the last 20 years, though they only won the popular vote once. So you do not want to put all your eggs in that basket. I would say for people who are in between, you know what, the Republican Party is OK for now. Let's strengthen the forces in the Democratic Party who are pro-Israel. And I would also say generally that goes along with the more internationalist view of foreign policy. I've always thought it's hard to sustain a pro-Israel position if you're against helping any other democracy but you're only for helping Israel. That's kind of the Trump Republican position. I don't begrudge, if you're the prime minister of Israel, you've got to work with what you've got to work with. And maybe you go along with that, you don't criticize that, but in the longer run that is not a healthy position. I'm not with the Trump-Bibi faction in the pro-Israel community that thinks the Democratic Party is lost or hopeless. I would say, in fact, it clearly isn't. It really matters who wins the Ohio 11 primary, it matters who wins a bunch of other primaries next year for the Senate and for the House. It matters, obviously, who serves in the Biden administration. It's very foolish to just write off the Democrats.

**JL:** *To that point about the Trump-Netanyahu wing, there are people who will say, 'We will acknowledge that there are extremely*

*problematic members of our own party, far-right extremists, but are they actually any worse than the Squad?’ There are a lot of comparisons made between those two groups.*

**Kristol:** I think it’s slightly irrelevant. I could make arguments about why the Squad is a lot less in the center of the Democratic Party than those Republicans are in the Republican Party. I don’t think a lot of Democratic candidates are asking Ilhan Omar to campaign for them in their districts, whereas I think a lot of Republicans are very happy to show up with Marjorie Taylor Greene or Paul Gosar or someone like that. Or maybe not that many Republicans are. But what does it matter? At the end of the day, we need to fight both. There are obviously people who are Republican elected officials who have more of an obligation to monitor their own party and the same with the Democrats. And there are times when I wish some Democrats stood up more vocally against some of the Ilhan Omars of the world. But one thing about supporting Democrats is that I can support Democrats who do stand up against them. And you know what would help is electing Shontel Brown in Ohio 11, in Cleveland, and electing — it’s a state-level race, so it’s not quite the same thing — but electing Terry McAuliffe in Virginia. What kind of Democratic Party do we want? I’m happy with Shontel Brown, Terry McAuliffe, Eric Adams, Phil Murphy in New Jersey, Gavin Newsom in California (I’m not a huge fan of his personally but I think he’s pretty pro-

Israel). But certainly at the congressional and Senate levels it matters who wins some of these open seats and contested seats in 2022 on the Democratic side.

**JJ:** *On the Ohio front, I know that you have supported [Republican Senate candidate] Josh Mandel in the past, and so I’d be curious what you make of the campaign he’s running now.*

**Kristol:** It’s horrible and it’s embarrassing. [Mandel was criticized by the Anti-Defamation League for comparing mask mandates to the Gestapo, and he called ADL chief Jonathan Greenblatt a “kapo.”]

**JJ:** *To zoom out on the Israel issue, Bibi Netanyahu is no longer prime minister. I know that you have a relationship with him. What do you think his legacy will be as prime minister?*

**Kristol:** I think mostly positive. He’s a very impressive person. He has his flaws, God knows, and maybe those flaws over time became more evident than the impressive parts. His policies were often different from his rhetoric. His policies were more prudent. The things that I would most hold against him were probably more of the corruption stuff. And then some of the demagoguery was bad, especially the last couple of election campaigns. I remember having a big argument with a very pro-Israel, hawkish, pro-Bibi, pro-Trump group of people in America. It was the day it became clear we were going

to have the Bennett-Lapid government. And there was total hysteria among those people. ‘It’s the end of the world, you’ve got a weak, left-wing government in Israel, the Biden administration is going to pressure them, and they’re going to capitulate, and everything’s gone. We have to be in total opposition on both fronts: to Biden and [to Bennett].’

I remember saying, ‘Bennett is not really a left-winger. It’s not really a left-wing government. It looks like it’s going to have the same defense minister. Lapid is not particularly dovish on foreign policy, and he’ll be foreign minister. So what are we talking about here?’ We have an interest in the Biden administration being pro-Israel and the Israeli government succeeding and the administration succeeding in the U.S. We want a strong U.S. and a strong Israel. So maybe we could do our best to push for sound policies in both countries, and not pretend that it’s the end of the world if we have Joe Biden as president of the United States and Bennett as prime minister of Israel. There’s something a little childish about that. That’s not to say there couldn’t be something that happens in six months that I don’t like that either the Bennett government does or the Biden administration does. I think maybe people will calm down a little bit in the pro-Bibi, pro-Trump right, as they see the new reality. Or maybe not. People are so invested at this point in a certain analysis of things and a certain apocalyptic view of everything, and it’s hard to know who came back to reality. ♦

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## J.D. Vance on Trump, Israel and his chosen faith

*In a JI interview, the Ohio Senate hopeful explains his flip-flop on the former president and his conversion to Catholicism*

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By Matthew Kassel

J.D. Vance, the venture capitalist and best-selling author of *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, got off to something of a bumpy start when he declared his candidacy in Ohio’s open-seat Senate

race two months ago. Speaking at a factory in Middletown, where he grew up, the 37-year-old Republican seemed disoriented as a campaign poster unceremoniously slid from its place on the lectern just as he was about to

announce his first bid for public office.

The flub, while relatively minor, was nevertheless a portent of deeper problems that have dogged his campaign — chief among them past criticisms of former President Donald Trump expressed by



Vance in since-deleted tweets during the 2016 presidential election. Vance, who now casts himself as a staunch Trump supporter, has apologized for the tweets, which were recently unearthed by CNN.

Despite some initial stumbles, Vance suggested in a recent conversation with *Jewish Insider* that he has finally found his footing as his campaign enters its third month. “I feel like we’ve got a lot of momentum,” he said in the rare interview with a national publication. “Certainly a lot of folks seem excited. We’re raising a lot of money. We’re getting a lot of volunteers. We’re getting a lot of media, and I think the polling is moving in our direction. All good signs, but it’s very early.”

Still, it remains to be seen whether his tweets, including one in which he described the former president as “reprehensible,” will be a liability in the crowded Republican primary to succeed outgoing Sen. Rob Portman (R-OH).

Trump maintains widespread support throughout the Buckeye State. But the former president has yet to make an endorsement in the race, even as the leading GOP candidates — including former Ohio State Treasurer Josh Mandel, former state party chair Jane Timken, Cleveland car dealer Bernie Moreno and investment banker Mike Gibbons — are locked in competition to win Trump’s favor.

“I certainly think I have a chance if he ends up doing an endorsement,” Vance posited to *JI*. “But everything I’ve heard from both the president directly, but also his close advisers, is that he is taking a wait-and-see approach on this race.”

Having entered the race on July 1, Vance is the only candidate yet to report official fundraising numbers. His campaign declined to reveal how much money he has raised so far. Peter Thiel, the billionaire venture capitalist, pumped \$10 million into a pro-Vance super PAC, Protect Ohio Values, in March.

Vance established himself as a leading voice of the white working class when he published his 2016 memoir about his turbulent Rust Belt upbringing. But his candidacy will test whether voters in his home state of Ohio feel as if he speaks for them.

The Senate hopeful emphasized that he

will need to appeal to a wide cross-section of voters if he has any hope of prevailing in next year’s primary. “My view here is that, to win a state like Ohio, I have to be a candidate not just winning any one geography or any one group,” he told *JI*, “but I have to try to appeal to everybody.”

For Vance, Jewish voters in particular represent an opportunity to expand his support base. “I think the Jewish community is an important part of our coalition on the right,” he said, noting that he has engaged in conversations with local and national Jewish organizations since he launched his campaign. “I hope it becomes a more important part of our coalition because I think that, frankly, the left has gone pretty crazy on a lot of issues that Jews care about.”

“When the left talks about Israel as sort of an evil colonizer apartheid state,” said Vance, “I think that’s a pretty radical departure from how politicians have talked about the State of Israel.”

Vance has never been to Israel but said that his connection with the Jewish state has deepened in recent years, thanks in part to his conversion to Catholicism. “Culturally, morally, politically, it is a real ally in the sense that we’re not just sort of sharing interests,” he argued, “we’re actually sharing common values.”

In conversation with *JI* this week, Vance discussed, among other things, his evolution on Trump, his recent conversion to Catholicism and how his political views may have changed since he wrote *Hillbilly Elegy*.

The interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

***Jewish Insider:*** Why did you decide to jump into this race now?

**J.D. Vance:** I’ve been talking for a long time now about what I think the Republican Party should be doing to better serve the working middle-class base of the party, and I kind of got to the point where I thought, instead of complaining about why other politicians weren’t doing things the way that they should, I should throw my hat in the ring and actually offer up some ideas to the voters of Ohio. I have ideas about how I think the problems of the country should be solved, and nobody else is really making

those arguments.

***JI:*** You considered challenging Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-OH) in 2018 but ultimately didn’t go for it. What changed between then and now?

**Vance:** It was not great personal timing. We had just had a baby, my wife had just started a tough job. We were sort of in the middle of moving from Columbus to Cincinnati. Just a lot of crazy stuff happening personally where it just wasn’t a great time. When you do this, you have to do it the right way, and to do it the right way you really have to have your family in the right place.

***JI:*** You’re a first-time candidate. It’s early in the race, but how do you feel about your prospects so far?

**Vance:** I feel like we’ve got a lot of momentum. Certainly a lot of folks seem excited. We’re raising a lot of money. We’re getting a lot of volunteers. We’re getting a lot of media, and I think the polling is moving in our direction. All good signs, but it’s very early, and I try to keep some perspective on the fact that this is definitely a marathon, not a sprint. It’s one thing to have a good six or seven weeks; it’s another thing to have a good whole year, which is what we really need to do.

***JI:*** How does it feel to be going back into the communities you wrote about in your book, now as a Senate candidate?

**Vance:** I really like campaigning. I like getting out there and talking to people, especially this time of year. It’s just a really fun and beautiful state, and you get to see different parts of it and talk to different people, and I’ve always liked that. It’s interesting because my family is still all mostly in Middletown, so I still have a pretty deep connection to Middletown. But it is very interesting to get to other parts of the state where you wouldn’t visit normally or as often. You see a lot of similarities to the town I grew up in and some differences, too.

***JI:*** What do you think differentiates you from the other leading candidates in the

*race, like Josh Mandel and Jane Timken and perhaps Bernie Moreno?*

**Vance:** First of all, I think I'm willing to say things and can go to areas that other candidates aren't willing to go to. Your other candidates talk a lot about tax rates and regulation and the immigration crisis at the Southern border. I don't know how many of them are going to talk about the fact that we need to change our legal immigration system. You hear a lot of folks talk about the problems of Big Tech. I don't think you hear most people say we should actually be breaking these companies up and making their entire business model, which is based on data theft, illegal. I think there's just a fundamental difference in what I'm willing to say and how I'm thinking about solving the problems that we face.

The second big difference is that I sort of recognize that the biggest challenges and the biggest problems that we have aren't just a problem of the Biden administration or a problem of bad government policy — they're also increasingly a problem of America's biggest multinational corporations actively aligning themselves with the left against conservatives. If you're not willing to solve that problem as a conservative, I think you're not actually serious about the challenges that we're facing in this country.

**JJ:** *One of your biggest financial backers is Peter Thiel, the co-founder of PayPal and an early investor in Facebook. Is there any tension between the two of you over your views on Big Tech?*

**Vance:** Certainly no tension between the two of us on that issue. We agree on many things and we disagree on things, too, but on the tech issue in particular, I think Peter has been pretty far out there the last few years making some of the same arguments I've made, which is, basically, these companies are way too powerful, and they're, I think, a very real threat not just for our democracy but for our prosperity.

**JJ:** *Are you engaged in any outreach to Jewish voters or pro-Israel advocates in the state?*

**Vance:** I've definitely talked to a number

of folks in the Jewish community and will continue to do so. I've definitely had a lot of conversations with both local and national Jewish organizations. I think we met with AIPAC a month or so ago. I've tried to be engaged. My view here is that, to win a state like Ohio, I have to be a candidate not just winning any one geography or any one group, but I have to try to appeal to everybody. Obviously, you're going to be more successful with some groups than others. But I think the Jewish community is an important part of our coalition on the right. I hope it becomes a more important part of our coalition because I think that, frankly, the left has gone pretty crazy on a lot of issues that Jews care about. I see this as a real opportunity for my campaign, but also for the Republican Party more broadly in the state.

**JJ:** *Can you elaborate on that?*

**Vance:** In my experience, Jews, whatever their political affiliation, are pretty patriotic. They care a lot about living in a country that's prosperous and free, and they don't see Western civilization, which obviously has deep roots in the State of Israel and in the Jewish tradition, as something that's evil and needs to be rejected but as something that needs to be built upon. When the left talks about Israel as sort of an evil colonizer apartheid state, I think that's a pretty radical departure from how politicians have talked about the State of Israel. Even in the last decade, it's changed pretty dramatically, and I think most Jews probably recognize what I've seen.

**JJ:** *Have you been to Israel?*

**Vance:** I never have. You could probably imagine, given my background, I didn't do a whole lot of international traveling growing up. I recently had a trip planned where I was hoping to go to Israel. We were actually talking about going in the summer of last year, and you can probably anticipate how that went. But no, never been. I've always wanted to go. I'm a devout Christian, so it's a pretty important place for me personally.

**JJ:** *You converted to Catholicism in 2019. How does your faith influence your political*

*views?*

**Vance:** A brief personal background: I grew up in kind of a non-denominational Christianity. Like a lot of kids, I went off to college, lost my faith, didn't really care that much about it. And then, as I got older and realized that Christianity was asking and answering very important questions about life and character and virtue, [and I] got more serious about it. When I got more serious about it, I started thinking about where I should actually call home. What tradition within Christianity should I belong to? I always just really liked the liturgy, the old rites, the tradition of the Catholic Church. Importantly, talking about policy views, I'm a very pro-life person. It was always very meaningful to me that Catholics were always very firm on the life question. So, on a lot of these moral questions, I just saw that particular part of Christianity as a really good home for me and for my family, and that's where we are.

**JJ:** *Has your conversion at all strengthened your connection with Israel?*

**Vance:** It has. One of the things that people have observed about Catholicism — I'm hardly the first — but I think once you get there, you realize that because the rites and the liturgy of Catholicism are so old, there are all these interesting ways in which I think it's a more self-consciously Jewish faith culturally than maybe some of the newer denominations are. Once you're on the inside, if you've ever been to a Jewish religious service, if you've ever sort of heard certain songs or hymns — I'm not sure what the right vocabulary is — but if you've ever heard those within both the Jewish and Catholic context, you realize there are certain similarities. And of course, a lot of the early church fathers that Catholicism calls its own were obviously Jewish men. So there is this kind of historical continuity between Judaism and Catholicism that I always found pretty interesting and that I've noticed a lot as I've actually spent some time within the faith.

**JJ:** *Do you have a favorite part of the Old Testament?*

**Vance:** I've always loved the Book of Genesis. Even though I've read it many, many times, I realize that I miss things, and I learn something new every time I read it. I've always been a big fan of Psalms, obviously very important to both Jews and Christians. And I kind of like some of the weirder stuff too, like the Book of Daniel is like the Old Testament version of Revelation. I find a lot of that stuff pretty fascinating. I don't know what it always means sometimes. But those are, I guess, the three that jump to mind if you forced me to to answer.

**JL:** *You're a fan of the French intellectual René Girard, who influenced your views of Catholicism. Are there any Jewish thinkers you admire?*

**Vance:** It's interesting. I'm trying to think of people from the Jewish faith who have been influential. There's a guy by the name of Yoram Hazony. He's sort of a conservative Jew who's written about what Judaism means for national politics, and not national politics meaning specifically this nation — he lives in Israel — but just what it means to be a sort of nationalist and a patriot in the context of the Hebrew and Christian traditions. So Yoram's been quite influential to me. There are actually a couple of relatively influential Catholic writers who are converts from Judaism. But the easy answer is Yoram, just because his book has influenced how I think about politics quite a bit.

**JL:** *There's been an uptick in antisemitic incidents over the past few years, most recently following the recent conflict between Israel and Hamas. Do you have a plan to address this as a senator, whether it's simply through the bully pulpit or more directly through legislation?*

**Vance:** The bully pulpit is important, but I think you have to prosecute people when they commit heinous acts of violence against people because they're Jewish. And one of the things we've seen, unfortunately, in a lot of Western European countries, is a real substantial increase in antisemitic violence, not just in the last couple of years but in the last couple of decades. There's this weird way where this problem can become endemic if you don't cut it out, and I think

that that has to be our focus in the United States. We do not want to be like France, or like Belgium, or like certain countries in Western Europe where Jews are legitimately afraid to walk down the street. And I know there's been an uptick in violence here, but I think what we do over the next three, four, five years is going to determine whether this becomes a long-term problem or just a blip on the radar, and God-willing, it'll just be a blip on the radar.

**JL:** *You've criticized social media companies and their efforts to de-platform bigots who use their services. Recently, your tweet about Nick Fuentes caused something of a stir. You denounced Twitter's decision to ban Fuentes last month while also describing him as a "giant troll" who had leveled "dishonest" attacks against you. But many observers felt that your characterization of a known Holocaust denier didn't go far enough. How did you view that criticism?*

**Vance:** I don't pay attention to the criticisms of my tweets too much, because if I did then I probably wouldn't get anything else done. But I think the point there is pretty straightforward, which is that, unless a person is advocating violence against somebody, unless a person basically is speaking in a way that violates the First Amendment, we should not let private companies control what people are allowed to say and how they're allowed to say it. I mean, the most important right in our democracy is the right to speak your mind, to opine on the questions of public policy. What really worried me about that episode is that it sort of revealed how — again, this is not the only example, but it's yet another example, and I think President Trump is the most high-profile one — where if we allow multinational corporations to control what people are allowed to say, they're eventually going to come after speech that you like. And that, to me, is an unacceptable way to actually run a country.

**JL:** *What did you make of the Trump administration's foreign policy approach in the Middle East, and would you hope to expand on it if you're elected?*

**Vance:** I think Trump was very

successful in the Middle East, and hilariously, was met with extraordinary hair-on-fire rhetoric when he actually did move the [U.S.] embassy to Jerusalem. A lot of his policy initiatives were dismissed as immature or poorly thought out or whatever the case may be. But if you actually looked at the sum total of the legacy, I think it was very positive for the region and certainly positive for the State of Israel. My basic foreign policy is that Americans have to be a little bit more humble about what we can accomplish in the Middle East, and importantly, what we can accomplish in the world. I think we're learning in Afghanistan, for example, that our efforts to build a Western-style nation out of a very different culture and linguistic tradition didn't actually work that well. It caused a lot of spent American life and a lot of spent American money for an outcome that I don't think anybody in America is happy with right now.

I definitely think that one of our takeaways, and one of the reasons why Israel is such an important ally, is that culturally, morally, politically, it is a real ally in the sense that we're not just sort of sharing interests, we're actually sharing common values. Because of that, I think there are things that we can do with Israel that we just can't successfully do with other countries, and we should have a little bit of humility about that fact. I've always thought we should be more willing to help Israel. We should recognize that it's sort of an island of shared values in a sea of really despotic regimes, and that's important.

On a lot of these questions — what do we do with Iran, for example, what do we do with Afghanistan now, what do we do with a lot of the troublesome regimes in the area? — I think the approach that we should take is, well, what's actually going to work? What's going to be the interests of the United States and its allies? Not, like, can we turn some of these countries into American-style democracies with 10 years of war, fighting and roads and bridges? Because the answer is clearly that we can't.

**JL:** *Trump hasn't made an endorsement in this race. You've met with him at least once. Do you have any expectation that he will endorse and, if so, whether you'll receive his support?*

**Vance:** I certainly think I have a chance if he ends up doing an endorsement. But everything I've heard from both the president directly, but also his close advisers, is that he is taking a wait-and-see approach on this race. And I don't know if that'll be true six months from now or nine months from now. We'll see what he does.

**JJ:** *You were pretty critical of Trump when he ran in 2016 and didn't even vote for him, though you have since expressed regret for speaking negatively about the former president. Notwithstanding the mea culpa, has your past criticism been a point of tension in your conversations with Trump?*

**Vance:** I wouldn't say it's a point of tension. He's certainly aware that I criticized him and we talked about it. I think he understands where I was then, where I am now, and why I changed my mind. I think that's true not just for the president but for a lot of voters. It's one of the most poorly kept secrets in this race that I was a critic of Trump in 2016, thanks to my opposition. But I also think that people care about what you actually think about the issues, what you think about the substance, and whether you've got a credible argument for why you changed your mind and why Trump proved you wrong. I think I do. Trump seems to think that, and I think a lot of voters do as well.

**JJ:** *Can you elaborate on your evolution there?*

**Vance:** I think it's a couple of things. In government, I thought Trump did a good job. He advanced the cause on a few issues that I really cared about, specifically our manufacturing relationship with China and just our long-term stagnation of the middle class in this country. I also think that, like a lot of folks who were critical of Trump in 2016, or even those who weren't, we all saw that Trump's presidency revealed something about the insanity of the left and that we should never let these people have power in our country. We should never let them control how the public debate unfolds because they've shown a very clear willingness to censor people, to shut them up, to silence them and to ruin people's lives

if they disagree with them politically. Even though, obviously, I had some negative things to say about Trump in 2016, I think recognizing how insane the left was, I was a very enthusiastic supporter in 2020 because I didn't want these people to have any more power than they already do.

**JJ:** *You were regarded, around the time Trump won, as a sort of whisperer of poor white people and the white working class. In your memoir, you describe, somewhat witheringly, a sort of deeply ingrained fatalism that prevents these communities from accepting responsibility for themselves even as they receive assistance from the government. It seemed to bother you that members of the community you grew up in had seemingly managed to procure cellphones from the welfare system when you were unable to afford one. Would you say your views have since changed, or do you feel like you still have the same outlook on that community?*

**Vance:** Of course, it's not that community, it's my community. It's where I grew up. I think it's important for us to be able to hold two ideas in our head at the same time. One is that the community that I grew up in really has been decimated by globalization, by bad trade deals, by the opioid problem, by a lot of very significant forces that are outside of people's control. At the same time, I think, as an individual ethic, however hard an individual's life is, people have to try anyway, and they can't give into defeatism and they can't give into pessimism. And I think both of those things are true at the same time. We actually have to make sure that people have an opportunity in this country to a better life, we have to reverse and undo the policies that made it hard for people to get ahead, and at the same time, we can't encourage our young people to give into defeatism, even though their lives are hard — maybe especially if their lives are hard. We have to encourage them to try to make something of themselves anyway.

**JJ:** *Do you have any desire to write another book?*

**Vance:** Oh yeah, I'm always writing, and obviously, most of my writing these days is in op-eds or press releases, public remarks,

things like that. But no, I'm sure that I'll eventually publish another book. It'll be on some of the topics that I'm running on and some of the topics that I care about. I care about this stuff, and will always continue to write and think about it, even as a U.S. senator.

**JJ:** *Recently, Insider published an investigation of the work you did, before you ran for Senate and after the publication of your memoir, as the founder of a nonprofit dedicated to fighting the opioid epidemic as well as a venture-capital firm devoted to Midwestern startups. The piece made the case that you'd overstated your achievements in those roles. Do you have a response to that article?*

**Vance:** The response is, look, I don't think that we ever said that we were doing anything that we weren't, which is we were taking some resources, a lot of which were coming from me personally, and we were putting them into a couple of efforts that we thought were worthwhile on the opioid epidemic. And that's what we did. And that's what we've been doing. And I don't think that we've ever been dishonest about what we were doing with the nonprofit. I think one of the weird things about that article — and I have to be honest, I haven't read it; I've heard about it, but I haven't read it — but one of the things about the criticism, I should say, the criticism of the nonprofit is that the guy that we got to run it was diagnosed with stage-four cancer almost immediately after we really set things up. And so, like, I'm not going to pretend that that didn't dampen our plans a little bit and that didn't distract us for a little while. It did. But I also think that even with that distraction, we did some good work and never said we were doing anything that we weren't.

**JJ:** *Is there anyone in the Senate you could imagine yourself working with if you're elected?*

**Vance:** Josh Hawley [R-MO] is, I think, right on a lot of this stuff, and on the Big Tech question has been one of the most important leaders in the country. I think Tom Cotton [R-AR] has been a great leader on the national security stuff that we talked about but also the manufacturing and trade stuff. There are definitely some good folks in



the Senate; I think maybe some more that will come in 2022, that we're going to have an opportunity to hopefully get some good things done with.

**JJ:** *If she were alive today, what do you think your grandmother — your unofficial guardian growing up, whom you credit in your book as*

*your most formative influence — would have made of your Senate bid?*

**Vance:** It's interesting. I've thought about that. I think that she probably would have just encouraged me not to get too big for my britches and not to let all the attention, positive and negative, go to my head, and to

remember that most important is that I'm a husband and a father, and if I could serve my country in the U.S. Senate, that's great. But I've got to make sure that I'm rooted in my family to do a good job at anything, including being senator. ♦

SEPTEMBER 10, 2021

## Michael Eisenberg is applying the lessons of the Torah to technology and business

*The Israeli-American venture capitalist's latest book, released in English last month, explores the ways in which Biblical values can guide modern decision-making*

By Judith Sudilovsky

In the beginning, there was economic theory.

In the story of Abraham, from Genesis, the Hebrew word for property, a stand-in for wealth and how to use it, is mentioned no less than seven times. The story of Noah and the Flood is a lesson in the pitfalls of economic abundance. And the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden — despite having all their needs taken care of — seems to argue against the very modern notion of a universal basic income.

These nuggets of economic and ethical wisdom gleaned from the first book of the Torah form the spine of Israeli-American venture capitalist Michael Eisenberg's *The Tree of Life and Prosperity: 21st Century Business Principles from the Book of Genesis*, which was recently released in English. Eisenberg readily admits that he views most things through an economic lens. But what drives him are the core values and morals he finds in Biblical teachings — what he has come to call “the wisdom of the ancients for the moderns.”

“My wife thinks I look at everything through an economic lens, and I am guilty as charged,” Eisenberg, 50, told *Jewish Insider* at a café in his Jerusalem neighborhood. The New Jersey native has made Israel his home since 1993, raising his eight children in Jerusalem with his wife, Yaffa, a former Torah studies teacher who, after earning a

master's degree in Judaic Studies and having their fourth child, took on the task of being a mother full-time. “Anybody who goes to a text of any kind, but certainly a Biblical text, brings their own baggage with them, their own perspective which is borne of their life... so my lens is my daily life and my daily life is a venture capitalist investor, it is economics, macro and micro, and it is technology. I don't think I read that into the Bible. I think you illuminate areas of the Bible because of your unique perspective.”

In the English version of his book, Eisenberg, co-founder and general partner at Aleph Venture Capital Fund, uses the weekly Torah portions from the Book of Genesis as a base to explore ethical and moral principles for successful business and economics.

“[This] is what makes it a living text, for over thousands of years,” he said.

He believes his economic perspective on the Torah is rare because there are few people in the tech, business and investing worlds with “Biblical fluency” who read the text over many times and are not embarrassed to discuss them.

“People are embarrassed to bring their hearts into their business, but I think that is what makes the world interesting,” said Eisenberg.

Through Aleph VC, an early-stage venture capital fund, Eisenberg focuses on

partnering with Israeli entrepreneurs to build meaningful companies and brands that have an impact in their respective fields.

Eisenberg has been a contributor to *The Marker*, the Hebrew-language daily business paper, and has published in Hebrew the first three books in his planned five-book series discussing the economic model of the Torah and what it can teach modern economies and businesses. *The Tree of Life and Prosperity*, published by Simon and Schuster under the Wicked Son imprint, hit bookshelves on August 24 and is the first of the series to be published in English.

“We live in a time of a lot of uncertainty, and it feels like there is a lot of chaos in the world. I think in times of chaos and storms we need timeless wisdom. The Torah's timeless wisdom has lasted 4,000 years, and I guess it will last another 4,000 years,” he said, noting that in today's terminology, the Torah “has the largest number of unique users in history—more than Google, more than Facebook.”

“That is not an accident,” he added. “It has had more commentary written on it than anything, and that is not an accident either.”

Eisenberg, who has been blogging on “Six Kids and a Full Time Job” since 2006, on topics ranging from politics, technology, Judaism and macroeconomics, said writing the book was not something he

had planned out. The book evolved from weekly discussions on the Torah portion at the Shabbat dinner table, to short notes written out on Google Docs to a Whatsapp group where every week he sent out a “missive” interweaving modern issues with the weekly Biblical portion.

Then one of his readers suggested he write a book. So he did. The Hebrew version came out two years ago.

“What was really interesting was it found a very broad audience—very, very broad. It was almost unpredictable. You had tech CEOs and investors and bankers and religious people and not religious people and ultra-Orthodox and national religious people of all types,” said Eisenberg. “It turns out that the Torah, the Bible, speaks to everyone if you put it in language that makes sense to a modern person.”

At the end of the day, he said, the real intended audience of the book is the younger generation, and more specifically his own children — two of whom work in startups with an intended social impact, one who is studying the Torah, another in the Israeli navy and the younger ones still in school.

But in a wider sense, he hopes the book will reach people who care about the world, about innovation and financial success on a broad scale and care about “timeless values and principles.”

These are principles that should guide a society of abundance, he said.

“We are not the first society to have abundance. The generation of Noah had relative abundance and they destroyed themselves, so there is a cautionary tale there about the challenges of abundance and we can take from this timeless wisdom. I hope people will apply it,” said Eisenberg.

In his view, everyone should care about these timeless values and principles. The “relativist mumbo-jumbo” he sees so much of today “drives me nuts,” he said, referring for example to the recent decision by ice cream giant Ben & Jerry’s to not renew the license selling rights of their product in the West Bank.

“I think Ben & Jerry’s are political relativists. Just the fact that they decided to single out Israel with what is going on in China, Afghanistan, Syria is beyond absurd. It is to scratch a political relativist itch rather than some fundamental principle that is

time-honored,” he said.

As for himself, said Eisenberg, he does not invest in China — a decision based on the Torah-based principles he writes about in his book, though financially it may not be the best decision.

“One of the lessons the Torah has taught me is that if you are not free you don’t own anything. Private property comes into being after the Exodus, and the notion of ‘thou shalt not covet’ you can only have if you own private property. But if you are a slave, you have no freedom, you don’t own private property. So when China strips many of its technology companies of their money, innovation and money cap, it should be obvious it is because you don’t own anything because the Communist Party owns everything,” he said. “Economically I am a loser for [not investing in China]. I probably lost a lot of money doing that, and Ben & Jerry’s scratches a political itch that costs them no money. If they were really true to their principles, they would stop selling ice cream in China, but they’re not.”

Tamara Harel-Cohen, co-founder of the startup Riseup which helps Israeli families manage their cash flow and make informed financial decisions, recently appeared in a symposium with Eisenberg. Every entrepreneur should read the book as an essential guide to making value-driven decisions, which ultimately also create more economic value, she said.

“Michael does an incredible job of making the teachings of the Torah relevant to the daily lives and decisions of entrepreneurs,” she said. “He speaks about many values which I hold very dear, but he gives them a context that was new to me, as a secular entrepreneur. He reinforces that these are age-old Jewish values that are rooted in the Bible and he uses the Torah’s teachings to reinforce how important it is to harness the power of economics for positive change.”

Before they married, Eisenberg recounts that he told his wife that their wedding ceremony was six hours, but after that they would build a life together. And that concept is true of a book launch, which lasts 24 hours, he said.

“After that launch, hopefully you can build a conversation. You write books to get feedback and to start a conversation. So when people get the book in their hands

and we start a conversation that will be gratifying,” said Eisenberg. “None of us lives forever, and we are like a relay racer who hands the baton off to the next generation. We are all on a march to improve our country, our society, our people, which is our family and our nuclear families, for the next generation. That is our job.”

Eisenberg sat down with *Jewish Insider* to discuss some of the Biblical principles and modern economic issues he writes about:

### **Adam and Eve and Universal Basic Income:**

Eisenberg is not surprised that Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN) introduced a universal guaranteed income bill in Congress, but is surprised that entrepreneur Elon Musk would support the idea, he said.

“When I wrote the book there was no pandemic so I had no proof, but since the pandemic started we gave out money to people and we discovered something amazing: They don’t go back to work. It is true in Israel, it’s true in the United States,” he said.

“This notion of universal basic income has been around forever, since the Garden of Eden, and it failed. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden had universal basic income; all their basic needs were taken care of so they didn’t work. They became bored and so they ate from the tree. They did exactly what God said not to do,” said Eisenberg.

In addition, he pointed out, children are only born once Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden. There is also no bread in the Garden of Eden, where there are the raw ingredients but no creativity.

“Without work and productivity there are no children; there is no creative endeavor. And there is no higher creative endeavor than having children,” said Eisenberg. “Maybe some pessimists...think it is a good idea not to have children. I think it is a terrible idea not to have children.”

Children, he said, are the ones who will become the innovators and creators of the future, solving problems rather than creating them.

“The world has been coming to an end from acid rain and climate change and nuclear power and God knows what else for a hundred years, and it hasn’t ended yet.

And some people say they are not having children because the world is a terrible place. To these people I would say: 'You have lost your mind. Have children.' Children will innovate our way out of these problems like they continuously did because young people innovate."

### **Noah and Ethical Frameworks:**

Though Noah is generally associated with his ark and surviving the Flood, those aren't the two most important biographical bits of information in Noah's story, Eisenberg argues.

The two most crucial facts are that he invented the plow, increasing food production, and he invented fermentation to make wine.

But despite Noah's invention, which created abundance, he did not build an ethical framework around his inventions, so society destroyed itself, explained Eisenberg.

"The world became abundant after Noah, because Noah invented the plow and he increased food production. The population expanded, but then humanity destroyed itself not out of scarcity but out of abundance," he said. "That's very clear from the Biblical texts...society becomes wealthy and corrupt, trust is lost...and God decides we need a flood, which means humanity has destroyed itself."

This happened a second time when Noah plants a vineyard after the Flood, said Eisenberg, and makes wine. He becomes drunk after drinking the wine and is abused by his son.

"Noah was a great innovator who didn't put a timeless, ethical, principled framework around his innovation. We need to do that," Eisenberg said. "We need to do that for artificial intelligence, we need to do that for synthetic biology. We have amazing innovations coming; they will move society forward but they need ethical and principled frameworks."

He intends to do exactly that with Israel's first synthetic biology institute he is in the process of setting up, he said. While it will be a scientific endeavor, it will partner with an ethical institute.

"Otherwise, you can go awry. And we want to be a thought leader and a practical

leader in the principle frameworks around these ideas," said Eisenberg.

### **Abraham and Sarah and Wealth**

Abraham, said Eisenberg, arrives in the Land of Israel a wealthy man but does not rest on his laurels. He plants a vineyard and begins to travel and pursue spiritual pursuits, spreading the word that the purpose of wealth is to enrich other members of society.

Abraham also comes with his orphaned nephew, Lot, and takes care of him. Both men return wealthy from Egypt, where they have gone to escape a famine, added Eisenberg.

Indeed, he noted, in the story of Abraham the word "rechush," property, is used seven times — a significant number in the Torah — denoting the importance of this concept of wealth.

"Abraham uses his talents and skills to help Lot enrich himself — that's the society the Torah is after. That successful people — and we want successful people — should use their talents and wealth to spread the blessing to enable other people to become wealthy," he said.

However, Lot, continued Eisenberg, chooses to go his own way and asks to go to Sodom, the richest and most fertile land, but also a place of selfishness, to make his own wealth.

"Sodom destroys itself because of its xenophobia and its pathological hatred and selfishness. Abraham becomes the father of the three great monotheistic faiths and persists, and nobody knows who the hell Lot is," said Eisenberg.

Relating that in modern terms to Israel, Eisenberg said that, as a wealthy country, Israel faces a challenge of how to approach wealth, and he holds that the Torah should be used as a guide book for that conversation.

"I think what my book has done is shown a very broad audience of religious and non-religious people, Jews and non-Jews, that the Torah has what to say whether you actively believe in God or not, or whether you are actively religious in practice or not," he said.

### **The Tower of Babel and One Language:**

Eisenberg sees a modern parallel in

the story of the Tower of Babel, where people decide they will all be the same and build a big tower "making a name for themselves," to today's debates over the idea of deplatforming, or blocking someone holding views regarded as different, offensive or unacceptable from posting on websites or social media such as Facebook.

"The Tower of Babel is an interesting story in that [why] shouldn't we all just be the same? One language, one thing. You hear a lot of that in modern society, particularly among progressives: we are all the same," said Eisenberg. "The answer is we're actually not all the same and real diversity, diverse languages and diverse cultures is what makes humanity interesting."

Today the deplatforming can occur not only on social media but also in financial institutions such as PayPal, he noted.

"With the very powerful platforms like Facebook, Google, PayPal, if they decide you are out of bounds — and we can debate what out of bounds is — you can be deplatformed," he said. "That is like the Tower of Babel. What we need to do in my view is what God did, which is scatter the Tower of Babel [the platforms]...where people own their own language, culture...The modern currency is data, so I can control in a centralized manner if I have your data. But if I give you your data and you own it, you can be different."

That would be the job of a "regulator," said Eisenberg, who in theory gets elected by the people.

"Regulation is a double-edged sword in which sometimes regulators overstep their bounds and they create [a] huge amount of reduction in productivity... but sometimes they have a job to do, which is to reflect the need of people to be different," he said. "Unfortunately God is not coming down to scatter big tech right now, so we need to rely on a far more important power called the government to go do this." ♦

# Noah Arbit wants to bring Jewish values to the Michigan statehouse

*The 25-year-old Democrat from West Bloomfield, a seasoned community organizer, is stressing issues that go beyond Israel*

By Matthew Kassel

Noah Arbit founded the Michigan Democratic Jewish Caucus in 2019 with a goal of increasing Jewish representation in state and local politics.

Now, the 25-year-old community organizer and Michigan native is mounting his own bid for public office. Late last month, Arbit, 25, announced his candidacy in the open-seat race to represent Michigan's 39th state House district, which includes his hometown of West Bloomfield.

"I have spent the past two-and-a-half years mobilizing and empowering the Jewish community to get involved in politics in a way that was unprecedented in Michigan," Arbit said in a recent conversation with *Jewish Insider*. "I think I've set myself up to be successful."

If elected, Arbit would join a long list of Jewish politicians in the state, including former Sen. Carl Levin (D-MI) as well as Reps. Andy Levin (D-MI) and Elissa Slotkin (D-MI).

In the interview, Arbit discussed his path forward in the red-leaning district, how Jewish values inform his campaign and why Yom Kippur is particularly meaningful for him this year as a first-time candidate.

The interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

***Jewish Insider:*** Why are you running now?

**Noah Arbit:** I have lived in Michigan all my life. I've been a staffer for Hillary Clinton's campaign in Michigan. That was my first political job. I worked for [Democratic] Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's campaign in 2018. I was on staff at the legislature for a while. Then I founded the Michigan Democratic Jewish Caucus in 2019. And I currently serve in my

day job as director of communications for the Oakland County prosecutor's office.

In my various roles, I feel like I've helped lead the fight against hatred and extremism in Michigan — whether it has been working for Gov. Whitmer, empowering the Jewish community as chair of the Michigan Jewish Democrats or at the Oakland County prosecutor's office. I've loved all of those jobs, and I could be just as happy continuing to work as a staffer and as chair of the Michigan Jewish Democrats. But I've really watched and seen how political violence, conspiracy theories and hate crimes are rising in Michigan and across the country, and I really felt compelled to do something about it.

We've seen state legislators across the country who have acted in bad faith to undermine democracy. It's crazy that I've had to say it, but I will never vote to overturn the votes of my fellow Michiganders if I'm elected because I believe in democracy. That's such a low bar for an elected official, but unfortunately, so many have failed to clear it, including right here in Michigan. I really believe that good governance has to start with electing better people — people who care about their communities far more than they care about the title. We haven't had that representation in my hometown for a long time. I'm running to remedy that.

***Ji:*** How do you see a pathway to victory, particularly with upcoming redistricting?

**Arbit:** This is the bread and butter for this race because redistricting is really the end-all-be-all for my path to victory. This House district, as it currently stands, is a Republican district. It was the number-one targeted seat by both parties in 2020 and the most expensive race in Michigan.

Democrats lost it narrowly. But the thing is that these lines were drawn in such a way as to ensure that a Democrat couldn't win. My hometown, West Bloomfield Township, is unique because it's one of those traditionally purple, highly educated, upper-middle-class suburban towns that zoomed left in the Trump era and really sort of hit the high watermark in the 2018 election when it powered Democratic victories up and down the ticket.

Importantly, it's home to the greatest proportion of Jews in the entire state of Michigan. It's 25% Jewish, and when you talk about the electorate, it's probably closer to 40%. It's incredibly diverse beyond the Jewish community as well. We have a huge Iraqi Christian Chaldean community and Black community... The Muslim community is very large. There's a very active Asian community. We have the largest community of Japanese Americans in Michigan.

What's interesting is, we talk a lot about racial gerrymandering to dilute the Black vote or to dilute the Latino vote or the Asian vote in certain places. The last redistricting cycle, the GOP legislature was in full control of the process and really drew some crazy lines. They actually deliberately drew the state legislative and congressional districts in such a way as to dilute and gerrymander the Jewish vote. I don't know of any other example in the country where that has happened. They split West Bloomfield in half down the middle and really divided this town in a way that's kind of unlike any other place in Michigan. This is something I've been very vocal about before I even decided to run. I knew that my hometown had been cracked in half. I really think that it has inhibited collective political action in my community and sort of stunted the development of a collective political identity.



**JJ:** *What does that mean for your candidacy?*

**Arbit:** Michigan has a new redistricting process that was passed by ballot initiative in 2018, where we set up an independent citizens' redistricting commission. So we have the opportunity to reverse that punitive, partisan gerrymander that deliberately disempowered the Jewish community. Hopefully we'll have a district that is actually fair and representative of the community I'm from. I think that is the pathway to victory.

I'm excited about the prospect of my community having true representation again, and I hope the voters in the community will think that I'm the best candidate. We should at least find out the draft lines of what the commission is thinking in the next couple of weeks. But it's such an obvious gerrymander. All the redistricting experts are looking at West Bloomfield. Obviously, my run is a little bit of a leap of faith to say that they're going to put it back together. But regardless of my candidacy, I think it would be an egregious dereliction of duty if they do not.

**JJ:** *Do you expect to garner wide support from the Jewish community no matter how the district is redrawn?*

**Arbit:** Yes. I have spent the past two-and-a-half years mobilizing and empowering the Jewish community to get involved in politics in a way that was unprecedented in Michigan and unprecedented in a lot of different states. We raised more money than any other similarly situated state-level Jewish Democratic organization in the country. We're by no means the largest community, but we are involved. When I worked in the legislature, there was no political platform for the Jewish community to get involved with candidates. That's because most of our institutions are nonpartisan, and, of course, that's important. But there was a gap within the party where Jewish voices weren't being represented. I don't know that I'll ever have a job that I'll enjoy as much as doing that. My politics are incredibly informed by my Judaism.

Of course, as a candidate, I'm not just representing the Jewish community. I

believe there are some people in politics whose faith governs everything, and they try to impose their faith on others. Part of what I have tried to do is put a new face on faith in politics, particularly in the Democratic Party. So often, I believe that the way Republicans approach faith is very much as a cudgel against other people. That's unfortunate. But my Jewishness is about the values that my faith, my community, my culture, my heritage teach me.

I wouldn't want to run anywhere else. I'm doing this because this is my community. I've organized in this community for years. I think I've set myself up to be successful, and of course, I take no vote for granted, Jewish community or otherwise. I'm excited about the prospect of giving a voice to the Jewish community in the legislature while, of course, also giving voice to my entire wider community.

**JJ:** *What are the Jewish values that resonate with you?*

**Arbit:** Everyone talks about tikkun olam and repairing the world, and I feel like I'm running to repair my little small corner of the world. The gerrymander has literally ripped my community apart. But I really think about how my great-grandparents came from Hungary and Poland and Belarus and Ukraine. They came escaping antisemitism in the early 1900s. They didn't experience any pogroms, but it was something that I know compelled them to leave. I think about how they ended up in Detroit, which was really like the engine of the world at that time. What a hopeful existence to have to leave the place that you knew because it was no longer safe for you and coming to this roaring, exciting place that was powering the world and doing so much for so many.

We've lost that, and we have to get back to that. I think about the grit and determination of my great-grandparents, who were market vendors and shop owners, and how they worked so hard and probably got spat at and their English wasn't good. Now here I am, a candidate for the state legislature. It really is l'dor v'dor, an unbroken chain of service and of giving back and of building something better for the next generation.

**JJ:** *Have you been on the receiving end of*

*any antisemitic attacks during your time in politics?*

**Arbit:** It's funny because sometimes I don't even think about it. I've received a number of hateful, grotesque emails that are not only targeting me being a Jew but also being gay. Certainly there's been a lot of hate mail coming my way, but also on Twitter. Back when I was working for Hillary, I got comments like, "Oh, you should have gone to the gas chamber with the rest of your people." I think the biggest thing that I am concerned about is not ad hominem attacks. I could talk a blue streak about antisemitism on the far right and far left.

But part of starting the Jewish caucus was always about how I can help my side of the political aisle better understand Jewish issues and have a cultural competency to talk about Jewish issues. I am so sick of politicians getting in front of Jewish audiences and saying, "I support Israel," or "I don't support [the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement targeting Israel]," and suddenly that's enough for you to get the Jewish vote. That doesn't cut it anymore. Not now, not for me, and certainly not for a lot of people in my generation. It's not that we don't care about Israel. But that is a very puerile way of trying to connect with Jewish voters. I have really been trying to push the envelope in trying to ensure, when we're talking about these issues, that especially people on the left don't get caught up in an antisemitic tropes and that Jews are just as worthy of protection and solidarity as all the other groups of people that the left cares about protecting. I care deeply about that.

One of the tangible reasons I'm running is to rewrite Michigan's hate crimes law, which is woefully inadequate and just so antiquated and not fit for what we've seen over the past four-plus years of rising hate crimes. We have an insufficient reporting infrastructure. In working in the prosecutor's office, I've seen the tensions in that law. It's just not on the level. The penalties are so low and the prosecutorial resources to prove a crime of bias are so hard that it's almost not worth it. We need to make it more efficient and effective as a deterrent.

**JJ:** *You mentioned Israel and BDS. What can you do in the statehouse to effect policies*

*with regard to those issues?*

**Arbit:** There's already a law in Michigan regarding BDS, so that's not really a live issue. I'm really tired of people believing that Israel is the sole focus of Jews and politics and it's the only issue that we care about. So the locus of my organizing work has always been about antisemitism and Jewish representation, not about Israel. It's not because I don't care or my community doesn't care. Of course we do. I certainly am a progressive Zionist; that's how I see myself. But it is essential that we model to the people who are listening — the politicians and the leaders and the candidates — that the Jewish community cares about so much more than that.

So when I talk about the kind of Jewish legislator that I'm going to be, it's going to be focusing on how I can advocate for funding for a lot of the communal services and organizations that serve not just Jews but the entire community, and how I can be a

leader on combating antisemitism and hate crimes and extremism. I believe that Jews know when democracy falters, minority groups are among the first to be threatened. All of this is part and parcel with my identity as a Jew, and certainly also my identity in the LGBT community.

We're lucky in Michigan, because we have quite a number of Jewish elected officials, including our attorney general, Dana Nessel, who is also another gay Jew, and state Sen. Jeremy Moss, another gay Jew. So I'm very excited by the prospect of joining this caucus of three in Lansing. It's amusing to me. But I think there's something to be said about the values that are sort of inculcated in you in such a strong community as we find in Michigan and the metro Detroit area. That's something I really care about and am interested in giving voice to.

**JJ:** *We're talking on the eve of Yom Kippur. Is the holiday particularly meaningful for you this year as you mount your first bid for public*

*office?*

**Arbit:** I enjoy the High Holy Days immensely, and I was incredibly saddened last year to not be able to participate in the way that I usually do. Life is so complicated and moves so fast, and we hardly ever have time to reflect and consider and make amends and resolve to be better people. That's something that I value so much about our tradition. It's not confessional. We're not about browbeating people for their sins. It's about taking ownership for yourself and resolving to do better next year.

Of course, there are mistakes that I've made and people that I've hurt and things that I've done that I'm not proud of. It is very surreal to me to be a candidate. Truthfully, it's not something I ever dreamed about. To feel like I'm in this place after a long time of some hard things happening and going through some stuff, you get this opportunity with our tradition to look back and say, here's how far I've come. ♦