

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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In the Florida 20 special election, one candidate declares opposition to Iron Dome funding

Omari Hardy previously stated his opposition to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, but has since thrown his support behind the effort

By Matthew Kassel

In the crowded special House primary to succeed Rep. Alcee Hastings (D-FL), no fewer than 11 candidates are competing for the rare open seat that had long been occupied by the former dean of Florida's congressional delegation, who died in April at 84.

Even with just a few weeks remaining until voters cast their ballots on Nov. 2, the race remains somewhat in flux. But experts who spoke with Jewish Insider identified a group of top-tier candidates who are likely to emerge from the crowded field, including such elected officials as state Sen. Perry Thurston, state Rep. Bobby DuBose and Broward County Commissioners Dale Holness and Barbara Sharief, the latter of whom earlier this week notched an endorsement from Rep. Lois Frankel (D-FL).

Holness, for his part, led the pack in outside contributions last quarter, pulling in \$305,000, but has been vastly outspent by healthcare executive Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick. The two-time former Hastings challenger, who has personally loaned her campaign more than \$2 million, is running to the left of her opponents on domestic issues, advocating for such progressive

policy proposals as the Green New Deal and Medicare for All. Whoever wins is expected to prevail in the Jan. 11 general election because the district is heavily Democratic.

While the leading contenders all seem largely aligned in their support for Israel — a cause championed by Hastings during his time in Congress — one staunchly progressive wild-card candidate, first-term state Rep. Omari Hardy, is sharing more critical views of the U.S.-Israel relationship.

In an interview with *JI* on Monday, Hardy, 31, expressed his firm opposition to legislation that would grant \$1 billion in supplemental aid for Israel's Iron Dome missile-defense system. The bill, which is currently stalled in the Senate, was overwhelmingly approved last month by both parties following an emotionally charged House vote in which just eight Democrats and one Republican voted against the measure.

"I would have voted no," Hardy said bluntly. "Some folks have argued that voting against the billion dollars is taking the position that Israel doesn't have a right to defend itself or that America should not help Israel defend itself," he added. "I think that's

disingenuous given that we're still providing \$3.8 billion of military aid to Israel this year."

But in Hardy's view, even that spending — guaranteed in a 10-year memorandum of understanding between Israel and the U.S. — merits scrutiny. Hardy supports conditioning aid to the Jewish state, arguing that Israel's treatment of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank amounts to a series of human rights violations that the U.S. is effectively funding by proxy.

"The funding is leverage that we have to ensure that Palestinians are not mistreated, and to the extent that we have leverage to generate an outcome that is in comportment with our values, we should use that leverage," said Hardy, while hastening to clarify, lest he be accused of unfairly targeting the Jewish state, that he also advocates for withholding foreign assistance to Egypt, Iraq, Pakistan and other countries he described as human rights violators. But Israel faced the harshest criticism. "I can't vote to send military aid to Israel," he explained. "My conscience won't let me support some of the very problematic practices there."

Though critics have argued that the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions

movement also unfairly targets Israel, Hardy said he supports the cause out of a conviction that non-violent resistance is the last avenue of legitimate recourse available to the Palestinians. “I think it’s the only option Palestinians have to draw attention to their plight and to change the behavior of Israel’s military and political leaders,” he said, “whose decisions have resulted in repeated human rights abuses.”

While Hardy’s positions on Israel stand well outside the Democratic mainstream, they are even more striking because they go beyond what some of the most outspoken Israel critics in the House have been willing to say publicly. Only a small handful of House Democrats, including Reps. Rashida Tlaib (D-MI) and Ilhan Omar (D-MN), support BDS. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), who introduced an amendment last month that would block a \$735 million arms sale to Israel, initially voted against the Iron Dome funding before switching to “present” at the last minute, shedding tears in the process.

Even the leading far-left candidates across the country who are now mounting congressional primary challenges with backing from Justice Democrats, the feisty political group that had at one point labeled Israel a “human rights violator,” have balked at calls to boycott Israel, instead advocating for conditioning aid to the Jewish state.

Josephine Gon, vice president of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Palm Beach County, said she had met with “the main candidates” in the South Florida race. Hardy was the lone voice in support of BDS and conditioning aid to Israel, she said. “He did express that he wants to learn more about Israel and is open to doing so and we will continue to dialogue with him,” Gon told JI in an email.

Over the course of a long and broad-ranging discussion as well as in subsequent phone conversations with JI, Hardy sounded eager to engage on the issues, making clear that he had not arrived at his conclusions without having grappled intensely with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since he declared his candidacy last April.

Weighing aloud the consequences of revealing his potentially inflammatory views for the first time to a reporter, Hardy — who spoke deliberately and often took long pauses before commenting —

acknowledged that he was venturing into hazardous terrain. “I understand, given some of what we’ve discussed here, the political ramifications of this conversation,” the state legislator told JI, later adding: “There’s no political good that can come out of it.”

“But that’s not how this should work,” he said. “We can’t have elected officials hiding from the media and, by extension, hiding their views from the public eye. I have had to learn a lot really quickly on this issue. I have a lot more to learn on this issue.”

Local Jewish leaders in and around South Florida’s 20th Congressional District, which includes Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach, expressed varying levels of disapproval with regard to Hardy’s Middle East foreign policy views, despite his appeal to transparency.

“On the BDS stuff, that’s obviously disappointing, and on the Iron Dome stuff that’s obviously disappointing,” said Mitchell Berger, a Fort Lauderdale lawyer and prominent Hardy campaign donor. “On how much you fund Israel, that’s a legitimate topic for debate right now.”

He said he would continue to support Hardy in spite of their disagreements on Israel. “I’ll certainly try and educate him as to why he is wrong on these things,” Berger told JI.

“We are concerned about him, there’s no question about it,” said Richard Stark, who chairs the Broward County Democratic Party Jewish Caucus and co-hosted a candidate forum last month in which Hardy participated. During the forum, as Stark recalled, Hardy seemed significantly more sympathetic to Israel than his current views would suggest, even explicitly stating his opposition to BDS. “That doesn’t mean that he was not speaking the truth,” Stark told JI. “But what’s getting out is that he may not be so pro-Israel like he portrayed himself in our meeting.”

For his part, Hardy admits that his evolution on the matter only took place recently. “Look, a month ago, if you had asked me this question, I would have said, unequivocally, I do not support BDS,” he told JI. “But I’ve since learned a lot, and this is part of the problem with the way that these issues are politicized. The second someone declares for Congress, folks are trying to pin

them down on positions on issues that are extremely complicated.”

While some experts speculated to JI that Hardy could find a path in the primary election next month, he has so far failed to garner the sort of grassroots momentum one would expect of a candidate who has racked up more than 164,000 Twitter followers and is sometimes compared to Ocasio-Cortez.

“Part of the problem is that only a fraction of his statehouse district is in the 20th Congressional District, and his viral tweets don’t necessarily translate into votes,” said Dave Wasserman, an elections forecaster for the nonpartisan Cook Political Report. “He’s also not getting the same kind of progressive lane to himself as other pro-Green New Deal and Medicare For All-type candidates.”

Brand New Congress, the progressive political action committee which has backed Tlaib and Ocasio-Cortez, endorsed Cherfilus-McCormick in June. “She has a chance,” Wasserman said, noting that she is outspending the field and is now dominating the airwaves as the race enters its final stretch. “That presents a risk to the old guard.”

But Mitch Caesar, a former longtime Broward County Democratic Party chair who is not supporting anyone in the race but has spoken with most of the candidates, quibbled with that assessment. “Cherfilus-McCormick’s money is important,” he told JI, “but whoever is going to turn out is going to be a super voter and super voters are less swayed by commercials.”

He characterized Hardy as a “serious contender” among a subset of viable candidates in a packed race where the threshold for victory is expected to be low.

Hardy, who describes himself as “the most progressive candidate in the field,” has pulled in just under \$95,000 as of the most recent quarterly filing, well behind the leading fundraisers in the race. The final round of quarterly campaign finance reports, to be released this Friday, will provide a more detailed barometer of the dynamics at play.

The other candidates include former state legislator Priscilla Taylor, author Elvin Dowling, retired Naval officer Phil Jackson, former Department of Labor investigator Emmanuel Morel and internist Imran

Siddiqui.

The race has so far failed to attract national attention from Democratic leaders, despite similarities with the high-profile Cleveland-based House primary between Shontel Brown and Nina Turner this summer. While more than a dozen candidates entered the race to replace former Rep. Marcia Fudge (D-OH), who vacated her seat for a Cabinet position in the Biden administration, the primary ultimately coalesced around Brown and Turner in what became a high-stakes proxy battle between competing moderate and progressive forces within the Democratic Party.

But in South Florida, the same dynamic is unlikely to take hold as the scant publicly available polling indicates that a plurality of Democratic voters in the majority-Black district remains undecided — as, it appears, do national Democratic figureheads who have refrained from weighing in.

National Democratic and bipartisan pro-Israel political groups also appear relatively disengaged from the race. Pro-Israel America, which supports Democrats and Republicans, does not plan to get involved, according to a spokesperson. Democratic Majority for Israel, whose early and consequential presence in the Cleveland race is credited with helping boost Brown over Turner, is taking a wait-and-see approach. “There are a number of strong, pro-Israel Democratic candidates in that race and we are continuing to watch it,” said Rachel Rosen, a spokesperson for DMFI’s political arm.

The Jewish Democratic Council of America has yet to make an endorsement but is hosting a candidate forum on Oct. 20.

Hardy assumed state office last November after serving as a Lake Worth city commissioner, but his profile has risen considerably since viral footage of a heated city commission exchange last year in which he loudly castigated a local mayor over her response to the pandemic drew national attention.

“Those three minutes of video were really three years in a nutshell,” Hardy said of his experience as a local commissioner. “We had many disputes like that, where we were choosing between a status quo that was broken and doing something that would

positively affect working-class people.”

Raised by two mothers in Broward County, the former educator, who received his undergraduate in economics from the University of Miami, said he was first elected “very much as a generic Democrat” — last year, even earning an endorsement from the Palm Beach County Police Benevolent Association — but has since shifted leftward as his priorities evolved to encompass affordable housing, free public education and universal healthcare, among other issues. Hardy now touts support from the Progressive Change Campaign Committee as well as a number of left-leaning lawmakers in Florida while embracing his affinity for the “Squad,” a growing coalition of vocal House progressives including Ocasio-Cortez, Tlaib and Omar.

Earlier this month, Hardy was endorsed by the editorial board of South Florida’s Sun-Sentinel, which praised the candidate as “an unapologetic progressive who’s unafraid to challenge deeply entrenched powerful interests.”

“I think it’s necessary for us to elect members of Congress who are going to push for the systemic transformational change that we know working-class people need rather than settling for incremental change,” said Hardy, who supports a strategy among House progressives who have vowed to withhold votes for the \$1 trillion infrastructure package until an accompanying social safety net bill is approved by the Senate. “This is really about our willingness to leverage everything that we have,” he said, “everything that we can leverage.”

He has yet to notch endorsements from any like-minded allies in Congress, even as a July poll from the think tank Data for Progress identified him as “the most viable progressive candidate” in the race.

In conversation with JI, Hardy cast himself as inheriting a progressive mandate from Hastings, who was the longest-serving member of Florida’s congressional delegation before his death earlier this year. “If you look at the Green New Deal, his name is the very first name that appears on it right after Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s name,” Hardy said. “This is a guy who supported Medicare for All. This is a guy who was ahead of his time on immigration

stances. I believe that he was largely a progressive Democrat. I just think he came from a different era where politics was practiced differently.”

But if Hardy is aligned with Hastings on domestic issues, they part ways — and in dramatic fashion — when it comes to foreign policy in the Middle East. Hastings, who established himself as a leading pro-Israel voice in the House, visited the Jewish state approximately 20 times throughout his congressional tenure and in 2007 helped lead an effort to grow a new forest in northern Galilee that was destroyed the previous year during the war with Hezbollah. A staunch critic of BDS, he once described the movement as “a deeply flawed approach to advancing peace.” In 2015, Hastings voted against the Iran nuclear deal.

Despite his unequivocal endorsement of the BDS movement, Hardy initially seemed reluctant to express his personal position on the matter when it came up for discussion in the interview. At first, he simply expressed his opposition to anti-BDS legislation at the state level, including in Florida, where Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis recently announced that Ben & Jerry’s parent company Unilever had been placed on a list of “scrutinized companies that boycott Israel.”

Hardy views such efforts to stifle political speech as violations of the First Amendment. “The government in this country is not supposed to punish private citizens or businesses for their speech,” he said. “That is not the American way, and if you disagree with it, then you can state that. But to leverage the power that the government has against private citizens and private businesses because you don’t like what they say? That’s un-American.”

Pressed to provide his own assessment of BDS on the merits, Hardy inched closer to an answer. “How else are Palestinians supposed to draw attention to their plight and to encourage Israel’s military and political leaders to change their behavior if not by non-violently calling for an economic boycott?” Hardy mused. “How else are they to do it?”

“There’s a two-step process for me,” he elaborated. “Are Palestinians’ human rights being violated? Yes or no? I think the answer is yes, and I don’t think I’m alone

in that assessment.” He alluded to a recent controversial report, published by Human Rights Watch in May, accusing Israel of apartheid. “If you believe that Palestinian rights are being violated, then what can be done to stop that? Violence is not the answer. Shooting rockets at civilians is not the answer.”

Hardy said he has engaged with a number of Jewish leaders since he launched his campaign but had not heard from Palestinians until recently. The discussions changed his perspective. “I’ve had conversations with Palestinian-Americans who had questions for me that I could not answer,” he said.

Finally, after an uncomfortably long pause, Hardy declared his support for BDS, though he emphasized with dismay that those “three letters” are “heavily freighted” in a manner that can foreclose reasonable debate. Still, he said he was struggling “to understand why it’s controversial for people to non-violently call for change.”

Those who regard BDS as antisemitic because it singles out the only existing Jewish state on earth might disagree. For his part, Hardy, who said he would join the Black-Jewish Relations Caucus in Congress as part of an effort to build on “shared values,” condemned recent instances in which pro-Palestinian protestors engaged in acts of antisemitic hatred amid escalating violence between Israel and Hamas last May. “I will say — and what I think is true — is that antisemitism is of course very real and acts of antisemitism have become more common in recent years,” he said, “especially since the election of Trump, and certainly there was a spike in what we saw in the summer.”

“I think that we have to separate a few things here,” Hardy told JI. “It’s OK to ask Israel’s allies and other governments to bring pressure to bear with respect to how Israel treats Palestinians, and I think that’s what BDS is doing.” But supporters of the movement “should be able to have a discussion about human rights issues with respect to the Palestinian people without there being an uptick in hate crimes and violence against Jewish people,” he added. “That is disgusting, and we just have to be able to hold both ideas in our heads at the same time.”

Notwithstanding his support for BDS, Hardy said he was open to visiting Israel, a country he has never been to, if he is elected to the House. “I really care a lot about trying to find ways to create peace with folks,” he told JI, “and if traveling there on a mission to bring the two sides together would further the cause of peace then that’s something that I’d be very willing to do.”

Like some progressive House Democrats who, accurately or not, view the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through the lens of racial oppression in the U.S., Hardy claimed that the Palestinian experience particularly resonates for him as a Black man “concerned about police violence” as an outgrowth of systemic discrimination. “I can’t apply my values in one case and not in the other.”

But if Hardy has found his own narrative reflected in a conflict thousands of miles away, the issue, he said, is hardly a top priority for the majority of voters in the district. The subject is so charged, however, that he felt compelled to engage in a deeper manner than perhaps he had expected, even if his own research led him to provocative conclusions.

“I’ve had to spend an inordinate amount of time wrapping my brain around these issues not because they loom large in terms of priorities that voters have but because the reactions that people have to a given position are so intense as to require someone in my shoes to make sure that they’ve done the work to justify whatever position that they arrived at,” he said. “What’s happening in our politics around this issue is not conducive to good decision-making and good policymaking. The intensity with which this debate rages does no one a good service here.”

That goes for his own party, he suggested, as divisions have intensified between far-left Israel critics in the House and mainstream Democrats who are broadly supportive of the Jewish state. “There are lots of folks who care about these issues,” Hardy said, “and we have to find a way to make sure that our concerns are reflected in our policymaking but not in a way that reduces people through whatever moral judgments we have about their positions with respect to these issues.”

“I know that these issues matter a lot to people,” he said. “I know that people have drawn all kinds of red lines about it. I’m

going to do my best to think through these issues and to apply my progressive values consistently across the board, not just with respect to Israel, but with respect to other human rights abuses.”

He expressed confidence that his broader approach to the issues would resonate with voters as he seeks to join a growing cohort of progressive lawmakers in Congress who are strategizing to reshape the Democratic Party on matters both foreign and domestic. “The point of vying for power is to use the power to help the American people, and I think that everyone in this race wants to do good things for the American people,” Hardy told JI. “But not everyone in this race is willing to go as far as I’m willing to go.” ♦

A Black Muslim candidate in Florida's 20th casts herself as a strong supporter of Israel

'I think people look at me and say, "Oh, my god, she's Muslim and she likes Israel,"' Barbara Sharief exclaimed

By Matthew Kassel

When Rep. Alcee Hastings (D-FL) died last April, the longest-serving member of Florida's congressional delegation was widely remembered for his passionate commitment to strengthening the U.S.-Israel relationship while fostering meaningful ties between the Black and Jewish communities.

With 11 Democratic candidates now vying to fill his seat in South Florida's wide-open special House primary, scheduled for Nov. 2, the question of who, if anyone, will advance Hastings's legacy on Jewish issues remains unanswered, even as a number of contenders have claimed commonalities with the late congressman.

"Whoever emerges or whoever wins," said Shevrin Jones, a Democratic state legislator in Broward County who is not publicly supporting anyone in the race, "it's my hope that their view on the U.S.-Israel relationship is consistent with Congressman Hastings."

At least one candidate seems eager to boost her credentials among Jewish community leaders and pro-Israel advocates who have struggled to parse the crowded race, where no single frontrunner has yet to emerge. Barbara Sharief, a Black Muslim commissioner in Broward County, casts herself as a staunch supporter of the Jewish state, a position she describes simply as "common sense."

"I think people look at me and say, 'Oh, my god, she's Muslim and she likes Israel,'" Sharief, who is 49, said in an interview with *Jewish Insider* on Wednesday. But such insinuations, she suggested, are not only offensive but ultimately misguided. "Israel has something that we have to protect."

Sharief recalled traveling through Israel two years ago on an AIPAC-sponsored

African-American leadership tour, an experience — which included meetings with Palestinians — she credits largely with influencing her ongoing concern for Israel's stability. "When I finished my nine days there, what I realized was that Israel was under constant attack," she explained. "That was one of the reasons why I came back and said, 'I support the aid to Israel continuously.'"

"When she came back from Israel, she shared a lot of the same feelings that I have," said Ilene Lieberman Michelson, a retired lawyer and pro-Israel advocate in Fort Lauderdale who previously served with Sharief on the Broward County Commission. "I know it affected her."

Sharief — the only candidate in the crowded race whose campaign site thus far includes an issues section exclusively touting her "support for Israel" — argues strongly in favor of maintaining annual U.S. military assistance for the Jewish state. She also supports legislation that would provide Israel with \$1 billion in supplemental aid to replenish its Iron Dome missile-defense system after the May conflict with Hamas. The bill is now stalled in the Senate following a House vote during which eight Democrats and one Republican opposed the measure while 420 members supported it.

Without such aid, "the Middle East will become destabilized very quickly," Sharief said. "That represents a threat for America, and I don't think people get that."

"The trip did me good in terms of just giving me a different level of understanding of what was going on," Sharief told *Jl*.

Her foreign policy message appears to be resonating, at least combined with an array of center-left domestic proposals, as she consolidates endorsements, including two this week from Reps. Cheri Bustos (D-IL)

and Lois Frankel (D-FL).

"Sharief is the right woman for the job across a range of issues — she's a fierce advocate for protecting voting rights, expanding healthcare coverage, advocating for the middle class, and, yes, advancing a strong U.S.-Israel relationship," Frankel said in a statement to *Jl*. "That's what folks in South Florida want and what the American people want — because they know that support for Israel supports America by advancing our values and our security."

Despite such recognition, polling has demonstrated that the primary is still somewhat in flux and will likely remain so when early voting begins next week. "It will be a very tough race to predict because there are so many qualified candidates running," said Steve Tauber, a professor of political science at the University of South Florida.

Sharief is among a group of elected officials whom experts regard as viable contenders, including Sen. Perry Thurston, state Rep. Bobby DuBose and Broward County Commissioners Dale Holness. Running to their left are healthcare executive Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick and state Rep. Omari Hardy. Former state legislator Priscilla Taylor, author Elvin Dowling, retired Naval officer Phil Jackson, former Department of Labor investigator Emmanuel Morel and internist Imran Siddiqui fill out the roster.

Most of the candidates have expressed varying levels of support for Israel, according to Richard Stark, who chairs the Broward County Democratic Party Jewish Caucus and co-hosted a candidate forum last month. But an outlier is Hardy, who has recently changed course.

In an interview with *Jl* this week, he came out in favor of the controversial Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement targeting Israel. Hardy also called

for conditioning aid to the Jewish state and said he was against the supplemental Iron Dome funding bill.

However, Sharief vehemently objected to Hardy's recent comments, charging that his views betray a lack of experience "when it comes to understanding the geopolitics and the dynamics" in the region. She suggested that Hardy had only changed his stance in an effort to court support from the progressive left, though he insists his evolution is authentic.

"For me, I am a Muslim-born woman, and I have a completely different opinion," Sharief said. "BDS, you see, is never going to be successful, number one, because Hitler tried that on the Jews in 1933 and it didn't work very well. So why is that concept, when we know how horrible it is, still being proffered today? I think it's wrong."

Sharief, a former Broward County mayor, announced a primary challenge against Hastings last December, but since the congressman's death a number of additional candidates have jumped into the race. Florida's 20th Congressional District, which includes Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach, is majority-Black but includes a robust Jewish community in Tamarac.

"I'm going to be a congresswoman that represents a diverse community," she said, "and I have to be able to listen to both sides and make an informed decision."

For her part, Sharief added her belief that calls to further condition aid are ultimately unhelpful in engendering the conditions that could lead to a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"We already know that the bombs are flying, and we know that they've been going on for hundreds of years," she said. "What we have to do as Americans is provide the aid, keep the Middle East stable and then try to get these people to the table to create a peace treaty and a two-state solution."

"If you don't have a two-state solution, you have nothing, because neither side will ever feel like they have clearly defensible borders," Sharief elaborated. "But at the same time, if you did create a two-state solution, what that would allow is for aid to come into Palestine and the Gaza Strip, and it would allow for Israel to have more of a comfort level."

In a position paper provided to JI by her campaign, Sharief clarifies her views on a number of Middle East foreign policy issues, including her belief that the U.S. embassy should remain in Jerusalem. She is also in favor of strengthening the Abraham Accords, a series of normalization agreements between Israel and several Arab nations brokered by the Trump administration, and supports a return to the Iran nuclear deal negotiated by the Obama administration.

"I will work with our strategic partners around the globe to make sure Iran remains in check and does not acquire or develop nuclear weapons," she writes in the paper. "I support tough economic sanctions as a way to curb Iran's bad behavior and use as leverage to bring them back to the negotiating table for a better deal."

No single candidate appears to have locked up the Jewish community's vote,

which could prove decisive in what is expected to be a low-turnout election, though Sharief has established "decent ties to the Jewish community," according to Stark. Sharief said she has campaigned at Kings Point, a condominium complex in the district that is home to a sizable Jewish community. "I've probably visited every club that they have out there," she told JI. "They're very interested voters."

The Broward County native, a medical professional who founded a pediatric home healthcare company, has loaned her campaign \$230,000 of her own money, according to the latest filings from the Federal Election Commission. She had pulled in just \$67,000 in outside contributions as of the last quarterly filing deadline. New fundraising numbers, to be released on Friday, will indicate whether she has gained more meaningful support over the past few months.

She argued that several candidates in the race "are trying to imitate" Hastings, whose legacy she describes as "invaluable." But while her goals, particularly with regard to Israel and fostering strong Jewish community connections, echo those of the late congressman, Sharief suggested that she had arrived at them not entirely out of fealty to Hastings — whom she once intended to unseat — but because of personal conviction.

"I want to be as supportive as I can with Israel," she concluded, "and I want to continue to educate our African-American community about the importance of that relationship." ♦

OCTOBER 14, 2021

Sounding a diverse tune at the opening of Dubai Expo's Israeli Pavilion

The event marked another first for Israel in the UAE since normalization between the two countries in September 2020

By Rebecca Anne Proctor

A group of yarmulke-clad men in suits and women in elegant dresses waited excitedly just outside the Israeli Pavilion at Expo

2020 in Dubai. As noisy crowds entered the adjacent pavilions of India and Italy, the sounds of an Israeli band warming up to play for the pavilion's opening

rose above the din. Despite the blazing temperatures on Sunday, the mood was optimistic: For many, the opening night of Israel's presence at the world's fair

celebrated prospects for economic and cultural ties between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and the wider Arab world.

While the historic Abraham Accords were signed just over a year prior to Expo 2020 (the event was delayed a year because of the pandemic), the Israeli Pavilion, with its open-air trapezoidal structure, symbolized another significant moment for Israel in the UAE — a few years ago its participation in such an international event in the Gulf would have been unthinkable. The pavilion's design and architecture were created to reflect the similarities between Israel and the rest of the Middle East.

Visitors entered the main area of the pavilion by walking up a winding walkway built to emulate the form of sand dunes and shaded streets found throughout the Middle East. From a distance, the “dunes” look like they’ve been made from real sand, but a closer look revealed a concrete steel structure topped with sand-colored recycled leather. Like most of Expo 2020, the Israeli Pavilion is about telling a country's story, particularly how it sees its past and its future. Atop the zig-zagging mount was an open-steel structure where seven 15-meter-high LED screen gates showed videos of Israel's cultural richness — from ancient ruins to contemporary dancers, small port towns and enchanting natural landscapes. It's designed to be a place for people to gather and discuss new ideas.

Dozens of blue and white balloons — a nod to the Israeli flag — filled the pavilion's inner structure. Israel's Minister of Tourism Yoel Razvozov delivered a few opening remarks, putting the event into perspective. “Many things are happening here for the first time. For the first time in history, the Expo fair is being held in an Arab country. It is also the first time there is an Israeli pavilion in a major fair on Arab soil. It is one of the most sound and robust steps toward cooperation between the United Arab Emirates and Israel in history.”

Razvozov then issued an open invitation to everyone to visit Israel. “Peace allows us to forge a new reality in the Middle East that will bring prosperity, security and stability to all,” he said. “We believe that to reach a better tomorrow, one should choose practical and positive actions today. I'm

delighted to invite each one of you and each visitor, participant and host at this Expo to come and visit our country. Come and see for yourself what Israel is really about.”

The minister's words notwithstanding, the high-security measures Israelis are accustomed to were still in place. At the entrance to an indoor conference room was a meticulous security check. Visitors who were invited to this area for conferences or meetings may have felt as if they were embarking on a flight to Israel itself. “You know, we are still in a sensitive environment. Nearby there is the pavilion of Iran,” said one of the security guards.

Those who simply wished to visit the pavilion's main open-air structure, enjoy the band, and catch images of Israel's diverse attractions did not have to go through a security checkpoint. In the pavilion's 360-degree room, a live DJ accompanied a film about Israel's high-tech innovations and the country's diversity. “I am an Israeli. My father's family is Arab. My mother's family, Jewish,” says the attractive young presenter at the beginning of the film. “Quite a challenge when you are looking for the right tone, people,” she continues, adding with conviction, “follow the beat.”

And the movie's “beat” is multiethnic, diverse and open-minded. If anything, the pavilion's upbeat and positive rendering of present-day Israeli society will attract, organizers hope, more tourists from across the Middle East.

The presence of the Israeli Pavilion on Arab soil was an inauguration rooted in heritage but with an avant-garde vision of the future. Before the official festivities began, the ancient Jewish tradition of a mezuzah ceremony — in which a mezuzah is affixed to the doorpost of one's home — was performed by Rabbi Levi Duchman with a mezuzah case made and designed exclusively for the Expo 2020 Dubai by noted Judaica artist David Roytman. In essence, the Israel Pavilion at Expo 2020 is a new home, albeit a temporary one, for Israelis, Jews and everyone seeking to travel and learn more about Israel.

The pavilion is designed to be demolished after Expo 2020 concludes. Apart from the concrete floor, all materials will be recycled, affirming the organizers' commitment to environmental issues and tackling the

climate crisis. The evening concluded on a contemporary note, with guests dancing to the catchy sounds of Hamalgezot, an Israeli band playing traditional Israeli music, followed by Israeli DJ Abass. As attendees celebrated the pavilion's opening, the large, illuminated sign at the back of the pavilion's main area glistened amidst the dazzling lights and moving images from the surrounding LED screens.

In Aravit script, a font invented by typographer Liron Lavi Turkenich that merges Hebrew and Arabic characters, the sign spelled the phrase: “Towards Tomorrow.” In a still somewhat tense geopolitical climate, this was the message Israel strove to deliver — one that doesn't forget the past but desires to work towards a new beginning. ♦

How reporting on the Middle East prepared one journalist to cover Facebook

Covering authoritarian regimes in the Middle East helped prepare Frenkel for reporting on the social media behemoth, she told JI.

By Gabby Deutch

For Sheera Frenkel, a *New York Times* reporter and the co-author of *An Ugly Truth: Inside Facebook's Battle for Domination* covering the social media giant was a result of “happenstance.”

As a freelance foreign correspondent, Frenkel published her first big stories from Israel, although she actually got her start in South America. Frenkel, who speaks Hebrew and Arabic, moved to the Middle East in search of stories to report just before Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip in 2005.

“I left stuff with a friend in Argentina because I was so sure that I was just going to be gone for six months,” she recalled. “I have not been back to Argentina since then, and who knows what happened to my suitcases.”

She joined *The New York Times* in 2017, assigned to the cybersecurity beat. “I was very, very pregnant, and pretty much immediately after joining, I went on maternity leave,” Frenkel told *Jewish Insider* in a recent phone interview. The end of her maternity leave coincided with the departure of the paper's Facebook beat reporter, who left to write his own book on the company.

“They needed somebody that could fill in for a couple months while he was off writing his book,” Frenkel recalled.

Four years later, Frenkel has become a must-follow reporter on the Facebook beat — an auspicious place to be, as news about the company's pursuit of profit at all costs continues to emerge. Last week, Frances Haugen, a former Facebook employee-turned-whistleblower, testified to Congress about how Facebook executives, including CEO Mark Zuckerberg, suppressed internal research demonstrating the harms of the

company's products, especially Instagram. Frenkel felt vindicated.

“It was, I would say, incredibly satisfying to see the receipts, in a way, for everything we had been told for years,” she said.

In conversation with JI, Frenkel talked about what covering authoritarian governments taught her about the social media giant, how to use Facebook responsibly and why she separates her Jewish identity from her reporting.

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

Jewish Insider: *To start with recent news, is there anything in the documents from or the congressional testimony of Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen that particularly surprised you?*

Sheera Frenkel: I can't say that I was surprised. Reporting the book, we had heard so much about research conducted by Facebook and internal documents that pointed to potential harm done by the company on teenagers, on decisions about misinformation and hate speech that could have been different had the company been willing to sacrifice some of its engagement in exchange for maybe decreasing things like hate speech, conspiracies and misinformation. We've been essentially hearing about this cache of documents and this body of research for so long. But it was, I would say, incredibly satisfying to see the receipts, in a way, for everything we had been told for years.

JJ: *Do you think it's still possible to be surprised at anything that Facebook does?*

Frenkel: Even as someone who's

reported on this as much as I have, I will say that it is still surprising just to see it in black and white. We see internal documents, which show the company is given five options that would potentially decrease misinformation. The first option would be the least effective, but also hurts them the least in terms of engagement. And the fifth option would be the most effective, but also the most hurtful in terms of engagement. It's still sometimes surprising to see them justify the fact that they don't want to hurt their engagement, that they have clear options on the table that could really decrease the amount of misinformation and hate speech, but they don't opt for them because they're bad for business. When you put it in black and white like that, it is still surprising, despite my knowing it for years.

JJ: *You focus mainly on Facebook, but I'm curious about your thoughts on whether there are similar problems at other tech companies, like Twitter or Google. Is Facebook worse, or does it just get the most attention at the moment?*

Frenkel: It's a really important question. I think that we pay attention to Facebook, just because it's honestly the biggest. But I've written on all the tech companies, especially when it comes to hate speech and misinformation. I've written about YouTube and Twitter and TikTok.

JJ: *How did you wind up focusing on Facebook in particular?*

Frenkel: I can't say that I ever set out to be a Facebook reporter. I joined *The New York Times* as a cybersecurity correspondent in 2017. I was very, very pregnant, and pretty much immediately after joining, I went

on maternity leave. And then right when I came back, I was told that the Facebook reporter was on book leave, and they needed somebody that could fill in for a couple months while he was off writing his book. It seemed like an interesting assignment. I honestly can't say I knew very much about Facebook. I didn't have very many sources in Facebook in 2017 when I was asked to do this. It was just kind of happenstance, but I became deeply interested in it as soon as I started reporting on it. I thought it was a fascinating company, and this was a really interesting time in that people were so upset over what had happened in the 2016 election within the company that it was actually a good time to build up new sources.

JJ: *Were the sources that you were developing mainly Facebook employees who were frustrated with the way that Facebook handled things in 2016?*

Frenkel: I think that the best sources I developed were people who saw problems in what Facebook was doing, but who actually were quite loyal to the company and who really were looking to improve it or make it better. Their motivation originally, I would say, was almost entirely, 'Well, I want to talk to a reporter about this, because I think we can be doing better.'

JJ: *You joined The Times at first to focus on cybersecurity. What is the overlap between cybersecurity and the work you do now on misinformation and democracy?*

Frenkel: I had a conversation with my editor at the time when I started writing about misinformation. It seemed fairly obvious to both of us that [misinformation and cybersecurity] were really interconnected, and that part of cybersecurity and part of cyber warfare is disinformation. It's countries waging information warfare. It's really an extension. And so while we maybe think of cybersecurity as just hacks — people leveraging computers to attack one another — I do think modern-day warfare extends beyond that. What happened in 2018 is a perfect example of that, where Russian agents didn't just infiltrate the computers of the DNC. They then waged information warfare with the electoral system. They took

those emails from the Clinton campaign and basically tried to harm her campaign. The two worlds of disinformation and cybersecurity both came together in that one moment.

JJ: *For people who are not going to get off of Facebook, is there a way to approach the site more responsibly?*

Frenkel: It's so important, because I don't actually expect people to get off Facebook. I use Facebook. I have friends and family that live all over the world, and the only way I have to reach them is through Facebook. I think it's unrealistic when people talk about getting off Facebook. I think a better approach is, how do you use Facebook responsibly?

When you see something which gets you riled up or angry, instead of just sharing it right away, you take a moment to say, 'Let me check the source of this information. This might not be accurate. This sounds too crazy — I'm going to take a moment before I share it.' When I talk to older family members and friends, I often say that. I've seen friends of mine share things on Facebook, especially during the pandemic, which I know aren't true because they're even fact-checked. And I call those people up, old-fashioned, saying, 'Hey, you just shared something on Facebook. You're saying there's going to be a mask mandate in this place and masks are required, and [people] not wearing masks will be put in jail. I can tell you that that's not the law in the city. This is the law.' Misinformation intentionally gets people angry or upset. I just think getting people to calm down a minute and realize that Facebook's algorithms are designed to put emotive content at the top of your newsfeed, so whatever is likely to make you angry or sad or happy is going to be the first thing you see on Facebook. Knowing that, and not letting yourself get riled up, is really important.

JJ: *You write sometimes about Israel and the Middle East in the context of your work on social networks. How do the problems of misinformation and online propaganda play out in other countries, particularly in the Middle East? Does your approach to covering the issues in those countries differ from the*

way you cover them in the United States?

Frenkel: I wouldn't say my approach is any different. There are people who are looking to promote hate speech or who are looking to promote conspiracies and misinformation or violence. That's something I'm always looking at. And then I think just because I have a background in the Middle East — I lived there for a long time, I reported from many countries there — that kind of stuff often comes on my radar from those countries faster than it would from other parts of the world. I also think it's a part of the world where people are very experimental in how they use social media. I think about how the Taliban responded on social media when they swept [into] control of Afghanistan. I'm thinking years back when ISIS used social media in an innovative way to try and recruit people to join their cause and to try and promote an especially cruel type of terrorism. These are interesting uses of social media that I don't think anyone at the [social media] companies predicted.

JJ: *Are there any particular skills that you developed when working as a foreign correspondent that you bring with you into this reporting?*

Frenkel: I like to say that I did a lot of reporting on authoritarian regimes when I was a correspondent in the Middle East, so I got used to working outside of the system. The government wasn't going to be giving me accurate information, so I had to work on the periphery to find people within who were willing to become sources, give me accurate information and try to help me understand the systems or lack of systems that were in place. I think it trains you to be skeptical of many things, because you don't know exactly who's going to be a good source and give you accurate information and who's not. In a country like Egypt, it's not like you have this repository of really basic public information. I can't look up basic things like how many people are using the internet in the city, or what is the water supply like. It's just not updated public information. You have to approach everything with a note of caution and skepticism — like, OK, one person has told me that in their city, this

thing happened, but I need to independently find three or four other people that can tell me the same thing before I can proceed with it. Because I know I probably can't trust the official account of this thing.

JJ: *When you were just getting started as a reporter, why did you decide to begin your career in Israel?*

Frenkel: I didn't start my career there, actually. When I graduated from college, the first place I moved was South America. I was there for a bit before I had an editor that said, 'We just have a limited amount of stories we're taking from South America right now. Israel is about to withdraw from the Gaza Strip.' This was back in 2005, with the disengagement; Ariel Sharon was the prime minister and Israel was about to withdraw from its settlements in the Gaza Strip and several settlements in the West Bank. My editor back then just said, 'Look, this is a huge news event. And if you go there, we can take a lot more stories from you.' I think it was her way of helping me as a young reporter. She gave me very good advice that if I went there, it was going to be a big news event, and they were going to be able to commission a lot more work from me.

JJ: *Did you have any concerns when you were going there that as a Jewish reporter, you would be siloed into the Israel beat for the rest of your career?*

Frenkel: I left stuff with a friend in Argentina because I was so sure that I was

just going to be gone for six months. I was only 22 at the time, maybe 23. I was really young. And I thought, 'Oh, I'll just go there for six months, sell a bunch of articles, make a name for myself, and come right back.' I am sad to say that I have not been back to Argentina since then. And who knows what happened to my suitcases. I have felt very strongly that my Jewish identity is personal and to be kept outside of my reporting. My editors knew that I could speak Hebrew, and that I could speak Arabic. Back in those days when I was really just freelancing and trying to sell my articles to as many places as I could, I was really focused on, 'Hey, I speak the local languages and I can do reporting without a fixer, without a translator.' From the very, very beginning that was a great entry-point. I eventually ended up getting a press card from the Jerusalem Post, I got a job at the Jerusalem Post and I worked for them for a bit. That gave me great access to sources, and I did Knesset reporting for them. I got to meet a lot of members of parliament and meet the prime minister. I was able to really quickly source up because I had local language skills. It was less about whether I was Jewish and more about, well, I could speak Hebrew and Arabic, so I could speak to people by myself and create sources by myself.

JJ: *You write about the internet as a woman and as a Jewish person, two identities that often get a lot of hate on the web. Have you had to deal with that, and has it affected the way that you've approached or covered certain stories?*

Frenkel: You were trying to be delicate about it, but I think you know. Being a Jewish person online, being a woman online: these are not identities that are easy. On the internet, there is a lot of incredibly vitriolic speech directed at any minority group. It's sad that for some reason, women are still very much treated as a minority online. Early in my career, because I was covering the Middle East — and people are very deeply emotive about their feelings about the Middle East — I had to develop a tough skin online, because the attacks were so vicious. I had to just learn, like, 'I'm creating a really big wall around myself, and I'm not engaging, and there's nothing to be gained from feeding the trolls online.' That's a hard lesson to learn when you're really young, especially as a woman. If people are attacking your appearance or saying incredibly sexist things, you just learn to say, 'They're full of hate. They are full of incorrect assumptions. There's no point in going there, in engaging.' Everybody bends at some point; I've found someone who's incredibly rude or condescending or inaccurate, and then immediately regretted it because I've just gotten bogged down into a fight with them that I don't really want to be in. People who have good faith — people who actually want to engage with me on the content of my stories and have a real dialogue — it's very rarely over Twitter, with a bunch of emojis and starting with expletives. Those people are not looking to actually understand my work or have a real conversation about it. ♦

OCTOBER 13, 2021

Fernando Lottenberg takes on antisemitism across the Western Hemisphere

As the Organization of American States's first antisemitism envoy, the Brazilian attorney is thinking bigger than South America

By Gabby Deutch

For the first time in its more than 70-year history, the Organization of American States has

designated a dedicated point person to tackle antisemitism in the Western Hemisphere.

Fernando Lottenberg, a Brazilian constitutional attorney who previously served as the leader of the country's Jewish

community, began serving as the OAS commissioner to monitor and combat antisemitism last week. His appointment follows an increase in antisemitic beliefs in Latin America in recent years, according to public opinion polling from the Anti-Defamation League.

"I think the [OAS] Secretary General and organization realized that, as it has happened with other countries, such as [the] USA and Canada, [and] regional organizations such as the European Union, it's ripe in the Americas to have a position like this," Lottenberg told *Jewish Insider* in a phone interview from São Paulo yesterday, in which he laid out a hemisphere-wide approach to combating antisemitism.

The creation of the position was announced in a speech by OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro in June at the American Jewish Committee's annual conference.

"I think that Secretary General Almagro understands [the problem] very well," said Dina Siegel Vann, director of the AJC's Belfer Institute for Latino and Latin American Affairs. Vann served as an informal advisor to Almagro as OAS looked for a candidate to fill the position, and she told JI that Lottenberg will be a "model of a partner" in the role.

"The Jewish world pays a lot of attention to Europe, for obvious reasons. But I think that it's at our own peril as American Jewry not to pay attention to Latin America," said Vann.

Lottenberg comes to the role after serving for six years as the president of the Jewish Confederation of Brazil, the country's leading Jewish communal group. With 120,000 Jews, Brazil has the second-largest Jewish population in Latin America, behind Argentina.

Born and raised in São Paulo, Lottenberg, 59, has spent most of his life there. He earned his bachelor's, law degree and doctorate at the University of São Paulo, with a brief stint at the University of Texas at Austin through the Fulbright Scholars Program.

And while he is not a well-known figure among Jewish leaders in North America, Lottenberg is committed to working with them in this new role. "It's important for everybody to remember that [antisemitism] is not something that relates only to Latin

America," said Lottenberg, who added that it is a "common mistake" for people to think that OAS's purview is only Latin America. In fact, "It includes the U.S. and it includes Canada," he noted.

The countries in the Americas share core values, Lottenberg argued, and fighting antisemitism is in line with preserving their commitment to democracy. He pledged to work with antisemitism envoys in Canada and the U.S. to "keep our continent as it was promised, a land where people can come and settle and thrive by keeping their identities, and living together in a place where you're not asked where you've come from, but what you do, what you can contribute to your society."

Lottenberg has reached out to Irwin Cotler, a human rights lawyer and Canada's special envoy on preserving Holocaust remembrance and combatting antisemitism, and to Deborah Lipstadt, a Holocaust historian who is awaiting Senate confirmation as the State Department's special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism.

"This is an important regional and hemispheric appointment," Cotler told JI. "He will, on his own initiative, bring forth an action plan for combating antisemitism in the Americas, for which we will all benefit."

In an email, Lipstadt praised the selection of Lottenberg, whom she does not know personally. "I welcome this appointment and, should I be confirmed by the Senate, look forward to working with Commissioner Lottenberg," she said.

Lottenbergsaidheintendstofocusmainly on education and on international treaties. As a representative of an international organization — OAS is a regional body that promotes cooperation between member states on democracy, human rights and the economy — Lottenberg will not have the power to change laws in the OAS's 35 member nations.

"The OAS is not the organization that can put some sanctions or legislation to punish people, but we can stimulate behaviors and we can build treaties. For instance, we can stimulate countries to adopt the working definition of IHRA," Lottenberg explained, referring to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism.

Cotler said that Lottenberg's legal background will prove useful as he urges other Latin American countries to adopt the IHRA definition. The definition has already been adopted by the OAS, although many member nations — including Lottenberg's native Brazil — have not yet signed onto the definition.

"He will be able to articulate how the IHRA working definition is, in fact, grounded in foundational principles of human rights law, of equality law, of our international treaty obligations, because he has that expertise as a constitutional lawyer," said Cotler.

As an example of the work he would like to do across the continent, Lottenberg referred to his efforts in Brazil regarding the treatment of hate speech within the country's legal system.

"We have developed, and this is very dear to me, kind of a guide to combat hate speech, especially within the platforms and on the social networks," Lottenberg said. "Countries differ in their approach [to] the issue of hate speech."

In the United States, he explained, free speech is enshrined in the country's Constitution. "The First Amendment gives a much broader spectrum for people to write or to speak. In other countries, for instance, such as Brazil, there is no such attitude," Lottenberg noted. As an attorney, he created a system to help Brazilian legal professionals identify hate speech.

"We built, with the help of a law school in São Paulo, Brazil, a guide to help legal professionals such as judges, police officers, DAs, etc., to identify when an expression can be characterized as hate speech, and then you can take the legal instruments that are available to punish that conduct," Lottenberg recalled. "I think we can expand this to other countries in the continent, of course respecting the specificities of each country, each legal system. But the message [is] that hate speech is not something that should be included in freedom of expression."

Lottenberg laid out three distinct types of antisemitism with which the region contends: "traditional antisemitism, let's say a right-wing expression"; "some manifestations of anti-Zionism that

comes more from the left, especially after [the May conflict] in Gaza, when Jews collectively are held responsible for what happens in the Middle East”; and “Islamic fundamentalism.”

This third strain “is not as prevalent in the Americas as it is in other regions,” Lottenberg said, but it holds great historical significance in South America, where Jews are still reeling from the 1994 Hezbollah bombing of the AMIA Jewish center in

Buenos Aires that killed 85 people. Two years ago, Almagro officially declared Hezbollah a terrorist group at AJC’s conference.

The fight against antisemitism in the Americas is not one that Lottenberg intends to tackle alone.

“The guy who fires at people in front of a synagogue in Pittsburgh is not very different from the guy who fires at people at a mosque in New Zealand,” Lottenberg explained.

“The Jewish communities are a natural

ally,” he said. But, he added, “I believe everybody should be interested in that fight, in combating discrimination — I believe civil society, universities and political leadership that are interested in having a respectful and tolerant environment with regard to minorities should be our natural allies.” ♦

OCTOBER 6, 2021

David Friedman aims to boost Muslim tourism to Jerusalem

Jerusalem takes center stage in Friedman’s new Abraham Accords initiative

By Ruth Marks Eglash

How do you turn a declaration signed by Middle East leaders on the White House lawn into a tangible and solid foundation for regional peace? David Friedman, America’s former ambassador to Israel who helped craft last year’s Abraham Accords between Israel and four Muslim-majority countries, believes the answer lies in the golden stones of Jerusalem.

On Monday evening, Friedman, who served as the Trump administration’s ambassador to Israel, will inaugurate his new nonprofit, The Friedman Center for Peace through Strength. Its aim: to place the holy but often contentious city at the forefront of the normalization agreements Israel signed with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco by boosting Muslim tourism to Jerusalem.

“I think there’s an opportunity, through the Abraham Accords, to really expose Jerusalem to the Muslim world in a way that hasn’t been done before,” Friedman told *Jewish Insider* during an interview from his Jerusalem home last week.

His plan is an ambitious one. The Muslim world is steadfastly reluctant to recognize Israel’s sovereignty over all of Jerusalem, but Friedman said he is driven, in part, by a desire to correct a “perception among

Muslims that Israel or the Jewish people are not hospitable or respectful” of Islam’s third holiest site, the al-Aqsa Mosque, which sits in the heart of the Old City. He also pointed out that only a fraction of the world’s two billion Muslims has ever visited Jerusalem or the mosque.

“They’re reliant upon news stories that often come from bias sources like Al Jazeera and there is this sense of discomfort — as you would expect anyone to have if you think another country is disrespecting your third holiest religious site,” said Friedman, who would like to see a shift in the conflict from the religious to the political. “Religious conflicts are dangerous, they foment extremism and lead to violence, but political conflicts, by and large, can be managed and resolved or at least be held in check.”

Friedman’s goal is to encourage Muslim visitors — thought leaders, business leaders and political leaders — to come and see Jerusalem with their own eyes and, he says, to witness the very opposite of what they’ve been told up until now, “that Israel does a very good job of promoting religious tolerance and respecting the religious faiths of others,” he told *JL*.

“I think there’s a story here that’s not told,” Friedman continued, “Nobody’s perfect and there’s always room for improvement, but I think Israel does a very good job protecting

the Islamic holy sites, the Christian holy sites and of course, the Jewish holy sites... I believe that properly presented, the story of how Israel protects Muslim holy sites is the secret sauce that can really end the Israeli-Arab conflict.”

His inspiration, says Friedman, whose father was a rabbi, comes from the Bible — in particular, a verse from Isaiah 2:4 that is inscribed on the wall facing the United Nations headquarters in his native New York: “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”

“What is the paradigm of peace that essentially the entire world accepts?” asked Friedman, reciting the passage in Hebrew. “Isaiah’s vision, that nation will not lift up sword against nation and will not study war anymore, is the end product, but he also gives you a recipe for how to get there in the same verse and the prior verse, that the nations of the world will come to Jerusalem. Why will they come to Jerusalem? Because Jerusalem is the wellspring of all the values that the religious world holds dear and what will happen when they get there? Isaiah goes on to say that G-d will resolve their differences.”

Friedman calls it a “2,800-year-old

vision” that still resonates with all the religions that recognize Isaiah as a prophet. He also says it’s a “logical extension” of moving the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in 2018, a step he facilitated for former President Donald Trump.

“I am very proud of what we did,” declared Friedman, whose office is filled with a mix of religious books and memorabilia from his nearly four years in diplomatic office.

“My idea is to make Jerusalem, which means ‘city of peace,’ worthy of its name and for Jerusalem to be part of the solution, not the problem,” he said. “People talk about commerce, trade and tourism and all those things, and, of course, that flow is from good relations. But by reducing or eliminating religious conflict, I think you really are able to build trust, and trust is what will drive these Accords to expand and to grow.”

Among those set to attend the opening ceremony of his institute on Monday will be Friedman’s former colleagues Jared

Kushner, who served as a senior advisor to the former president; Ivanka Trump; former U.S. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who will receive an award. Also slated to make an appearance is the president of FIFA, the world soccer association, Gianni Infantino, who is visiting Israel for the first time at Friedman’s invitation.

The new institute will also screen the world premiere of a five-part documentary about the agreements aptly titled “The Abraham Accords.” Co-produced by Friedman and the Trinity Broadcasting Network, the film “records the voices of all the players involved,” Friedman told JI, reeling off a list of who’s who from Trump’s inner circle, including the former president himself, as well as former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel’s former Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi and former Israeli Ambassador to the United States Ron Dermer. Leaders from the

other states involved in the Accords are also featured.

Friedman is hopeful that other countries will soon join the Accords. “I no longer have any influence, but [President Joe] Biden has said many times that he supports this, as has [Secretary of State Tony] Blinken; they’ve all been very positive,” said Friedman. “This is the one consensus thing between the administrations, but they have just been moving very slow.”

If the Accords are to be expanded — Friedman declined to give any clue as to which country he thought might be next to join — he said that “it will require the United States of America to take a more active role.”

“What you need is a strong America, working with a strong Israel, working with strong nations in the Gulf that have common values and common interests,” Friedman surmised. “It’s all there but they’ve all got to remain strong.” ♦

OCTOBER 15, 2021

Andrew Yang marches forward

‘I believe the Forward Party is, in many ways, a natural response to many of the concerns of the Jewish community,’ Yang explained to Jewish Insider

By Matthew Kassel

Andrew Yang, the entrepreneur and former presidential longshot, said his experience navigating the fraught politics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict last spring as a Democratic candidate for New York City mayor — when escalating violence between Israel and Hamas in Gaza coincided with an uptick in antisemitic incidents — informed his decision to launch a third party that he hopes will act as a moderating force in American politics.

“We’re seeing antisemitism arise in different ways now, and that’s something that I find very worrisome,” Yang said in an interview with *Jewish Insider*. “I believe that’s another reason why we should have a more robust, multi-polar system.”

Yang, who recently registered as an

independent after decades as a Democrat, recently revealed that he was starting the Forward Party in an effort to reshape what he views as an entrenched political system in thrall to various forms of extremism and groupthink. The announcement appears in the final chapter of his eponymously titled new book, *Forward: Notes on the Future of Our Democracy*, published by Crown.

“I believe the Forward Party is, in many ways, a natural response to many of the concerns of the Jewish community,” Yang said.

The 46-year-old businessman turned politician, who is ultimately aiming to attract 20 million members to his new party, lays out six “key principles” in his book, touching on such procedural ambitions as “ranked-choice voting and open primaries” as well as broad policy initiatives like “human-

centered capitalism” and “universal basic income.”

While guaranteed monthly payments of \$1,000 for American citizens 18 and older was the central proposal of his 2020 presidential campaign — helping him garner a sizable fan base of enthusiastic young followers — Yang emphasized that he is now largely focused on ballot initiatives that will enable ranked-choice voting and open primaries in states around the country ahead of the 2022 midterms.

“There’s not a whole lot of time,” he told JI.

Yang placed fourth in the June New York City mayoral primary, which used a ranked-choice voting system. But instituting such changes more expansively, he argued, would help create the conditions for new coalitions — such as the one he forged with the Jewish

community during his mayoral campaign — capable of loosening the current two-party framework that he views as “very vulnerable to authoritarianism.”

“I think, if you have certain ideas, and you only have two parties, that those ideas can become more pernicious and widespread and powerful than if you have more parties that represent different points of view,” Yang told JI. “The last thing that you’d want is certain points of view that are in a subset of the Democratic Party to become more prevalent.”

Yang was alluding, at least in part, to what he characterized as a “strong narrative” among progressive Democrats “that tries to separate everyone into either oppressor or oppressed” — a sorting mechanism that, he suggested, takes a particularly malevolent turn when coupled with growing anti-Israel sentiment on the far left.

“In this narrative, the people of Israel are the oppressors, and what’s interesting is that when you have conversations with other people in other contexts, you could make the case that Jews are actually historically the most oppressed people in the history of the world,” Yang said. “There’s this narrative that’s taking place that’s very binary that will give rise to antisemitism, and that oppressor versus oppressed narrative leaves no room for nuance.”

Yang indicated that he had “encountered people who very much held” that view when his mayoral campaign overlapped with the conflict between Israel and Hamas. As violence intensified last May, Yang weighed in with a supportive statement for the Jewish state. “I’m standing with the people of Israel who are coming under bombardment attacks,” he wrote on Twitter, “and condemn the Hamas terrorists.”

Though his pro-Israel statement echoed those of a number of leading Democratic candidates in the crowded field, Yang found himself subject to the most intense scrutiny from critics who protested that he had excluded Palestinians impacted by the conflict. Over the following days, Yang was uninvited from a Ramadan event and heckled by pro-Palestinian activists at a campaign stop in Queens.

“Utterly shameful,” Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) declared of Yang’s comments.

Seeking to quell the backlash, Yang released a lengthy note of contrition in which he clarified his initial remarks. “I mourn for every Palestinian life taken before its time as I do for every Israeli,” he said at the time. His statement, however, appeared to do little to appease his detractors, many of whom excoriated the follow-up on social media.

“There were very, very strong emotions and exchanges, certainly around Israel, and some of the sentiments I encountered I did disagree with very significantly,” Yang recalled. He declined to elaborate, simply remarking that he “had exchanges with people who have extreme points of view that I don’t think should be mainstream.”

“I was brought up to believe that the U.S. and Israel are the best of friends, and I was also brought up to believe that your friend can do something that you disagree with and they’re still your friend,” Yang said. “Those are some of the principles that I grew up with that I’ve taken for granted my entire adult life.”

But if Yang was disoriented by the intense pushback elicited by his social media message, he was more alarmed by the string of antisemitic attacks that had many Jews in New York on high alert during the May conflict..

“During my mayoral campaign, I became aware of just how much a rising danger antisemitism is, and it’s genuinely frightening to me,” he told JI. “I saw that antisemitism is getting stronger on a level that, I imagine, Jewish people are very aware of and sensitive to. I’m not sure other people would realize.”

Despite his newcomer’s status in the mayoral primary field, Yang, who lives in Manhattan, earned widespread support from the local Orthodox Jewish community thanks in part to his laissez-faire approach to the yeshiva education system as well as his unequivocal rejection of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement targeting Israel. Yang described the movement as “rooted in antisemitic thought” in an opinion piece at the beginning of his mayoral campaign.

Yang said his newfound relationships with Jewish leaders in Brooklyn and Queens have imbued the Forward Party with a “different urgency,” highlighting “some of

the excesses” on “the Democratic side,” most recently including a House vote last month in which an outspoken cohort of progressive Democrats opposed the approval of \$1 billion in supplemental funding for Israel’s Iron Dome missile-defense system. “I thought that vote was deeply troubling,” he said.

“I learned a lot from the Jewish community,” Yang told JI. “There’s an integrity to the community I just really adored and appreciated and I’m very grateful for. It’s something that’s missing in far too many parts of this country.”

As he embarks on his latest political project, Yang said he has spoken with Jewish supporters who are disenchanted by the Democratic Party. “They’ve expressed a number of concerns that have made them excited about the Forward Party,” he told JI. “Number one, they see that there is a strain within the Democratic Party that will make support for Israel more and more contentious moving forward — a stream that does, unfortunately, include antisemitism.”

The other element, he said, “is that they see that right now the system is not designed for success, and it’s subject to very negative and authoritarian impulses.”

“I just had a call today with someone who’s the child of Holocaust survivors, and he said to me that the Forward Party is the most important thing going right now because it has a chance to preserve a stable system and that most people don’t see it,” Yang told JI. “Most people are trapped in the bipartisan back and forth. It’s like, OK, this party wins, that party wins. But then my Jewish friend who I just spoke to said, ‘No, the issue is really whether democracy itself will maintain integrity and survive.’ And that’s what the Forward Party’s laser-focused on.”

Yang, who is Taiwanese-American, believes that Jews and Asians in particular represent a natural coalition for the Forward Party amid a rise in hate crimes against both groups. “A lot of this stuff I discovered during the mayoral [campaign],” he said. “I didn’t realize how tied together the Jewish community is with my community and the survival of the system.”

“Jews and Asians are kind of in a similar boat in terms of, like, we need a functioning system of integrity to stand the test of time

or else our communities are among those that will be targeted,” he said. “Truly.”

Yang recalled attending an anti-Asian hate rally when he was running for mayor that helped clarify why he now believes forming a third party is necessary. “People started chanting ‘defund the police,’” he told JI. “I said to a friend at the time, ‘If someone thinks that defunding the police would be a good thing for Asians, they need to have their head examined.’”

“The Forward Party is going to build a very significant coalition of Americans who are typically more moderate, more practical, less ideological and want the system to work,” Yang claimed. “I think that will have

high overlap with the Jewish communities and the Asian communities who, I think, tend to be a little bit more moderate and practical.”

More broadly, Yang speculated that his party would also appeal to business people and those who work in the tech industry. “Business people right now look at our current political system and are like, ‘Where am I supposed to fall in this?’ — in part because the two parties are hewing toward various extremes,” he said. “I have a lot of friends in the tech community, and many of them are very excited about trying to upgrade the system itself.”

“It’s going to be a really interesting,

diverse coalition, and I’m super excited about it.”

Asked if he would run for office again as a member of his own party after two failed Democratic campaigns, Yang said he is currently dedicated to liberalizing electoral systems at the state level.

But he didn’t explicitly rule out the possibility either.

“Right now, I’m focused on 2022,” he said. “We have to try and make the system stronger. I’ll do whatever I think I’m called to do, but I’m genuinely laser-focused on trying to use the time we have, because we don’t have limitless time.” ♦