

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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OCTOBER 6, 2021

The latest challenge for SpaceIL co-founder — virtual biopsies

Yonatan Winetraub will use the million-dollar award to bring new technology to cancer imaging

By Tamara Zieve

Two years ago Yonatan Winetraub watched with anticipation as the Israeli spacecraft Beresheet, launched by the Israeli organization SpaceIL, which he co-founded, crash-landed on the moon. A second mission is in the works, but today the ambitious 34-year-old Israeli engineer has his sights set on a new — and entirely different — challenge, having just been named a winner of the \$1.25 million U.S. National Institutes of Health Director's Early Independence Award.

The award offers an on-ramp for talented junior investigators to be able to carry out independent research by allowing them to bypass the traditional post-doctoral training program and helping them start their own labs.

Winetraub, who recently received his Ph.D. in biophysics from the Stanford University School of Medicine, will put the \$250,000 per year that he has been awarded for the next five years toward developing technology that will enable doctors to "read" skin tumors without the need for physical biopsies, but rather with a virtual one.

Winetraub explained that today, a biopsy

is needed to ascertain whether a person has skin cancer. "It's invasive and you can't do it everywhere — especially in elderly patients where sometimes they get a lot of spots that are suspicious," he told *Jewish Insider* on Tuesday.

His research focuses on utilizing Optical Coherence Tomography (OCT) and machine learning to create virtual histology tools to non-invasively image cancer at a single-cell resolution.

"It's a combination of an imaging device and machine learning and the device outposts what we call a virtual histology," Winetraub said. "It basically outputs what the doctor is looking for, it sees into the skin and the doctor can interpret the images and tell you whether they think the patient has cancer or not — that is the goal of this research."

Winetraub hopes that the same device can eventually also be used for brain tumors. "It's the same issue there. You don't want to take everything out, you just want to take the tumor out — so doing this virtual biopsy to get those images that the doctors need in order to determine if there is cancer or not is really important."

"The gold standard for detecting most solid cancers and confirming tumor margins is hematoxylin and eosin (H&E) stained tissue sections, which require an invasive biopsy procedure," his research abstract states. "Unfortunately, current non-invasive in-vivo imaging modalities do not produce images of comparable usefulness."

"This is particularly important for brain tumors, the most common type of solid tumor in children and the leading cause of pediatric cancer mortality," it adds.

Winetraub, who has spent years working in the field of imaging — including studying neuroscience imaging while working toward his master's degree — was struck by the fact that despite the rich information provided by pictures, there was little clinical adaptation of them. He believes that his device can help bridge that gap by serving as a type of "Google translate" for cancer images by converting the images into something the doctors already know how to read.

"The images are in a language that they don't understand and they need to learn it. My device is an imaging device so we want to translate the image to something that is

familiar to them,” Winetraub said.

“It’s at a very early stage and I am

interested to see if we can get it into the hands of clinicians,” he added; he hopes the

NIH award will enable him to do that. ♦

OCTOBER 6, 2021

Reckoning with Judah Benjamin, the Jewish slave-holder and Confederate mastermind

James Traub’s biography brings renewed scrutiny to ‘the most politically powerful, and arguably the most important, American Jew of the 19th century’

By Matthew Kassel

The *Jewish Lives* biographies published in an ongoing series by Yale University Press have typically functioned as succinct celebrations of Jewish achievement, covering a broad range of figures including Franz Kafka, Albert Einstein, Barbra Streisand, Steven Spielberg and Theodor Herzl.

But the latest book, released this week, grapples with a much knottier subject: Judah Benjamin, the eminent Southern lawyer and Louisiana senator who, during the Civil War, went on to serve as attorney general, secretary of war and, ultimately, secretary of state of the Confederacy.

“Judah Benjamin was the most politically powerful, and arguably the most important, American Jew of the nineteenth century,” James Traub, the author and journalist, writes in *Judah Benjamin: Counselor to the Confederacy*. “He was also the most widely hated one, not only in the North but in portions of the South. Benjamin does not deserve our admiration; but like some other figures who have yoked their lives to deplorable causes, he nevertheless deserves our attention.”

Traub, a senior fellow at New York University’s Center on International Cooperation whose previous books include a biography of John Quincy Adams, knew little of Benjamin when he first began the book — and found that was likely his subject’s preference. Benjamin left behind scant documentation of his controversial life, forgoing a diary and discarding written correspondence, perhaps aware that future

historians would view him unfavorably.

Still, Traub had enough material to work with. Born in the West Indies, Benjamin grew up in Charleston and later moved to New Orleans, establishing himself as “the most prominent Jewish member of the bar,” Traub writes, and “by far the largest slave-owning Jew in America” thanks to his sugar plantation, Belle Chasse, where he owned 140 slaves.

Rather than embracing his Judaism, however, Benjamin largely eschewed his faith, despite never converting to Christianity. He married a Catholic woman, ate pork and did not observe the Sabbath.

“I think that Judah Benjamin wanted to efface his Jewishness as much as he could,” Traub said in a recent interview with *Jewish Insider*. “He wanted to be as not Jewish as he could. He wanted to succeed as much as he could, not among Jews but among Americans, among the people of New Orleans, among the people of the South. He did not want to be judged by Jewish standards. He didn’t want to seek solace in the Jewish world.”

“For him,” Traub added, “success meant success in a slave culture.”

Benjamin, a staunch defender of slavery, took that proposition to its extreme when the South seceded, going on to become an “indispensable counselor,” as Traub puts it, to Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy.

After the war, Benjamin escaped to England, enduring a shipwreck on the way, and built a new life as a successful British barrister. “In a universe ordered by our moral

imagination, Judah Benjamin’s life would have ended with a terrible reckoning,” Traub writes. “But the universe is not a movie. Benjamin died in 1884 wreathed with honors and probably quite content with the path he had hewn through life.”

In his new book, Traub, who is now at work on a biography of Hubert Humphrey, puts forth a proper reckoning, in spite of Benjamin’s best efforts to avoid close scrutiny. “Ambition makes men do terrible things, and he was an ambitious man,” Traub said. “He had to come to terms with slavery in order to achieve what he wanted to achieve.”

The interview is edited and condensed for clarity.

Jewish Insider: How would you describe your knowledge of Benjamin before you began writing this biography?

James Traub: Here’s what’s happened. Ileen Smith, who is the general editor of the Yale *Jewish Lives* series, as well as being a very celebrated editor at Farrar, Straus, approached me about doing this, I think, because I’d written this biography of John Quincy Adams. If you had asked me then, I would have said, “Oh, Judah, Benjamin, he was that guy in the Confederacy.” That’s probably the sum total of what I knew. So I read the very good biography by Eli Evans written in the ’90s, and I thought there were so many things that were interesting. You know, the drama of assimilation for this poor kid from the South who made it to the

highest echelons of American life, and then this moral drama of a person who, in effect, assimilated to the wrong side. For him, success meant success in a slave culture. I would say those two questions — one cultural and psychological and the other moral — made me think this is a guy worth writing a book about.

JJ: *He left behind very little documentary evidence of his life. He didn't keep a diary and didn't hold onto his letters. How did you make sense of this seemingly opaque man?*

Traub: He kept a war journal, and when I discovered that, I thought, "Oh, this is going to be great!" But it was completely work-related. It had almost nothing human in it at all.

JJ: *What other sources did you consult?*

Traub: Fortunately, there are certain parts of his life of which there were records, despite his own efforts. For example, his correspondence during the Civil War is completely available. Then there was business correspondence, of which there wasn't a whole lot. Some of his correspondence with his sisters was available. What you wind up doing is just desperately gleaning everything that you can find. Then, part of the way I write biographies is I choose people who, I feel, stand for or embody things that I think are important and interesting. I'm somebody who probably stands at a greater distance from his subject than some other biographers do. I'm in the middle of writing a biography about Hubert Humphrey, and that is very much true. In the case of Benjamin, I already knew a fair amount about the slavery debates of the 1850s. When you think about him as a slave-holder, I wanted to learn everything I could learn about what it meant to own a sugar plantation. When you read about that, it really makes you sick.

JJ: *Did you speak with Benjamin's living descendants for the book, if there are any?*

Traub: He doesn't have any. He only had one child. I don't think the daughter had any children. There was never a grandchild that he dangled on his lap.

JJ: *Benjamin, by your account, was extremely reluctant to embrace his faith. He wasn't religious. He ate pork. He married a Catholic woman. What accounts for that? Was it a form of self-preservation, or do you think he was simply uninterested in Judaism?*

Traub: He lived in a world of very assimilated Jews. His mother kept the shop open on the Sabbath. His father, I think, probably was much more immersed in religious texts than Judah ever was. He was part of this very early Reform movement in Charleston in the 1820s. But when Benjamin moved to New Orleans, most of the Jews had married Christians. But it's important to note that these were not Russian or Polish Jews who had come from a very pious background. They weren't. Many of them were English. They'd come through the Caribbean. So the level of religiosity was lower than we imagine.

But second, yes, I think that Judah Benjamin wanted to efface his Jewishness as much as he could. He wanted to be as not Jewish as he could. He wanted to succeed as much as he could, not among Jews but among Americans, among the people of New Orleans, among the people of the South. He did not want to be judged by Jewish standards. He didn't want to seek solace in the Jewish world. Perhaps it was a repudiation of his parents. He wanted to go far. He didn't want to be stuck in what he saw as that little world that he'd grown up in. So I think there's also active repudiation.

JJ: *And yet he never converted to Christianity. Karl Marx, Benjamin Disraeli and Heinrich Heine were baptized. Heine described baptism as "the admission ticket to European civilization." Why don't you think Benjamin ever went that far despite all but disavowing his faith?*

Traub: Like everything about the guy, it's a mystery. Possibly he thought, "It's pointless. My name is Judah Benjamin, I have thick, curly, black hair and black eyes and what people always describe as an olive or swarthy complexion." The guy just looked completely Jewish. He may have thought, "I'm never gonna get away with it, anyway." But it's intriguing to speculate that there was some compunction in him. That

while he would not honor his faith, neither would he explicitly repudiate it. But we don't know. We just don't know.

JJ: *You present him as a true believer, but he did write a rather elegant repudiation of slavery during his time as a lawyer. Even if he was not speaking from the heart, his brief, as you write, "became a new cause célèbre for abolitionists." How do you think he squared that, given that he owned slaves?*

Traub: I try to tease this out. So, as you mention, in that case, he delivered this passionate address, which I think clearly draws on *The Merchant of Venice*, though he doesn't say so. It's hard to imagine that a person who would go to such lengths, even though we understand that he was an advocate, held the exact opposite belief — that in fact he viewed slaves as other Southerners did: sub-human. I tend to think that he was too intellectually sophisticated a person, especially having spent his life in New Orleans — where people of color did every single thing that white people did and there was this infinite gradation of people from 100% white to 100% Black, each with their own specified name — that such a person could have held the simplified Southern view of Blacks as occupying the position, virtually, of livestock. I doubt that.

But to say that is only to say that he may not have shared in the most viciously dehumanizing view, but it's not to say that he entertained any active doubts about slavery. Because if he entertained active doubts about slavery, he couldn't have lived the life he wanted to live.

I just think ambition makes men do terrible things, and he was an ambitious man. He had to come to terms with slavery in order to achieve what he wanted to achieve. He could not have been a public figure. And so he was not going to let himself believe the thing which would have prevented him from living the life he wanted to live. Whatever complex thoughts he may have had about the nature of Black people did not prevent him from becoming a full-throated advocate for the South and for slavery when he came to the Senate and became a very important figure in those debates in the second half of the 1850s.

JJ: *Were there any details about Benjamin's life that surprised you or that you found particularly revealing?*

Traub: The previous biographies have been extremely coy about his sexuality, and so I didn't really have any clue, when I started reading about him, not only that there were rumors but they may have been true. The rumors were spoken of in the biographies as if they were calumnies and nothing more. The fact is, when you think about the guy's life — I don't think it's just our own modern reading, I think it's the reality — that it's perfectly possible that he was gay, and therefore, that this rebarbative quality he had of hiding everything was not merely because as a Jew in a Christian world he had to simply live in a self-protective way; he may have had something to protect that he thought was much more dangerous if discovered.

The more you think about his life — he doesn't have a child for the first 10 years of marriage. He has a child finally, and his wife deserts him. He continues to support them. He lives in New Orleans, where every man has a mistress, and he, who's been abandoned by his wife, did not take a mistress ever. He has a very odd relationship to his wife's much younger brother Jules, whom he utterly doted on, saving bits of food from fine meals to give to him. It doesn't mean I think that he had a homosexual relationship with Jules, but it certainly does feel like if this guy is trying to either repress or not express his homosexual leanings in

a way that would get him in trouble, Jules may have been one of the chief recipients.

JJ: *You mention in the book that Benjamin was offered a spot on the Supreme Court but turned it down — which brings to mind a counterfactual scenario in which Benjamin is perhaps remembered as the first Jewish Supreme Court justice well before Louis Brandeis was appointed to the court. Do you think there's any way Benjamin's life could have gone another way had he become a Supreme Court justice?*

Traub: If he had been, he would have been one of the notorious people who decided the Dred Scott case. So we would have known him as a different kind of villain. But I wouldn't have written the book about him. He wouldn't have been an interesting figure. He just would have been a kind of successful Southern lawyer who went on to make terrible decisions on the Supreme Court. But it's not his nature. I happen to have written two biographies of people who were asked to go on the Supreme Court. The other was John Quincy Adams, and Adams recognized that he didn't have a judicial temperament. He did not want to have to make these fine distinctions and make himself a neutral arbiter. He was a vehement advocate.

Now, I think, in the case of Benjamin, he was much more of a temperamental, neutral arbiter, but he also was a worldly person. He wanted to make money. He wanted to have a big life, and going on the Supreme Court

would have put an end to that. It would have been the most dignified version of the life he ever could have imagined, but I think, to him, it would have felt like a coffin he had entered.

JJ: *Did you feel any sympathy for Benjamin while you were writing the book?*

Traub: I know people who have written biographies of really just horrible people, and it's hard to understand how you can do that. I mean, Judah Benjamin stood for a set of principles that are despicable. But that's not exactly the same thing as saying he individually is despicable. That's a more complicated thing. There were many aspects of him that I admired and wish I could have known more about, and when I think about his retreat from Richmond [the capital of the Confederacy], and how everybody was flipping out, and this fellow was reciting Tennyson in order to keep his colleagues calm, and he never seemed to lose his cool, and when he had to escape all by himself in a hostile world, he was so resourceful. When he spent days and days on the open sea with the sun burning down on him, he was later able to write to a friend that "I never had a moment of indisposition."

There's something astonishing about that. This is grace under pressure. This is what Hemingway meant by that. This is a resourceful man. That's why I compare him to Ulysses. That's why I say he didn't have Judeo-Christian virtues. But he had classical virtues. ♦

OCTOBER 5, 2021

The battle for Jewish Agency head heats up

Race for bridge-builder between Israel and Diaspora is 'Jewish politics of the highest order.' JJ gets the candidates on the record

By Ruth Marks Eglash

October could be a fateful month for the organized Jewish community as the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI), the quasi-governmental organization with a budget of nearly \$400 million that

makes funding decisions on some of the thorniest issues in Jewish life, is slated to select its next executive chairperson. The politically charged race for the sensitive post of bridge-builder between Judaism's often warring religious and

political factions is already heating up.

The previous head, Isaac Herzog, stepped down last July to become Israel's 11th president, and the battle for his replacement is fierce, with a crowded and competitive field of nine candidates

currently in the running. Jewish Insider spoke to each candidate about their vision and why they want to head the 91-year-old agency (see their comments below).

“The head of the Jewish Agency for Israel is basically the prime minister of the Jewish world,” Michael Jankelowitz, a commentator on world Jewish affairs and JAFI’s former international media spokesman, told JI. “It is the most prestigious position after being president or prime minister of the State of Israel.”

It might also be just as much of a political battle.

Deciding who will lead the agency, which was founded in 1929 with the aim of assisting and encouraging Jews worldwide to help develop and settle Israel, and take on the biggest challenges facing world Jewry today, is a 10-member selection committee representing the three factions that make up JAFI – the World Zionist Organization (WZO), the Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA) and Keren Heyesod.

Headed by Yaakov Hagoel, chairman of the World Zionist Organization and the acting chairman of the Jewish Agency, the committee also includes Harvey Blitz, chairman of the World Mizrahi Movement; WZO’s Racheli Baratz Rix; Helena Glazer, chair of the Zionist General Council and past chair of World WIZO; and Rabbi Meir Azari, executive director of Beit Daniel, a congregation in Tel Aviv affiliated with the Israel Movement of Progressive Judaism (IMPJ); as well as JFNA’s Michael Siegel, Mark Wilf, Jeffrey Schoenfeld; and Steven Lowy and David Koschitzky from Keren Hayesod.

To claim victory, the winning candidate must have the backing of nine out of 10 committee members, who will then make a recommendation to the Jewish Agency’s Board of Trustees at the end of this month when the board is scheduled to hold its annual meeting. If there is no consensus among committee members, the process will roll over into next year. The committee is expected to hold meetings with each contender in the coming weeks.

In the past, the individual backed by the Israeli prime minister stood the best chance of winning the committee’s support, but that changed during the last selection, when Herzog was favored over then-Prime

Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s pick, former government minister Yuval Steinitz.

“This is Jewish politics of the highest order,” observed Jankelowitz. “The Jewish Agency has changed a lot since its inception. It is no longer just about aliyah, but about recognition and acceptance of all the streams of Judaism, as well as unity of the Jewish people in every corner of the globe.”

The post is also about being an effective fundraiser and manager of an often bureaucratic and bloated organization as it addresses the most potent challenges facing world Jewry. Whoever becomes the chairperson will be responsible for a core budget of some \$365 million, including vast assets in Israel and abroad, as well as additional sums from the Israeli government for various targeted projects run jointly.

Backed by Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, Israeli Minister of Intelligence Maj. Gen. (res) Elazar Stern is said to have the best chance of garnering the nine-vote quota, though reports have emerged of some resistance from certain members of the committee, most notably Hagoel. The acting chairman hails from the opposition Likud party and is said to be loyal to another candidate: Israel’s former U.N. Ambassador Danny Danon, who is now chairman of World Likud.

Also considered a top candidate, according to analysts closely watching the race, is Jerusalem’s Deputy Mayor Fleur Hassan Nahum, who has worked hard to boost the city’s image and is known as an effective fundraiser. Former Minister of Diaspora Affairs Omer Yankelevitch, also vying for the position, has the backing of Blue and White party head and Defense Minister Benny Gantz. Former Knesset member and Israel National Security Advisor Maj. Gen. (res) Uzi Dayan, who flew to the U.S. last week to campaign, is supported by Netanyahu.

Non-political candidates include Irina Nevzlin, chair of the board of directors of ANU – The Museum of the Jewish People, formerly known as Beit Hatfutsot; Israel’s former ambassador to the United States Michael Oren; Michal Cotler-Wunsh, another former Blue and White Knesset member; and Bar-Ilan University law professor Yaffa Zilbershats, chairwoman of the Planning and Budgeting Committee of the Council for

Higher Education.

In interviews, several candidates stressed the necessity of reaching out to “the next generation,” amid increasingly fraying ties between Israel and the Diaspora community, and especially among younger Jews.

What follows are the candidates, in their own words, discussing their visions for the Jewish world’s top post. (The list is in alphabetical order.)

Michal Cotler-Wunsh

“The Jewish Agency is the singular most important platform connecting Jews in Israel and throughout the world,” said Cotler-Wunsh, an expert in international law and human rights. “That was what it was founded to be, and remains its mission. Implementing, enhancing and advancing existing plans and programs, it has the ability and responsibility to bridge growing gaps and heal deepening rifts, uniting Jews worldwide.”

“At this tumultuous time, marking nearly a century of leadership, the Jewish Agency’s continued stability is an important asset, enabling it to transcend real or perceived divides — of politics, geography or denomination; to listen to all communities; and to represent their voices in Israel, ensuring the nation-state of the Jewish people, its leaders and general public, recognize and prioritize this relationship.”

Danny Danon

“I am honored that my name is being considered for this position. I got to know the Jewish Agency very well when I was an emissary for JAFI in North America and also in my position as chairman of the Committee on Immigration, Absorption and Diaspora Affairs in the Knesset,” said Danon, who previously served as Israel’s ambassador to the United Nations and as a minister in the Israeli government.

“I believe the agency has a significant role in tackling the challenges facing the Jewish people, mainly in connecting the younger generation to Israel and Jewish life. We care a lot about promoting aliyah; at the same time we have to make sure that we bring the next generation of Jews who,

according to recent polls and reports, are distancing themselves from Israel and their Jewish identity, into the Jewish life.”

Uzi Dayan

“The Jewish Agency is vital for the survival of the Jewish people, and we must work to preserve the Jewish people at this very problematic time. Jewish education should be the main focus [as well as] Jewish identity, which serves as the basis of the unity and cohesion of the Jewish people,” said Dayan, a former chairman of Israel’s National Lottery and founder and chairman of the Sderot Socio-Economic Conference.

“It is important to do this work in Israel, as well as abroad, to bring the different communities around the world together with Israel and to let Israel take a leading role in promoting Jewish cohesion and unity.”

Fleur Hassan Nahoum

“I don’t differentiate between Israel and the Diaspora because we are all one family. Once we start with that premise, any disagreement is easier to solve.”

Hassan Nahoum, who made aliyah from Gibraltar and this year co-founded the UAE-Israel Business Council and the Gulf-Israel Women’s Forum, added: “As a former Diaspora Jew and new immigrant, I have a unique perspective. I understand what Diaspora Jews are looking for and what the challenges are for new immigrants to Israel. I am dedicated to helping improve the experience for both, building bridges and improving communication.”

Irina Nevzlin

Nevzlin, who immigrated as a child from the Former Soviet Union and authored a book on Jewish identity, said: “Being Jewish is a gift. We share the same roots and there is so much that unites us. I am a product of JAFI’s work, and I see this role as an opportunity to make sure that the Jewish people are united, and together, we can look forward to a shared future.”

“The most important work for anyone who becomes the chair of the executive is to engage the younger generation of Jews, to

make sure they feel proud of being Jewish and to make sure they are connected to Israel. I know from my projects in the museum that this is possible to do.”

Michael Oren

“The Jewish people are at a crisis point and we stand to lose a large segment of the Jewish people. There is no other organization that has the scope, staff and means to tackle this crisis,” said Oren, an author, historian and former deputy minister in the Israeli government who made aliyah from the United States.

“It is time to reexamine the ways we reach out to Jews in the diaspora with a Zionist message, particularly young Jews. We also need to reinforce the appreciation for aliyah among Israelis, this is a sensitive point and a huge challenge.”

Elazar Stern

“The Jewish Agency needs to look at the challenges of the Jewish world and needs the synergy to bring them together – this is essential. It is important to think outside the box and to do things that were not thought possible in the past,” said Stern, who headed the IDF’s Manpower Directorate, served as a commander of the IDF Officers Training School, and chief education officer.

“I want people to be proud of their Jewish identity. It is important, in this role, to be a bridge builder between different sectors in Israeli society, and also between Israeli society and the Diaspora,” said Stern, who initiated the army’s Nativ conversion project to assist immigrants from the FSU to convert to Judaism while serving.

Omer Yankelevitch

“The Jewish Agency plays a critical key role in the alliance between the Jewish state and the Jewish people in the Diaspora,” said Yankelevitch, a lawyer by training who lived in the FSU as a child while her parents served there as emissaries for the State of Israel.

“For me, the issue of world Jewry is my mission, and this was reflected in my tenure at the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs and in the initiatives I led there. I was very involved

in the connection between the different populations and communities, in Israel and in the Diaspora, and I think it is very important,” said the former minister, who has been deeply involved in the nonprofit world advocating for marginalized populations, particularly the Haredi sector.

Yaffa Zilbershats

“I think the Jewish Agency has an important role to connect all segments of Jewish people and connect the Jewish people in Israel and to Jews around the world,” said Zilbershats, formerly dean of the Faculty of Law at Bar-Ilan University and deputy president of the university.

“I believe that the Jewish people are one, and the State of Israel is a place not only for the Jewish people that live here but for all Jews,” she said. ♦

Yair Lapid: ‘The most important relation we have is with American Jewry’

The Israeli foreign minister made the comments during a Jewish Federations of North America event

By Tamara Zieve

In his first major meeting with U.S. Jewry since becoming Israel’s foreign minister and alternate prime minister, Yair Lapid slammed comments made by a top representative of the former Israeli government suggesting Israel should prioritize the American evangelical Christian community, stressing that “the most important relation we have is with American Jewry.”

Speaking from Israel, Lapid addressed The Jewish Federations of North America’s Leadership Lab, a component of its annual General Assembly, on Tuesday, in a virtual interview conducted by JFNA Chair Mark Wilf.

In a recording of the interview, obtained exclusively by *Jewish Insider*, Wilf asked Lapid how he thinks Israel and the U.S. Jewish community can move closer together.

“Well, first of all we have to do what we’re doing now, which is reinitiating the kind of dialogue we have within the family — and it is the family,” Lapid responded, noting that he was “a bit shocked” to hear “officials from the former government discussing other

communities within the United States as the main relations of the Israeli government. This cannot happen.”

In May, former Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. Ron Dermer made waves when he described evangelical Christians as the “backbone of Israel’s support in the United States,” and pointed out the far larger size of that community compared to the Jewish one, while also remarking that U.S. Jews are “disproportionately among our critics.”

Questioned over whether the current government intends to act on issues that have caused division between Israel and U.S. Jewry, such as implementing the agreement to expand the egalitarian prayer section at the Western Wall, Lapid said, “Indeed, we have to work on several issues that were neglected for a long time, like the cultural framework, like the conversion bill that we’re working on now...it might take some time in a very complicated coalition.”

“But we are making sure this is happening,” he assured, adding that he was working on such issues on an almost daily basis.

Wilf also raised Lapid’s recent trip to Bahrain, where he opened the new Israeli

embassy, a move that comes in the wake of last year’s agreement to normalize relations between the two countries as part of the Abraham Accords.

“As I was telling my friends in Bahrain, this is moving from a written agreement to real peace, and from handshakes to friendship,” Lapid said, also noting signed agreements with Abraham Accords partners on issues such as water, agriculture and technology.

“And now we of course aspire to spread this, to expand this, to other countries as well. As it was before, I wouldn’t name names because this will harm the process. But of course, we’re working with the United States and with the new friends in the Emirates, in Bahrain and Morocco,” he continued.

Lapid added that “by all means this doesn’t mean we are neglecting forever and ever the Palestinian issue that we have also to work on. Of course, we will always have to keep an open eye both on Gaza and on Hezbollah up north. But this is basically an optimistic process. This is a moment in our history that is the cause of a lot of new great things.” ♦

Young ‘mavericks’ envision new GOP

At a weekend conference in Washington, members of the national Maverick PAC network made the argument that a diverse, business-savvy elite still belongs in the Republican Party. Is anyone listening?

By Gabby Deutch

Last Friday night, in one of the bastions of deep-blue Washington, Democrats felt defeated. Earlier in the day, President Joe Biden had been dispatched to the Capitol to sell Democratic members of Congress on his two spending priorities. But the only bill passed that day was a month-long extension of highway funding.

A mile and a half away from Capitol Hill, at a trendy music venue at the Wharf, a small but exclusive group of young Republicans gathered to mingle with others of their kind. Fried chicken was abundant and the drinks were free. The guests’ preferred political party controlled none of the levers of power in Washington, but everyone was having a good time.

The 150 or so people filling out Pearl Street Warehouse were members of Maverick PAC, a national network of conservative young professionals that join together to make donations to Republican politicians. Some came from Washington or nearby Northern Virginia, while other members flew in from around the country. Texas was well-represented — one speaker’s reference to fossil fuels earned loud cheers from the oil and gas industry employees in the room — as was Florida. (Before he ran for Congress, Gov. Ron DeSantis had been a member of MavPAC.) Dunking on California, which just voted against a recall of Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom, was a common theme.

But more than just a social gathering, the two-day conference served as a test case for the Republican Party in a post-Donald Trump era. Some prominent

speakers, including former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and former National Security Adviser Robert O’Brien, served in the Trump administration, while others, like Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA), are known as moderates.

The former president, widely seen as the current standard-bearer of the Republican Party, was referenced infrequently; Trump supporters were in the room, but so were others who backed Rep. Liz Cheney (R-WY) when she blamed the Jan. 6 insurrection on the former president. One woman recalled hardly leaving her apartment last winter until she got the COVID-19 vaccine, while a young Ohio politician known to be an anti-masker described himself “as conservative as they come.”

Yet everyone seemed to get along, perhaps taking a page out of the Democrats’ anti-Trump playbook: When nearly everyone in your party wants to defeat the current president, bringing together politically disparate factions in opposition is an easier task than uniting those factions around a forward-looking vision for a party.

But while MavPAC members didn’t hesitate to share a few laughs at the expense of the Biden administration, they also tried to present a policy-focused, public service-driven approach to conservative politics separate from the world of election fraud and COVID-19 conspiracy theories that has animated segments of the Republican Party for the past year.

“We just don’t get into the weeds of having that fight,” said Ben Proler, a Houston-based employee at Shell who sits on MavPAC’s national board. “Just because we’re not in line with maybe

what [the] mainstream GOP is talking about doesn’t mean we’re wrong. In fact, I think we’re right. And we’re talking about the issues that matter to our members, who are young and diverse.”

MavPAC launched around the midway point of George W. Bush’s presidency, and its founding lore lives on. “Ted Cruz and a bunch of guys were sitting around in Texas, and they thought about creating the future of the GOP, to create a brighter future for the GOP,” MavPAC national chairman Fritz Brogan recalled in a Friday night speech.

Brogan, the managing director of the restaurant group that owns Washington hotspots including Mission and The Admiral, took a moment to boast about some of the group’s more prominent alumni: Rep. Elise Stefanik (R-NY), the House Republican Conference chair; Rep. Mike Gallagher (R-WI); former Rep. Will Hurd (R-TX); and Sen. Josh Hawley (R-MO). “We have a tremendous history and a great future,” Brogan said of the group, which has between 350 and 500 members.

The network of young professionals, most of whom work in the private sector, is an educated, establishment crowd. At the start of the 2015 Republican primary, most MavPAC members gravitated toward mainstream candidates like Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL) or former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush rather than Trump. (One of MavPAC’s earliest members was George P. Bush, the current Texas land commissioner who was recently spurned by Trump in his race for Texas attorney general.)

“We lost,” Proler acknowledged. But unlike some Never Trump Republicans,

MavPAC members made the decision not to spurn the Trump administration.

“I think we tried to separate the fact that it was Donald Trump and more just like, this is a Republican administration. We are a network of very talented young professionals from around the country,” Proler recalled. “How do we best [fill] government with really, really, really good people who may not have all the political connections to get in the door?”

One of the group’s most visible alumni is Morgan Ortagus, who was a MavPAC national co-chair before becoming the State Department’s top spokesperson in Trump’s final two years. Like many MavPAC members, she opposed Trump’s primary campaign at first.

Ortagus moderated a panel discussion with O’Brien, Rep. Mike Waltz (R-FL) and Adam Boehler, a healthcare entrepreneur who served as CEO of the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation in the Trump administration. More so than the other events over the weekend, this event featured an ample amount of praise of Trump — particularly on his handling of relations with Israel.

“The world is not as safe as it was seven or eight months ago,” said O’Brien, who noted that the three largest threats he dealt with as national security adviser were China, Russia and Iran. He praised the Abraham Accords as a singular piece of good news in a challenging foreign policy landscape.

“The Accords are solid, they’re

enduring, they are supported here. But the real support is coming from the parties in the Abraham Accords. You’ve got the UAE and Israel [who] realize that the U.S. [is] pulling back,” O’Brien argued.

Proler praised “the diversity of our membership — not just geographically, but we have a women’s initiative, an LGBTQ caucus, an African American caucus. So many different elements of our PAC are really showcasing the diverse group of youngish Republicans.”

The conference’s first night also featured a panel about criminal justice reform, a conservative priority that MavPAC has supported for years; a conversation with Miami Mayor Francis Suarez (who deflected a question about whether he has plans to run for higher office) and Sacramento Kings owner Alex Bhathal; and a discussion with Fitzpatrick, the Pennsylvania congressman, about campaign strategy.

In response to a question about remaining relevant when more extreme politicians throw out incendiary quotes and headlines to get more clicks, and more small-dollar donations, Fitzpatrick defended his own course of action.

“My politics are very moderate because we’re trying to grow the base of the Republican Party,” he said. “The vast majority of people in this country want pragmatic responsibility. They don’t want this red meat-throwing saber-rattling and incendiary talk. They want leaders,” Fitzpatrick said,

explaining that a goal of leaders should be to “lower the temperature.”

The most praise for the former president came Saturday night in a keynote speech by Pompeo. “He taught me an awful lot,” Pompeo said of Trump. Riddled with folksy sayings about the value of integrity and hard work, Pompeo’s speech was more a paean to public service than a kiss-the-ring ode to his former boss.

“There is no job too small to work your tail off,” Pompeo said when asked what advice he would give to current service members who would one day like to serve as secretary of state. “Find some joy in what you do.”

Pompeo did not avoid conservative culture war issues — he compared The New York Times’s 1619 Project to Vladimir Putin as examples of entities that seek to “undermine the central things that we know to be true” — but he also did not dwell on the 2020 election or otherwise ingratiate himself to his party’s most extreme elements. And while he spoke of the left’s attempts to “infiltrate” American institutions, he told attendees that when fighting the left, “Do it with a smile.”

“My wife reminded me that when you talk about things in national security, you can sell a lot of Xanax. It can be pretty depressing. I’m not depressed at all,” said Pompeo. “If you’re gonna bet your money today, you should always place it on the United States.” ♦

OCTOBER 4, 2021

‘My life is not in threat anymore,’ Afghanistan’s last Jew says after leaving country

Zebulon Simentov is hopeful that he will settle in New York, after leaving Afghanistan last month

By Matthew Kassel

Zebulon Simentov, until recently the last Jewish resident of Afghanistan, has been living

in migratory limbo since he fled the Taliban early last month, finding temporary refuge in an undisclosed

neighboring country as he awaits further instruction from his handlers.

Despite some uncertainty about

his future, Simentov — who escaped with nearly 30 of his neighbors, mostly women and children, on a perilous five-day bus route through several Taliban checkpoints — is in many ways more fortunate than the thousands of Afghans now desperately scrambling to evacuate following the recently completed U.S. troop withdrawal that left the country under Taliban rule for the first time since 2001.

Simentov, who was beaten and imprisoned by the Taliban when the extremist group last held power from 1996-2001, sounded relatively sanguine in a phone conversation on Friday evening, approximately three weeks after vacating the ramshackle synagogue in Afghanistan's capital city of Kabul that he had called home for decades.

"I'm feeling happy. My life is not in threat anymore," he told *Jewish Insider*, in a deeply guttural and expressive Persian dialect, through an interpreter who is assisting with his evacuation from the region. "I feel a little bit safer than when I was in Afghanistan."

Speaking from a safe house, where he is now in hiding, Simentov said his "final plan" is to settle in New York, a city that has captured his imagination, he told JI, for the past 50 years. "I am really in love with New York," he said. "I'm not sure whether it will take 10 days, 15 days or one month."

A spokesperson for Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) confirmed to JI that his office is working on Simentov's case and has brought it to the State Department's attention.

For the moment, however, it seems more likely that Simentov will, at least at first, end up in Israel, according to Moti Kahana, the American-Israeli businessman who orchestrated the evacuation from his farm in northern New Jersey — one of a number of such missions he has facilitated in Afghanistan since August, when the Taliban took Kabul. "I think the U.S. side of it takes longer than Zebulon would like," said Kahana, who runs a logistics and security company called Global Development Corporation.

The process, he said, could drag on for months as the Department of Homeland Security, the federal agency tasked with resettling Afghan refugees on American shores, works its way through an extensive backlog of evacuees.

"He's eager to leave," Kahana said of Simentov. "He would like to make it to New York tomorrow. But it's not going to happen."

Kahana — who helped arrange the covert rescue of Aleppo's last remaining Jews from war-torn Syria seven years ago — said he had spoken with Simentov on Friday morning and advised him to go to Israel, where Simentov's sister lives. He is currently preparing for Simentov's departure to the Israeli embassy in Dubai, where officials are expecting him.

After his arrival in the United Arab Emirates, likely within the next week or so, Kahana estimates that Simentov will be required to wait for just a few days while his papers are processed, and then make his way to Israel. There, he can apply for an Israeli passport after 90 days.

"I think if he made it to Israel he would probably stay in Israel," said Kahana.

Simentov told *Arab News* last April that he planned to leave Afghanistan for Israel during the High Holy Days. But he refused to leave Kabul when Kahana first arranged for his rescue in late August at the behest of a Hasidic leader in Brooklyn who is dedicated to such humanitarian work. Instead, Simentov asked for money, citing unpaid debts.

His hesitation cleared the way for a separate rescue effort in which Kahana and his associates successfully evacuated members of Afghanistan's national women's soccer team, among others.

Reached by phone on Aug. 17, not long after the Taliban seized control of Kabul, Simentov told JI that he was safe and did not feel as if the Taliban posed a threat to his safety. He expressed reluctance to leave the country until he resolved some financial issues, and at several points asked to be paid in

exchange for an interview.

Notwithstanding any lingering debts, Simentov had long refused to grant his wife a Jewish divorce document known as a *get* — which would likely have placed him in legal jeopardy if he arrived in Israel before doing so.

But Simentov was finally persuaded that fleeing Afghanistan was in his best interest when Kahana invoked the threat of such terrorist groups as ISIS and al-Qaida. Simentov agreed to a divorce via Zoom last month. "There is no whiskey to celebrate that, unfortunately," he told JI.

Simentov left Afghanistan in the early '90s and settled in Turkmenistan with his wife and children. After they immigrated to Israel, he returned to Kabul in 1999. Simentov says he has not spoken to his children for 25 years and would like to rekindle the relationship. "I miss them so much," he said.

Still, Simentov has his eye on the Big Apple in spite of Kahana's suggestion that he focus on getting to Israel. "Israel is my first home," Simentov told JI, describing his connection to the Jewish homeland. "Now I would like to go to New York to get an American passport so that I can travel everywhere in the world — and then I will go to Israel, for sure."

"Everything is exciting in New York — the cars, the whiskey, the people," he said. "Everything."

Worldly pleasures aside, Simentov — a portly man of large appetites who claims he is 59, though conflicting press accounts put him, more realistically, closer to 70 — would be following something of a well-traveled route within the modestly sized diaspora of Afghan Jewry that largely found refuge abroad more than 50 years ago in New York and Israel.

By 1960, only 700 Jews remained in Afghanistan, according to Sara Koplik, the author of *A Political and Economic History of the Jews of Afghanistan*, down from a peak of around 5,000 in the previous century. While the history of Jews in Afghanistan dates back more than 1,000 years, their modern presence in the country can be traced to 1839,

when the Persian Jewish community of Mashhad was forcibly converted to Islam under threat of execution in a pogrom known as Allahdad — or “God’s justice” — and began to flee.

Afghanistan “was not an easy place to live by any means,” said Koplik, though some rulers were more hospitable than others as Afghanistan’s Jews carved out an existence unique to the multiethnic region. “This is a very interesting ethnicity and people who were international traders,” she told JI, “who used their language skills and their knowledge of cultures to survive.”

By 1971, though, the number of Jewish families in Afghanistan had dwindled to just 25 in Kabul as well as the northwestern city of Herat, where Simentov was born. By the Soviet invasion eight years later, most of the Jewish community was gone. The last rabbi left Afghanistan in 1988, and a minyan — the quorum of 10 Jewish adults required for prayer services — was last formed in 1990.

New York City is now home to an estimated 1,000 Afghan Jews — the largest population in the world outside of Israel — including Simentov’s uncle, who is in his 90s and lives in Queens. Congregation Anshei Shalom, an Orthodox synagogue in Jamaica Estates, is the only shul for Afghan Jews in the country. Over the years, the synagogue has made efforts to assist Simentov as he hung on through decades of hardship, sending him annual care packages during Passover and making repairs to the synagogue door so he would no longer be forced to climb in through the window.

Still, Simentov does not seem to have developed deep connections with the Afghan Jewish community in New York, despite familial ties to the city. “I would prefer to live there alone,” he told JI. “I am planning to get my fiancée there.”

Asked for more details on his relationship, which he does not appear to have spoken about in previous interviews, Simentov adopted something of a belligerent tone. “This is a personal issue,” he snapped. “Do you need to know everything?”

Later in the conversation, Simentov revealed that he was not actually engaged but had been intimately involved with a woman in Afghanistan, whom he likes to describe as his fiancée. “Of course she is in danger,” he said. “I will try to help her.”

Simentov, who says he worked as a carpet dealer in Kabul, among other jobs, projected confidence that his business acumen would serve him well in New York. Though he speaks only fractured English, he said he planned to learn the language if he makes it to the U.S. “One hundred percent,” he said in English, then reverted to Persian. “I know a little bit.”

He said he was “completely quarantined for one year” during the pandemic and is now “fully vaccinated.”

“It is time to live outside a synagogue,” Simentov told JI. “I would like to enjoy the rest of my life in a private house.”

It remains to be seen how warmly he will be welcomed by his own community in New York. “The Afghan community is very embarrassed by Zvulon,” said Osnat Gad, a Jew of Afghan descent who lives in the Hamptons, pronouncing Simentov’s first name with an accent. “What he has done with the synagogue in Afghanistan,” she added, “what he has done with staying there and making a sensation about being a Jew in Afghanistan, it’s very embarrassing.”

“I think it’s a spectacle,” said Gad, who, like many Afghan Jews in New York, works in the jewelry business. “We get the shudders every time there’s an article about him.”

During his time in Kabul, a steady stream of journalists paid visits to Simentov’s synagogue residence, documenting a number of revealing tidbits about his eccentric existence. Fond of whiskey, he watched TV on Shabbat, kept a pet partridge and slaughtered chickens in accordance with Jewish dietary law.

“He’s a curiosity and he knows he’s a curiosity,” said Koplik.

Somewhat infamously, Simentov is reported to have bickered so excessively with a fellow Jew, Yitzhak Levi, who took up residence in the synagogue

when Simentov was away, that they were both imprisoned by the Taliban. But they were released when the squabble became too much for the Taliban to bear. Levi, the uncle of Yossi Avni-Levy, the Israel writer and diplomat, died in 2005 — reducing Afghanistan’s Jewish population to just one: Simentov.

Such darkly comical details have imbued Simentov’s plight with a vaguely screwball quality, even if the tenor of some coverage obscures a gloomier story about a seemingly kooky man forced into exile from his native country. “It’s kind of tragic and sad,” said Koplik, who has closely followed Simentov through the years. “There’s real tragedy.”

Simentov said he had no run-ins with the Taliban before he left Afghanistan last month, but he looked back on their previous reign with a sense of despondence. “During the Taliban it was a bitter life,” he said, particularly for women. “I want to say to the Taliban that they should not repeat the mistakes of the past,” Simentov added. “They should permit women and children to go to school, and they should include women in the government.”

“We have lots of brave women in Afghanistan,” he said, turning his criticism to American foreign policy in the region. “Unfortunately the Americans sold them to the Taliban and now they are de facto in jail.” The Americans “left the people behind,” Simentov argued. “They built something in half and they did not complete it.”

Simentov said he is in touch with his “Muslim brothers” in Afghanistan. “The Hazaras, the Tajiks, the Pashtuns,” he told JI. “Everyone. I love them. I love everybody in Afghanistan.”

While Simentov’s departure marks the end of a long history, the Afghan Jewish diaspora is engaged in ongoing efforts to preserve and maintain cultural sites from abroad.

Gad, for instance, is now helping with the coordination of an upcoming exhibition at the American Sephardi Federation in New York that will cast light on Afghanistan’s little-known Jewish history. “Afghanistan: the

Hidden World of Afghan Jews” will open in the spring of 2022. Gad has also worked to restore Jewish cemeteries in Afghanistan and has paid a guard to protect a Jewish burial site where, she says, Simentov’s grandfather happens

to be buried.

Simentov, for his part, said he had no plans to return to Afghanistan, nor does he envision any Jews settling in the country again after so many years of turmoil.

“Never, never,” he told JI. “I don’t think that any Jews want to go there and to live there. I don’t think so. It’s probably over.” ♦

OCTOBER 7, 2021

Reading the room at Planet Word

Washington’s newest museum is a labor of love, and a major financial investment, for philanthropist and retired teacher Ann B. Friedman

By Gabby Detuch

On a Thursday morning, just before lunchtime, it’s time for karaoke.

A woman is belting out Dolly Parton’s “Jolene,” trying in vain to get her embarrassed daughter, maybe 10 years old, to join in. Instead, she gets Ann B. Friedman, 67, who sidles up beside her and starts singing: *Jolene, Jolene, Jolene Joleeeene*.

The two women do not know each other, though this is not the raucous brand of karaoke that follows too many sake bombs or mixed drinks. They are in an exhibit at Planet Word, an interactive museum devoted to words, language and literacy that opened in Washington, D.C., last year.

This room is meant to teach visitors about songwriting, one of several exhibits that are “devoted to what we do with words,” Friedman, the museum’s founder and CEO, said in an interview with *Jewish Insider* while on a recent tour of the museum. People can choose from a couple of dozen songs that the museum has acquired the rights to, with Disney hits “Let It Go” and “Moana” among the most popular. The lyrics are projected on a wall, while certain elements of songwriting — like metaphors, alliteration and repetition — are highlighted and explained next to the text.

Spread over the five stories of the historic Franklin School, a century-and-a-half old red-brick building across

from Franklin Square in downtown Washington, the museum is the embodiment of Friedman’s love of language and reading.

“One of the big questions I got a lot of time from people when I told them about the museum was, ‘Oh, are you going to have an exhibit on diagramming sentences?’ I was like, ‘No. This is not a right or wrong museum. This is where we celebrate language like we use it,’” Friedman recalled.

The museum has been a labor of love — and a massive financial investment — for Friedman, who first began working on the project in 2013, a few years after she retired from teaching first-grade reading in Montgomery County, Md.

“I loved reading, always,” said Friedman, whose favorite book as a child was Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden*. She read it often growing up in Des Moines, Iowa, where her father, Matthew Bucksbaum, developed a massive shopping mall empire.

In 2017, when Washington Mayor Muriel Bowser picked Friedman to restore and develop the old Franklin School building, she pledged to use at least \$20 million of her own money to create the museum. (Other major donors include Bloomberg Philanthropies and Blackstone CEO Stephen A. Schwarzman and his wife Christine.) Although it is not part of the Smithsonian Institution, Planet Word is free to all visitors.

The idea for the museum first came

to Friedman when she visited the National Museum of Mathematics in Manhattan. The reading teacher in her grew competitive as she walked through the museum.

“They had all this great publicity when they opened about the cool galleries and exhibits that they had done to bring math to the world,” Friedman said. “Math is good. I like math. But we’re really much more important to our country, and to me personally.”

As a retiree with free time and a sizable budget, Friedman set off on a national tour of “different museums that had something about language arts,” including the Strong Museum — the National Museum of Play — in Rochester, N.Y.; The Tech Interactive in San Jose, Calif.; and Liberty Science Center in Jersey City, N.J. None of these were focused on language, but each had an exhibit devoted to communication.

Once she decided to forge ahead with the idea for a museum, Friedman knew she needed outside help. “I started building a governing board and advisory board to educate myself, because I know reading and teaching and education, but not museums, and not anything about linguistics,” she said.

This meant not just bringing on linguists, but also finding experts in museum curation and design, as well as people who could restore a historic building that was left abandoned in

bad shape after last being used as a homeless shelter.

"The hardest thing was managing people. I had never been the boss of that many people," Friedman noted.

Friedman points out that every available space, including the first-floor reception area before visitors enter the exhibits, is covered with something related to language.

Each locker, where visitors can leave their belongings, is numbered — and annotated with the spelling of that number in a different language, written in the International Phonetic Alphabet. This is a system devised by linguists so that people can sound out a word in a language they don't speak, using a universal set of phonetic sounds.

The floor leading up to the check-in desk is covered in letters, symbols and hieroglyphics that are spread like a spilled bag of the magnets one might put on a refrigerator. They are grouped by history and language family.

And the restrooms, whose walls feature bathroom-related sayings taken from literature like "To pee or not to pee?" or "I stink, therefore I am," were recently nominated for "America's best restrooms," an actual distinction that is awarded by the cleaning services company Cintas.

When it comes to the actual exhibits, everything is created for user interaction.

The Word World shows a several-foot-high image of interconnected landscapes — a lush forest, a vibrant pond, a city street lined with tall buildings — flowing seamlessly between the three walls. "Grab a brush," Friedman commanded. "They're smart brushes. 'Dip' them into a word and you paint the walls with that word." Each word "painted" the scene: "Autumnal" covered the trees with orange and yellow leaves, while "crepuscular" darkened the image to the shades of blue, purple and pink that appear at twilight. The sound of birds chirping filled the room.

Book lovers like Friedman will be most excited by the Magical Library, an ornate, wood-paneled room that looks like the interior of an old English

castle. Books, arranged by color, line the walls; a mirror on the ceiling makes the room feel endless. Visitors can pick up any of the dozens of books on display and place them under the light on the reading tables, where a special scanner "reads" them and launches into an animation and audio recording that provides historical and literary context on the book and its author.

Friedman picked up *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, and the book came to life: Frank's handwriting was illuminated onto the pages of the book, and an image of Frank appeared above the text. "While we get huge insight into who she is as a person," the narration says, "we also have the constant threat of Nazi occupation, and of possible capture and murder of her and her family at the hands of the Nazis."

Another exhibit allows visitors to "practice" their foreign language skills with speakers of 28 different languages. Friedman walks up to a tablet and begins the Hebrew lesson, which is taught by the 12-year-old daughter of friends. "The [museum's] ambassadors are middle aged or young adults, but I went to her bat mitzvah, and she was so well-spoken, that I said [to her parents], 'Will you let her be our language ambassador?'" Friedman recalled.

The brief lesson involved an explanation of how Eliezer Ben-Yehuda modernized Hebrew in the late-19th century, along with some of the words he created — like tapuz, orange, created from a mishmash of the words for "apple" and "gold."

Friedman, who described her Jewish upbringing as "very Reform," spent several years in Israel in the 1980s when her husband, *The New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, served as the paper's Jerusalem bureau chief.

"I went to ulpan, and then I kept getting pregnant," Friedman recalled, laughing. "I had enough [fluency] to do grocery shopping and things like that. But never an advanced level with Hebrew." Their two daughters inherited their parents' love of words: One created and runs a private school in San Francisco, and the other is the weekend

executive producer of NPR's "All Things Considered."

After a late October opening last year — delayed from a planned May 2020 opening — the museum operated for just five weeks before a pandemic-mandated shutdown that lasted until April of this year. The pandemic has affected the museum in other unexpected ways: A popular photo booth, where visitors act out SAT vocabulary words, is closed until further notice because the paper used to print the images is only available from a Chinese manufacturer, and supply chain delays have made it impossible to deliver.

Everything at the museum is kid-friendly (although some of the material, like a room where visitors can try to write creative advertising copy, is too advanced for them), and while some camp groups came for field trips over the summer, Friedman is eager for school groups to regularly visit the museum when pandemic restrictions ease. Right now, only 100 people are allowed to enter the museum every hour.

At the end of the tour, she had to run back to her office — that night, the museum would be hosting 250 teachers in a sold-out educators night to introduce them to the museum's content. After all, Friedman added, "teachers have never had a language arts museum to visit." ♦