

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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OCTOBER 19, 2021

Israeli ambassador's residence to return to the District

The lease on Maryland home where former Israeli Amb. Ron Dermer lived for eight years set to expire at the end of this month, but the official ambassador's residence remains under construction

By Gabby Deutch and Ruth Marks Eglash

When Israel's new ambassador to the United States lands in Washington early next month, he will be greeted by a vacant lot where the official Israeli residence once stood.

Incoming Ambassador Michael Herzog will move into a rental property in Washington, D.C., close to the Israeli embassy, a source with knowledge of the arrangement told *Jewish Insider*.

The property will be a new one for the embassy, which since 2013 has rented a five-bedroom home in suburban Chevy Chase, Md., at a total cost of nearly \$2 million, *Ynet* reported last week. The lease on the home, which is in the Kenwood neighborhood, close to the border with Washington, is up at the end of this month.

The official residence, owned by the Israeli government, on Chesapeake Street Northwest, is in a prime location, near the residences of ambassadors from countries including Kuwait, Iraq and Italy. It was also an historic building that housed every Israeli ambassador since the 1960s, including Yitzhak Rabin. The house was abandoned

in 2013, when former Ambassador Michael Oren returned to Israel and in recent years was torn down.

"The ambassador's residence is not a house, it is a facility," Oren told *Jewish Insider* on Tuesday. "It is a crucial facility that is in constant use to host attachés, diplomats, members of the administration, and the press."

"You build relationships through the house," he added.

Whereas the now-demolished residence could cater to hundreds of people, the Israeli Embassy compound is too small to host large gatherings, explained Oren. "It had a strategic and diplomatic importance," he said. "I hosted presidents [at the residence], defense ministers and foreign ministers. We held celebrations on the Jewish holidays and it was in constant use."

But he described the house as being "in decrepit condition."

"There were termites and mold," he said, recalling waking up one morning to an entire floor covered in termite larvae. "Walls would crack and a terrible smell would emanate from inside, part of the roof caved in."

According to *Ynet*, Oren's replacement, the Sabbath-observant Ron Dermer, requested not to live in the residence, partly because it was too small to house his five children and also because he wanted a place closer to an Orthodox synagogue in Maryland. Oren said it was also because of the condition of the house. "He was afraid for his kids' health."

Asked why the process of repairing or rebuilding the residence has taken so long, Oren said it was a symbol of how the Israeli Foreign Ministry operates. "The rot in the walls of the residence symbolizes the rot in the structure of the foreign ministry."

Originally there were plans to sell the residence and make the ambassador's home part of the embassy, Oren recalled. "It was an interesting idea but that residence was a historic building. It housed Israeli ambassadors going all the way back to the 1960s. It was also an architectural jewel. I thought we should renovate the house and I had donors lined up to do so but then I was told, 'Either deal with the renovations during your tenure or deal with diplomacy'; I had no choice but to deal with the latter."

After returning to Israel, Oren served as a Knesset member and deputy minister and attempted to deal with the building's renovations, but the ministry's budget kept shrinking, and diplomatic missions were being closed.

A 2017 *Haaretz* report said Israeli government officials eventually concurred with Oren, deeming the house uninhabitable, but it took three years after he left for the Israeli government to file a request for demolition with the Washington, D.C., government, and the process remains incomplete. The house has now been demolished, and a new one is expected to be constructed within the year.

"It's not good to have a razed building,"

said Aviva Kempner, a Jewish film producer who lives a few blocks from the official residence. "But more importantly, it's good for the status of Israel to be there with all the countries that are in that area."

Gilad Erdan, Israel's permanent representative to the United Nations and current ambassador since Dermer returned to Israel earlier this year, has stayed at the Kenwood residence during his visits to the area. (Erdan lives full-time in New York.)

"The location of the residence is less important, though it is nice to be close to the sweet spots on Connecticut or Massachusetts Avenue and you also don't want to be too far out," Oren commented, explaining how administration officials

often attend more than one event in an evening and being in the same proximity as other ambassadors is beneficial.

He said that he hoped the replacement building would be accessible to people with disabilities. He described one event he held at the residence where Sen. Tammy Duckworth (D-IL), a wheelchair-bound Iraqi war veteran, arrived but was unable to enter. "It was super embarrassing," said Oren.

A spokesperson for the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem confirmed that the embassy would rent an alternative residence for Herzog where he will live until the construction of a permanent ambassador's house is complete. ♦

OCTOBER 19, 2021

A sprawling Reboot project creates new music for a classic horror film

Musician and philanthropist Gretchen Davidson is playing both roles in 'The Golem' project

By Helen Chernikoff

First, Gretchen Gonzales Davidson was a musician, a member of the indie band Slumber Party and a high-profile figure in Michigan's experimental scene. Now, she's also a philanthropist, married to Ethan Daniel Davidson, who helped create the William Davidson Foundation, named for his father. Those two identities have merged in a new project she's helping to create and fund — the rescoring of "The Golem: How He Came Into the World," a German film about the monster of Jewish folklore, Davidson told *eJewishPhilanthropy*.

"When I think of the golem, I am reminded of how important it is to be careful of what you wish for," Davidson said, referring to the golem's combination of protective and destructive urges. "We need to be mindful of the consequences surrounding the words we say, and the things we create."

Davidson is a member of the band Threshing Floor, which created the music

for the first section of the rescored film. She was also one half of the creative pair who conceived of the idea, which is a project of Reboot, the nonprofit network of Jewish creatives. The other was David Katznelson, Reboot's CEO, also a musician and music producer.

Finished in 1920 but released in 1921, "The Golem" was directed by Paul Wegener and Carl Boese and based on a novel by Gustav Meyrink. None of the three were Jewish, but other members of the company were, such as Hans Lansberger, who wrote the original score, and actor Ernst Deutsch.

"These people who were in the same troupe at the same time had very different fates," Katznelson said. "Some joined the Nazis; some fled; some were killed. You're seeing a moment in history. That goes beyond the film itself."

Reboot has cut the film, which is in the public domain, into eight parts, and paired each section with music and commentary. In the first one, "Magic and Mystics," a professor

of philosophy and religion examines the mystical spiritual leader Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, creator of the golem. Threshing Floor, which had come together last spring to create music during Reboot's all-night online Shavuot event, DAWN, provides the score.

Part of the motivation for "The Golem" project was the band's desire to make more music together. Reboot was also eager to explore putting music to other silent films, as the group had done this past Passover, for Cecil B. DeMille's "Ten Commandments."

Katznelson is a fan of both contemporary horror movies and the emotional, stylized "German Expressionist" school that produced "The Golem." While web surfing one day, he learned that 2021 was the centennial of the film's release, which inspired Davidson and Katznelson to move forward with the project, which will be released later this month.

The William Davidson Foundation, along with the Joyce and Irving Goldman Family

Foundation, the Jim Joseph Foundation and the Righteous Persons Foundation, is one of Reboot's major institutional supporters and a source of ongoing operating funds. Davidson also contributed independently to the project, Katznelson said.

Lou Cove, founder of the Jewish arts funder CANVAS, praised Reboot's rescored "The Golem" on its artistic merits, and as a piece of culture that will enhance and strengthen Jewish life. "Modern Jewish creativity is, by definition, dependent upon the past," he said. "The results, when they are truly excellent and imaginative, can move us, as Jews, to embrace and reexamine our own identities."

The movie is set in the ghetto of medieval Prague, where Rabbi Loew has created the golem in order to protect his flock from eviction by the Holy Roman Emperor. It plays on themes of Jewish vulnerability, wisdom, sexuality and cohesion.

Reboot hopes to offer in-person screenings when the COVID-19 pandemic permits, and in the meantime will release it online — on YouTube and its own site, and by tapping into the various niche networks that will be eager to see and listen to it — horror buffs, aficionados of historical film, fans of the many musicians involved in the project and Jews with an interest in their heritage and culture, Katznelson said.

"One of the things that Reboot does is remix the past for future generations to own and find inspiration from," he said.

The project is hosted by John K. Bucher, creative director of the Joseph Campbell Foundation and Torri Yates-Orr, host of the "Skeleton Keys" podcast. Some 25 people are participating in the effort, including Marika Hughes, a cellist and composer; members of Los Lobos and the Flaming Lips and Jeremiah Lockwood, front man of the band The Sway Machinery, who received training from both blues musician Carolina Slim and his grandfather, Cantor Jacob Konigsberg. ♦

OCTOBER 18, 2021

Wes Moore bets on Maryland

The former Robin Hood Foundation CEO and gubernatorial hopeful is counting on his charisma to win over Maryland voters

By Gabby Deutch

As the former CEO of New York City's largest anti-poverty nonprofit, Wes Moore stayed loyal to his Maryland roots. So loyal, in fact, that he commuted to Manhattan from Baltimore throughout his four years at the Robin Hood Foundation. Now, Moore, a Democrat, is taking his love for the Old Line State to a new level, having entered the race for governor of Maryland.

It's Moore's first time running for office, and polling indicates that most people in the state have never heard of him. But he is well-known to members of Baltimore's tight-knit Jewish community: Moore spoke at the annual meeting of The Associated, Baltimore's Jewish federation, in 2019, and traveled to Israel several years ago with the Baltimore-based Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation.

"He has a relationship with us, with the broader Jewish community," said Howard Libit, executive director of the Baltimore Jewish Council, the political and community relations arm of The Associated.

Moore, 43, joined a crowded field of

longtime Maryland politicians running for the state's top office, looking to reassert Democratic dominance in the state after eight years under the term-limited Republican Gov. Larry Hogan. With a compelling personal story and an optimistic outlook, Moore is counting on his charisma to win over supporters.

"I knew early that I was going to devote my life to public service," Moore told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview. "I had a chance to see my mom struggle in ways that she didn't have to. I saw the way that my grandparents were able to sacrifice for their grandchildren, and in many ways give up pieces and parts of their own American dream so I could fulfill my own."

Born in Takoma Park, Md., Moore spent much of his childhood in the Bronx with his grandparents — immigrants from Jamaica and Cuba — after his father died. His mother sent him to a military academy as a teenager following several run-ins with the law, an experience that Moore has described as transformative. He went on to attend Johns Hopkins University, and he later earned a Rhodes Scholarship. After serving a tour of

duty in Afghanistan, Moore worked at the State Department as a White House Fellow in the George W. Bush administration and on Wall Street.

"I knew that throughout all those experiences, that I wanted to devote my life to making things a little bit easier for people," Moore said. He wrote a bestselling 2010 book called *The Other Wes Moore*, about a friendship he developed with another Black man with the same name, also from Baltimore, who like Moore was raised mainly by his mother — but ultimately ended up in prison with a life sentence for murder.

"[Moore has] a personal story that comes across really well, and it seems that a lot of people are really excited about him and drawn to him," said Susan Turnbull, who was the Democratic candidate for lieutenant governor in 2018 and who has not yet endorsed a candidate in the governor's race. "After four years of Trump and eight years of Hogan, people want to be excited about somebody."

The Democratic gubernatorial primary is in June 2022, and the filing deadline

for the race is not until January, leaving plenty of time for the dynamics of the race to change in the months ahead. Seven other Democrats have declared that they are running, and several of them have long political histories in the state.

A poll commissioned by Moore's campaign found that the leading candidates are current Maryland Comptroller Peter Franchot and former Prince George's County Executive Rushern Baker.

Moore was next in third place with just 7% support, and former Democratic National Committee chair Tom Perez followed with 6%. More than half of voters said they remain undecided, but among the third of voters who had heard of Moore, he was the top candidate. Former state Attorney General Doug Gansler garnered 4% in the poll, and Baltimore tech executive Michael Rosenbaum — who is self-financing his campaign — got 2%.

"I do think many of the candidates have a long way to go to introduce themselves, not just to the Jewish community, but to the state. It's early," said Libit, who noted that his organization will organize forums for the candidates to speak to members of the Baltimore Jewish community. Gansler and Rosenbaum are Jewish. "Franchot, as comptroller, has been supportive of issues in our community and has long relationships" with the Jewish community, Libit added.

One of Moore's closest friends in Baltimore's Jewish community is Rabbi Daniel Cotzin Burg, the rabbi at the Conservative Temple Beth Am in Baltimore City. "We met about nine years ago in Jerusalem when he was traveling to Israel with the Weinberg Foundation," said Burg, who as a spiritual leader does not intend to endorse a candidate in the race.

After Moore's book came out, Burg's synagogue, which is in a historically Jewish neighborhood that is now majority Black, hosted him for a number of events. A conversation about the bar mitzvah process led to another joint program, after Moore returned from a trip to South Africa inspired by a local tribal custom of adolescent boys spending a week in the bush to mark their official transition to adulthood.

Together, the pair created "a platform and a program that focused on combining African American young men from West

Baltimore, and also Jewish young men who are going through the bar mitzvah process, and saying, 'What would this look like if we could have this cohesive relationship about what it means to enter into adulthood together?'" Moore recalled.

Moore's Jewish base of support is strongest in Baltimore. Darrell Friedman, the longtime former head of The Associated, is a personal friend of Moore's who plans to "knock on doors, whatever it takes to get someone like Wes Moore into public service," Friedman told JI. He has already hosted multiple events for Moore in New York City, where he lives now, and said he has heard of similar events being planned in California.

"We share common values. He stands for everything that I think I stand for, and the Jewish people stand for," added Friedman.

Moore's campaign treasurer, Lissa Muscatine, is the co-owner of the Politics and Prose bookstore in Washington and a former speechwriter for Democratic politicians including Hillary Clinton. Liz Schroyer, president and CEO of the U.S. Global Leadership Coalition and a former AIPAC staffer, has hosted numerous Zoom events to introduce Moore to people in her community in Montgomery County.

"It's very hard to meet somebody in a one-dimensional box, and he just comes alive because he connects to people so quickly," said Schroyer, who met Moore for the first time after he entered the race. "A lot of people don't know him yet, and it's a very big field. But people are really drawn to him."

Jeffrey Slavin, the mayor of Somerset, Md., a small town in Montgomery County just over the border from the Friendship Heights neighborhood in Washington, cautioned that Moore might be "better known nationally than he is in Maryland." Slavin, who is supporting Moore, called him "the next generation who wants to make the world a better place."

In the interview with JI, Moore described his campaign as centered on "equity and fairness, and making sure that we're protecting people and specifically the most vulnerable in many of our societies." During his tenure at Robin Hood, the organization raised more than \$650 million, including \$230 million in 2020 to meet the increased need prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"He was very successful in the work that he did," said David Greenfield, CEO of the New York-based Met Council on Jewish Poverty, a nonprofit that routinely collaborated with Robin Hood. "He was definitely highly respected and admired and was someone who you could just as easily have a beer with as you could discuss some of the most complicated issues around social policy and how to improve America's social safety net."

Moore intends to bring his data-driven approach from Robin Hood — which had been honed previously in stints at Deutsche Bank and Citigroup, and at an education-access nonprofit he started — to Annapolis.

"I think the fact that I'm a very data-driven leader matters," Moore argued. "I believe that we should have measurements of accountability through the nonprofit sector in the same way we have measurements of accountability throughout all other sectors."

He expressed a desire to work closely with nonprofit organizations in the state, particularly after the pandemic obliterated the finances of some nonprofits in Maryland.

"People have to remember that the largest provider for social services in our state are nonprofit organizations. It's actually not the government. The government funds them," Moore explained. "We have to make sure that as a state and as local governments, that we are paying them on time, and we are paying them fair value for the work they are providing."

But part of what motivated his run for public office was an acknowledgment of the limits of nonprofits.

"Part of the challenge that nonprofits are taking on is the fact that there are systems that are so ruptured that we continue to allow people to fall through the cracks, and nonprofits end up there, picking up the pieces," said Moore. "Part of the job of the government is to make sure we're addressing the systems, so we don't have so many people who are falling through cracks and have this need, where we have our nonprofit organizations who in many cases end up having to clean up the debris that comes from broken systems."

While at Robin Hood, Moore took a broader approach to fighting poverty than the organization had in the past. "When I became the CEO was the first time that

Robin Hood very intentionally was making investments outside of the city of New York,” he said. “One of the first initiatives that we launched when I became the CEO was an initiative called Mobility LABs, which was working on, How are we addressing urban, rural and suburban poverty, and creating economic opportunities?”

This work often centered on Baltimore; the Weinberg Foundation was one of Mobility LABs’s early partners. It has allowed Moore to make the case to Marylanders that he never really left, even though he led a nonprofit focused on New York. According to U.S. Census Bureau data, Baltimore City has a poverty rate of 21.2% — one of the highest in the nation — while the poverty rate in the state of Maryland is 9%, the second-best in the country.

“Being able to really establish that core connection with the place that is my hometown, and the place where my wife and I are raising our kids, was incredibly important to me,” Moore said. (Moore’s wife, Dawn Moore, served as chief of staff to former Lt. Gov. Anthony Brown, who is now a member of Congress representing Prince George’s County.)

One feature of his work with Robin Hood that Moore hopes to bring with him as governor is an ability to study and learn from other municipalities. “There is no part of the country that has the market cornered

on poverty nor the market cornered on good ideas, and so we really became a place that wanted to be a best-practice laboratory to understand what was working in other parts of the country and bring it to our localized jurisdiction,” he said.

One of Moore’s key priorities is education, an issue he worked on earlier in his career as the founder of a company that helps remove barriers to access to higher education for poor students.

“I think that we have to make sure that we are investing heavily in our public schools and our public school students, and that includes our charter schools, because the things that work need to be scaled, and the things that are not working need to be addressed,” said Moore.

Since 2016, the state has offered private school vouchers to low-income students through a program called BOOST. When asked if he would support vouchers for parochial schools, Moore noted that the state just fully funded BOOST but did not offer a concrete answer on his policy: “This is something that’s going to be debated again with the legislature, and I just look forward to working with the legislature to come up with the correct answer,” Moore said. “My sole priority when it comes to education in Maryland is making sure that every child has access to a quality education.”

Although Joe Biden won 65% of the

vote in Maryland last year, the state was represented by a Republican governor. “Maryland voters have shown a willingness to consider the candidates regardless of party, so if you think about 12 of the last 36 years, we’ve had Republican governors for a pretty Democratic state,” Libit pointed out.

“The whole unknown is, what’s Michael Steele going to do?” asked Slavin, the Somerset mayor, referring to the former Maryland lieutenant governor and a former chair of the Republican National Committee who opposed former President Donald Trump from the beginning of his campaign in 2015. Steele is not officially in the race, but has said he is seriously considering a run. “He’s also very charming and all that. I never agreed with his issues, although I was glad he was involved with the Lincoln Project [an anti-Trump PAC], and he’s so anti-Trump,” added Slavin.

Moore isn’t yet talking about potential Republican candidates, or even his Democratic primary opponents.

“We got into this race with a clear idea that we as a state just have to move faster, that we have to be bold and deliberate about how we meet this moment, how we meet the challenges that we’ve seen throughout the state,” Moore said. “It’s been very encouraging to see that people in the state feel the same.” ♦

OCTOBER 19, 2021

Dale Holness vows to continue Alcee Hastings’s legacy in Congress

In the crowded race for Florida’s 20th, only one candidate claims to have been endorsed by the late Alcee Hastings

By Matthew Kassel

Dale Holness touts a number of advantages that should strongly position him among the half-dozen leading Democratic candidates now vying to replace the late Rep. Alcee Hastings (D-FL) in South Florida’s jam-packed special House election, scheduled for Nov. 2.

While polling is scarce, the Broward

County commissioner, 64, argues that his on-the-ground voter-engagement strategy remains unmatched in Florida’s 20th Congressional District, and he has led the field in outside campaign contributions, so far pulling in \$575,000, according to a campaign spokesperson.

But perhaps the most crucial advantage is the most contested: Holness claims to

have earned an endorsement from Hastings before his death in April at 84, despite that the former dean of Florida’s congressional delegation never publicized his support and does not appear to have put it in writing either.

Though Hastings’s widow contends that Holness is telling the truth, other candidates in the 11-way primary have quibbled with

his assertion. “I wouldn’t want to cast aspersions on the commissioner’s veracity, but I just think that an endorsement implies that it’s either in public or in writing,” Perry Thurston, a candidate and Democratic state senator who describes Hastings as a “good friend,” told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview.

Holness bristles at such comments. “The way I look at it is they didn’t get it so they’re going to make noise about it,” he said in an interview with JI on Sunday, retorting that he spoke with Hastings about the alleged endorsement two weeks before the congressman died. “We had that conversation and he said he was ready to get his voice out there. Unfortunately, we didn’t have that done.”

“He’s a legend,” Holness added about Hastings. “I certainly have great shoes to fill. Not saying that I’ll fill them, but I’ll do everything I can.”

For Holness, who describes Hastings as a mentor, that means upholding the congressman’s longstanding commitment to strengthening the U.S.-Israel relationship, of which he was hailed as a champion throughout his nearly three decades in the House.

If elected, “I will continue his leadership and follow in his footsteps,” Holness declares in an Israel position paper his campaign provided to JI, explaining his support for the country through the prism of advancing Black-Jewish relations — a cause to which Hastings was also dedicated.

“Jewish Americans and African Americans share histories of slavery and emancipation,” writes Holness, a Jamaican-born real estate broker who previously served as Lauderhill commissioner. “Similarly, the United States and Israel have shared histories of being places of refuge for people seeking the freedom to practice their faith while living in freedom and security. As a black male and strong supporter of the U.S.-Israel alliance, I look forward to working with the Jewish community to strengthen our bonds and the relationship between the United States and Israel.”

Holness visited Israel in 2019 on a trade mission during his tenure as vice mayor of Broward County, noting that he read *Startup Nation: The Story of Israel’s Economic Miracle* in preparation for the

trip. “Folks might not realize how Jews and Muslims and Arabs live side by side in Israel unless you go and see that,” he told JI. “Not saying that the Palestinians don’t have some serious issues in terms of the difficult conditions in which they live. But part of that, I believe, goes through leadership.”

He singled out Hamas, the militant extremist group that controls the Gaza Strip and last May fired rockets into Israel that precipitated the worst violence in the region since 2014. “Who believes that the way to create prosperity for their people is to lob rockets at Israel?” said Holness, who supports a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. “There are some challenges there that we must overcome to ensure that policies are put in place that help the Palestinian people,” he added. “But I don’t know that that can be done with Hamas in charge.”

“They need to join with what the other Arab countries are doing now and sit down at the table,” Holness said, referring to the recent series of diplomatic agreements, known as the Abraham Accords, between Israel and several Arab nations. “Now there are countries that are normalizing relationships with Israel.”

Holness rejected the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement targeting Israel, and supports public efforts to divest from companies that engage in the practice, such as Florida’s recent decision to enforce anti-BDS legislation by placing Ben & Jerry’s parent company, Unilever, on a list of “scrutinized companies that boycott Israel.”

He also supports the continuation of U.S. military assistance provided annually to Israel through a Memorandum of Understanding between the countries.

Holness said he would have voted in favor of legislation giving Israel \$1 billion in supplemental aid to replenish its Iron Dome missile-defense system, which was overwhelmingly approved in a House vote last month despite opposition from a handful of Democratic lawmakers and one Republican.

“The Iron Dome benefits America,” Holness said. “The research and development and the implementation of that Iron Dome helps us with our security, so funding that is actually funding our own defense.”

One candidate in the race, state Rep. Omari Hardy, drew controversy after revealing in an interview with JI last week that he would have voted against the funding. Hardy also favors conditioning aid to Israel more broadly and expressed support for BDS.

Holness took issue with those views. “Does he know how much money comes from Israelis that invest in our community in District 20?” he told JI. “Should we then cut off that investment from flowing in? That’s pretty much what would happen if we put something like that in place. It doesn’t make sense. I’m sorry. That’s not the solution to the issue that we face between the Palestinians and the Israelis.”

Holness is one of just two leading candidates in the race to have visited Israel. The other is Broward County Commissioner Barbara Sharief, who described her experience on an AIPAC-affiliated African-American leadership tour two years ago as eye-opening in a recent interview with JI.

The remaining top contenders include state Rep. Bobby DuBose and healthcare executive Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick, who has spent \$2.5 million of her own money in the race, according to a campaign spokesperson. All have expressed interest in visiting Israel if they are elected.

Former state legislator Priscilla Taylor, author Elvin Dowling, retired Naval officer Phil Jackson, former Department of Labor investigator Emmanuel Morel and internist Imran Siddiqui are also running.

National pro-Israel groups have so far withheld endorsements, and no single candidate appears to have locked up support from local Jewish community members, though candidates are actively courting their vote.

Aside from Hardy, “there is very little to distinguish the others when it comes to Israel,” Josephine Gon, vice president of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Palm Beach County, told JI, adding that all of the candidates she met with “say they’re supportive” of the Jewish state.

The candidates addressed the local Jewish community last month at a virtual forum hosted by the Broward County Democratic Party Jewish Caucus. They will meet again for a candidate forum hosted by the Jewish Democratic Council of America

on Oct. 20.

While the candidates are all largely aligned on Israel, they are also relatively in tune on domestic issues such as expanding healthcare access, increasing affordable housing and furthering criminal justice reform.

Holness, for his part, acknowledges that this dynamic has contributed to a relatively fluid race even with just a few weeks remaining until the primary. Whoever prevails is all but assured victory in the Jan.

11 general election because of the partisan makeup of the district, which includes Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach and is majority Black.

But Holness said the even playing field has only increased his motivation to engage with voters in what is expected to be a low-turnout election. "I believe that's how the race will be won," he said. "It will be won with who has the most outreach directly to the people, and we're there. I mean, I'm in church every Sunday. I've been to the

Chabad. I'm reaching out across all lines."

It's an approach, he suggested, that his late mentor, Hastings, would have wholeheartedly endorsed. "I look at what he's done, and his verbosity, his boldness, his strength of character, to do what's in the best interest of the people he represented, and also, to be inclusive of all the people that are within the district," Holness said. "It's something that I'll model moving forward." ♦

OCTOBER 21, 2021

Bobby DuBose wants to bring his Tallahassee experience to D.C.

The Florida state representative believes his 'battle-tested' legislative experience sets him apart in the crowded special election

By Matthew Kassel

Bobby DuBose, a Florida state representative who serves as co-leader of the Democratic House minority caucus, believes his experience navigating a charged political climate this past legislative session sets him apart in the crowded special election to replace the late Rep. Alcee Hastings (D-FL).

"We had a very toxic session in Tallahassee that was very similar to D.C.," DuBose, 50, told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview, referring to a series of controversial Republican-backed efforts targeting protesters in Florida, as well as the state's voting infrastructure that his party has decried as draconian. "But I was still able to pass key legislation."

One bill he is particularly proud of, co-sponsored by Democratic state Sen. Lauren Book, prohibits harsh disciplinary tactics against students with disabilities, which DuBose hopes will be adopted at the federal level. Another law, which DuBose passed with Republican state Sen. Dennis Baxley, will create Florida's first rare disease advisory council, hailed by proponents of the legislation as a crucial and long-overdue resource.

"They called us 'the unlikely pair,'" DuBose said of his somewhat improbable partnership with a staunch conservative in the upper chamber.

The term-limited state lawmaker, who represents Fort Lauderdale, is optimistic that voters in Florida's 20th Congressional District, which also includes West Palm Beach, will feel that his vision aligns even more broadly with their priorities as early voting begins on Saturday. The Nov. 2 primary is all but certain to indicate who will head to Congress next year because the district is heavily Democratic.

"Bobby has a history of working across the aisle to pass legislation that is important to his constituents," said Justin Day, a Democratic strategist in Florida who has contributed to the DuBose campaign but is otherwise uninvolved in the race. "He doesn't surrender his principles, but has an understanding of the legislative process, and the ability to build relationships that have led to his success."

DuBose is one of five elected officeholders — including state Sen. Perry Thurston, state Rep. Omari Hardy and Broward County Commissioners Dale Holness and Barbara Sharief — whom experts are assessing as

viable contenders in the race. Healthcare executive Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick is also aggressively vying for the seat, having spent \$2.5 million of her own money on the race.

"Bobby DuBose is a proven vote-getter," Joseph Geller, a state legislator in Aventura, told JI. "He's a viable candidate who has a shot."

While Holness has raised the most in outside contributions, pulling in \$575,000, according to a spokesperson, DuBose has strongly positioned himself among the leading fundraisers in the field, garnering \$227,000 as of June. A spokesperson for his campaign declined to provide an updated figure when asked by JI.

Rounding out the 11-way field are former state legislator Priscilla Taylor, author Elvin Dowling, retired Naval officer Phil Jackson, former Department of Labor investigator Emmanuel Morel and internist Imran Siddiqui.

DuBose, a former Fort Lauderdale city commissioner and vice mayor who entered the race last April shortly after Hastings' death at 84, said his top three priorities are healthcare, public school funding and criminal justice reform, a cause to which he

has long been devoted as a life-long member of the NAACP.

That some of the civil rights group's founders were Jewish, said DuBose, who is Black, has only deepened what he describes as a longstanding commitment to forging similar coalitions as an elected official. "Collectively, we're still in this together, even in this modern-day America," DuBose told JI. "I get it historically. I understand. We've always kind of acknowledged the connection and the relationship."

He is well aware that Hastings was viewed as a stalwart in that regard, known for his close relationship with Jewish constituents, as well as being an outspoken voice against antisemitism. "He was someone who understood the Jewish community," Ron Klein, a former Florida congressman who chairs the Jewish Democratic Council of America, said of Hastings, describing the late congressman as "unabashedly supportive of Israel."

DuBose said he recognizes that Middle East foreign policy is a particularly salient issue among the sizable minority of Jewish community members who make up a population of 41,000 voters in the mostly Black 20th District, according to a recent report from the Jewish Electorate Institute.

"I don't think they would have to worry about my stance," DuBose told JI.

The congressional hopeful supports the continuation of U.S. military assistance provided to Israel through a 10-year memorandum of understanding and rejects calls to condition aid that have increased since the conflict last May between Israel and Hamas in Gaza.

In addition, DuBose said he agreed with the majority of House Democrats who voted in favor of sending Israel \$1 billion to replenish its Iron Dome missile-defense system, despite resistance from an outspoken yet small faction of left-wing party members who objected to the measure.

He also opposes the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement targeting Israel, characterizing the effort as "antisemitic" in a position paper. DuBose signed on to a House resolution condemning the movement in 2016, and, according to a candidate questionnaire solicited by JI, agrees with public efforts to divest from companies

that engage in BDS, such as a recent effort in Florida that placed Ben & Jerry's parent company, Unilever, on a list of "scrutinized companies that boycott Israel."

"I recognize the need for a continued and strong commitment to Israel, including its right to exist and defend itself," DuBose writes in his position paper. "In addition to strengthening relations, there is a need for dialogue between our nations as the issues are more than justice issues. Economic growth, technological advances and cultural exchange are equally important for the continuation of the strength of our commitment to Israel. The United States gets as much as it gives to Israel."

The state legislator also advocates for expanding the Abraham Accords, the historic series of diplomatic agreements signed last year between Israel and several Arab nations in the region.

In the position paper, DuBose lauded the Biden administration's ongoing effort to reenter the Iran nuclear deal, but cautioned against lifting sanctions "as a gift to open negotiations." While Hastings opposed the deal in 2015, DuBose broadly pledged to continue the congressman's legacy on foreign policy matters as they pertain to Israel.

"He was unapologetic about his stance on Israel and the unconditional friendship shared by our two nations," DuBose writes of the former dean of Florida's congressional delegation. "Although he will never be replaced, my desire is to have a similar reputation as it relates to being pro-Israel."

DuBose has never visited Israel but hopes to do so if he is elected.

Recently, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become something of a hot topic in the 20th District race, following an interview with JI last week in which Hardy expressed his support for BDS, as well as conditioning aid to Israel over its treatment of the Palestinians. He also stated his firm opposition to additional Iron Dome funding, aligning himself with some of the most vocal anti-Israel critics in the House.

Hardy has faced pushback since going public with his views, not least because they represent a stark reversal from just a month prior, when he expressed broad support for Israel in a candidate forum hosted by the Broward County Democratic Party Jewish

Caucus.

The editorial board of the *Sun-Sentinel*, which endorsed him earlier this month, criticized Hardy's approach in a follow-up on Tuesday. The paper also published an opinion piece this week by a local rabbi who had castigated the progressive first-term lawmaker as "the Hitler of South Florida" before the epithet was summarily scrubbed because readers found the comparison offensive.

In a statement provided to JI on Wednesday, three prominent Jewish leaders in South Florida came out against Hardy because of his positions. "Omari Hardy does not follow in the footsteps of the late Alcee Hastings when he supports BDS and opposes Iron Dome," they wrote. "One of the hallmarks of Congressman Hastings's long career was his collaborative partnership with Florida's Jews in supporting the survival of the State of Israel."

The statement was signed by Rabbi Mark Winer, president of the Florida Democratic Party Jewish Caucus; Richard Stark, who chairs the Broward County Democratic Party Jewish Caucus; and Rachelle Litt, the mayor of Palm Beach Gardens and president of the Palm Beach County Democratic Party Jewish Caucus.

DuBose, who works alongside Hardy in the state legislature, said he was perplexed by his colleague's about-face with regard to Israel. "I don't know what got him there," he told JI. "I don't know. I don't know. Sometimes political winds cause people to do certain things. I really have no idea."

Hardy doubled down in a virtual candidate forum hosted by the Jewish Democratic Council of America on Wednesday afternoon, even as Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL), addressing viewers at the beginning of the discussion, put forth an implicit rebuke of Hardy's stance on the issues. "Let me be clear, Democrats are united behind Israel," she said. "Republicans try to politicize the U.S.-Israel relationship."

Wasserman Schultz does not plan to make an endorsement in the race, according to a campaign spokesperson. Neither does Rep. Ted Deutch (D-FL), who also gave introductory remarks at the forum. Rep. Lois Frankel (D-FL), who completes the trio of Jewish Democratic House members in

South Florida, endorsed Sharief earlier this month, citing the commissioner's support for Israel in a statement to JI.

In July, DuBose notched an endorsement from Rep. Nikema Williams (D-GA), who is among a small handful of sitting House members from outside the state to have publicly weighed in on the race.

Throughout the forum, Hardy positioned himself as the lone Israel critic among the nine candidates who attended. All of the candidates except Hardy supported Iron Dome funding while rejecting BDS as well as calls to withhold U.S. aid to Israel. Thurston was not in attendance but echoed those views in a recent interview with JI. Siddiqui seems to have eschewed public engagement in the race despite qualifying for the primary.

At the end of the discussion, Hardy took a moment to address what he described as “the elephant in the room” while offering his concluding statement. “As an idealist, I must believe that there is nothing incompatible about supporting Israel’s right to exist and Israel’s right to defend itself and also

supporting the inalienable right of the Palestinians, which are grounded not just in their humanity but also in international law,” said the first-term lawmaker.

His voice began to catch as he appeared to be fighting back tears.

“As a Black man, I have asked people who are not of color to stand with me and affirm that my life matters,” Hardy said, visibly shaken, “and what that means is that I cannot rail against a discriminatory criminal justice system in this country and ignore the fact that five to 700 Palestinian children are detained every year and prosecuted in military courts. I cannot not decry gentrification on Sistrunk and keep my mouth closed about settlements. I can’t talk about Flint, Mich., and keep my mouth closed about the fact that many Palestinians don’t have access to clean water.”

“I have love in my heart for everyone here, and I will maintain an open dialogue with the community,” he said. “Thank you.”

DuBose, for his part, was even-tempered in his sign-off. “I’ll keep my closing simple

and just say Jewish people, people of color, Israel, we all have a lot in common,” he said. “Congressman Hastings understood that. Jewish people and antisemitism and racism — he understood that well, and so do I.”

In conversation with JI, the House Democratic leader acknowledged that foreign policy is “not something we really had to focus on at the state level,” but he said Hastings’s unwavering support for Israel had introduced him to a form of advocacy he is grateful to have witnessed. “It really opened my eyes.”

That awareness, coupled with his self-described record of legislative achievement in Tallahassee, is what DuBose suggested will propel him to a successful first term in Congress.

“I feel I’m battle-tested and ready to go on day one,” he told JI. “It’s good to scream and shout and fight real hard that way, but you’ve got to be able to produce and get things done.” ♦

OCTOBER 20, 2021

Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick hopes the third time’s a charm in FL20

The healthcare executive is carving a niche as a pro-Israel progressive in the race to succeed the late Rep. Alcee Hastings

By Matthew Kassel

While she may not explicitly cast herself as such, Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick seems to be carving out a niche for herself as something of a pro-Israel progressive among the half-dozen leading Democratic candidates vying to succeed the late Rep. Alcee Hastings (D-FL) in South Florida’s special House election next month.

Cherfilus-McCormick, a 42-year-old healthcare executive now mounting her third bid for the seat, is running to the left of all but one of her most formidable opponents on a number of domestic issues, advocating for progressive policies such as

the Green New Deal and Medicare for All. In a more populist vein, she is also proposing a “People’s Prosperity Plan” that would provide voters with a universal basic income of \$1,000 a month.

When it comes to Israel, however, Cherfilus-McCormick, a religious Christian of Haitian descent, holds views that are more aligned with the Democratic mainstream. She rejects the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement targeting Israel, favors continued — if not increased — U.S. military assistance to the Jewish state and supports recent legislation that would give Israel \$1 billion to replenish its Iron Dome missile-defense system — the subject of a heated

intra-party debate last month on the House floor.

“I would definitely have voted to fund the Iron Dome, just because Israel has a right to defend itself,” Cherfilus-McCormick said in a recent interview with *Jewish Insider*. “More importantly, because Israel is one of our biggest allies, we actually play a part in ensuring that they’re able to defend themselves. Our partnership is just too deep for us to have to even make an issue of whether we should or shouldn’t. That is a priority.”

Her perspective is somewhat notable as a growing faction of far-left lawmakers — whose views on domestic issues Cherfilus-

McCormick largely seems to share — have amplified their criticism of the Jewish state following a flare-up in violence last May between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, deepening divisions over American foreign policy toward Israel within the Democratic Party.

It was possibly that dynamic that led some local Jewish community leaders to assume that Cherfilus-McCormick might align with anti-Israel voices in the House, according to Richard Stark, who chairs the Broward County Democratic Party Jewish Caucus and co-hosted a candidate forum last month.

In June, Cherfilus-McCormick notched an endorsement from Brand New Congress, the progressive political action committee that has previously backed Reps. Rashida Tlaib (D-MI) and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), who are among the most outspoken Israel critics in the party.

Cherfilus-McCormick is “pursuing support from the Bernie Sanders wing of the party,” Stark told JI, “and if that’s the case, then I would expect” she would “fall more in line” with the view “that Israel’s got to be scrutinized.”

But Cherfilus-McCormick dispelled such assumptions in a conversation with JI, vowing to uphold the pro-Israel values espoused by the late congressman whose seat she hopes to fill. During his time in Congress, Hastings, who died in April at 84, was known as a champion of Israel committed to advancing Black-Jewish relations, and Cherfilus-McCormick pledged to “extend” his legacy on that front if she is elected to the House.

“We are so intimately tied,” she said. “We have to support each other.”

Until recently, Cherfilus-McCormick had been sharing the pro-Israel progressive lane with at least one other candidate: Omari Hardy, a left-leaning state representative who expressed broad support for Israel during the recent forum in which candidates addressed issues of particular interest to Jewish voters.

But in an interview with JI last week, Hardy reversed course, explaining that, after careful consideration, he now supports BDS and conditioning aid to Israel. The 31-year-old lawmaker also opposes supplemental Iron Dome funding and vowed he would

have voted against the measure if he were in Congress.

Such views appear to have cost him politically in Florida’s 20th Congressional District, which, while majority Black, is also home to a sizable Jewish community in Tamarac and includes Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach. Recent editorials in the leading local newspaper, South Florida’s *Sun-Sentinel*, which endorsed him, have taken issue — in one case quite stridently — with his controversial foreign policy stance.

Cherfilus-McCormick, for her part, disagreed with Hardy’s approach. “At this moment, Afghanistan has been retaken by the Taliban; Iran, who by the way funds Hamas in Palestine, is charging towards a nuclear weapon; and we have new threats from terrorist organizations such as ISIS-K and Boko Haram,” she told JI in a strongly worded statement last week after Hardy went public with his views. “This is not a time to play politics with national security and the security of Israel is paramount.”

“Rep. Hardy is entitled to his opinion,” Cherfilus-McCormick added, “but I strongly oppose weakening Israel in any way and endangering the lives of millions.”

Cherfilus-McCormick has hardly established herself as an outspoken advocate of the U.S.-Israel relationship in the manner of Rep. Ritchie Torres (D-NY) or Arizona state Rep. Daniel Hernandez, to name two high-profile Israel supporters who identify as progressive.

And the congressional hopeful largely stands in alignment with the other leading candidates in the 11-way race — including such moderately aligned elected officeholders as state Sen. Perry Thurston, state Rep. Bobby DuBose and Broward County Commissioners Dale Holness and Barbara Sharief — who have all expressed support for Israel.

But Cherfilus-McCormick claims an affinity for the Jewish state that extends back to childhood, when her Haitian-born parents became strong supporters of Christians United for Israel after they immigrated to the U.S. and began traveling to Israel every other year on religious pilgrimages.

Cherfilus-McCormick never accompanied her parents on those trips, but said that she and her husband had been planning a

similar pilgrimage of their own with a local pastor’s group when the pandemic hit. “I definitely would love to visit and want to visit,” she told JI. “We’re heavily Christian in my family, me and my husband, so we were going to do that anyhow.”

As a first-generation Haitian-American, Cherfilus-McCormick — who was born in Brooklyn, raised in Queens and moved to South Florida at the age of 13 to attend high school — claims a connection with Israel that she says is deepened by her personal background.

“Perhaps it is the example of the Duvalier father and son Haitian strongmen, who so brutalized the people and left an indelible mark on my family, that I deeply understand the phrase ‘Never again,’” she wrote in a lengthy Israel position paper provided to JI by her campaign. “More than 35 years ago, former Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, then as a religious leader, delivered a sermon proclaiming that only the ‘path of righteousness and love’ can counter the repression and violence of those who would have us live in fear.”

“A secure and prosperous U.S.-Israeli friendship,” she added, “depends on a commitment to resolving conflicts that arise from ignorance and fear-inspired xenophobia before they mushroom into clouds overhead.”

Cherfilus-McCormick supports U.S. involvement in brokering a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which, she wrote, “must include the security of Israel’s borders,” as well as “the protection of a Jewish, democratic state and a commitment to improving the quality of life for both the Jewish and Palestinian people.”

But she argues that Hamas “must not be included” in any negotiations, characterizing the militant extremist group now in control of the Gaza Strip as “a terrorist organization that aims to destroy the Israeli people.”

“The U.S. has served as an arbiter in resolving every major conflict or incident in the region,” Cherfilus-McCormick wrote. “I believe our critical role continues today to achieve democratic gains and attain a lasting peace. To support this goal, we must continue to provide support to the region and increase aid to the Palestinian people to achieve an outcome like that of the rebuilding of postwar Europe.”

Cherilus-McCormick also supports the Biden administration in its ongoing effort to renegotiate a nuclear deal with the Iranians that will include “ending Iran’s support for terrorist organizations,” she wrote. “If Iran wishes to further this dangerous behavior, longer and tougher economic sanctions must be in place.”

While there is no up-to-date polling on the race, elections experts argue that Cherilus-McCormick has a decent shot at prevailing in the Nov. 2 primary, for which early voting begins on Saturday. The winner is expected to win the Jan. 11 general election because the district leans heavily Democratic.

Cherilus-McCormick, the CEO of Trinity Home Healthcare — who received a law degree from St. Thomas University College of Law in Miami Gardens — has poured \$2.5 million of her own money into the race, according to a campaign spokesperson, outspending every candidate as she has blanketed the airwaves in the final weeks of the election.

By contrast, Holness, who has raised the most in outside contributions, is relying on a campaign war chest of \$575,000, a spokesperson told JI.

“One candidate who’s spending more than the rest of the field combined could win the race with less than 25% of the vote,” Dave Wasserman, a House elections forecaster for the nonpartisan *Cook Political Report*, who has written about the race, told JI. “Cherilus-McCormick has won that share of the vote in this district twice against Alcee Hastings.”

The three-time candidate first ran to unseat Hastings in 2018, pulling in just over 26% of the vote but losing by a nearly 50-point margin. On her second attempt, Cherilus-McCormick performed somewhat better with 31% as Hastings’s support slipped below the 70% threshold.

Now, in a wide-open race where the threshold for victory is expected to be low, Cherilus-McCormick may be strongly positioned to pull off the sort of upset she has long sought. “She doesn’t need that much of the vote to win this race,” said Wasserman. “And considering how split the rest of the field is, there’s a real path to victory for her even though she was a gadfly candidate in ‘18 and ‘20.”

“With my background in law and in healthcare, it positions me specifically for this time,” Cherilus-McCormick told JI. “The reconciliation bill really deals with what I believe to be urgent needs, which are health care, child care, education, just really helping us live better lives every day,” she said, referring to legislation, currently stalled in the Senate, that would vastly expand the American social safety net. “That’s why I ran the first time.”

Whether she will earn support from the Jewish community in the district, which is largely situated in Kings Point, a local sprawling condominium complex, remains to be seen. But Cherilus-McCormick has been competing for that share of the vote since she first ran for Congress, according to Jeffrey Romeu, a spokesperson for her campaign.

“Her main campaign office is close

to Kings Point because she knows how important the voters of Kings Point are in this election,” Romeu told JI. “Sheila is a faith-based candidate who has bonded with those in the Jewish community not only in Kings Point but throughout the district in both Palm Beach and Broward Counties.”

Last week, Rep. Lois Frankel (D-FL) — one of three Jewish Democratic House members in Florida — endorsed Sharief, citing her support for strengthening the U.S.-Israel relationship in a statement to JI. Rep. Ted Deutch (D-FL) is not planning to make an endorsement in the race, his office told JI on Tuesday, and a spokesperson for Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL) did not respond to requests for comment about whether she would be weighing in.

Either way, Cherilus-McCormick believes that voters are ready for new leadership as a number of longtime elected officials jockey for the seat. “I think that Alcee was great for his time, and the issues that we’re facing presently, even some of the issues that we started facing toward the end of his career, were issues that he’s never seen before and never experienced,” she said. “That’s why I think that whoever comes into this seat has to really be able to push our district forward and not be someone who’s timid.”

But on one matter, at least, Cherilus-McCormick said she looks to Hastings as a model. “When it comes to the relationships that Alcee had with different communities such as the Jewish community,” she told JI, “we have to continue that in a robust way.” ♦

OCTOBER 21, 2021

Sunrise Movement’s DC chapter boycotts event due to ‘participation of Zionist organizations’

None of the members of Congress endorsed by the Sunrise Movement responded to questions regarding the decision by the group’s Washington arm to pull out of a voting rights rally because of the involvement of progressive Jewish groups

By Gabby Deutch

For progressive advocacy groups, this was supposed to be a make-or-break week on voting rights.

After the Senate failed to advance the Freedom to Vote Act on Wednesday, a group of runners, walkers and bikers

are set to depart West Virginia today on the Freedom to Vote Relay, culminating in a large Capitol Hill rally in support of

voting rights when participants arrive in Washington, D.C., on Saturday.

Instead, the event has become steeped in controversy after the Washington chapter of the Sunrise Movement — an influential progressive environmental advocacy group — released a statement on Tuesday announcing it would not participate in the event “due to the participation of a number of Zionist organizations.” The statement also announced that the movement would no longer join coalitions with Zionist organizations, naming the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (RAC), the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) and the Jewish Council on Public Affairs (JCPA).

The group rooted its reasoning in its support for Washington, D.C., statehood. “We will continue to fight for statehood for DC in the United States and for the liberation of Palestine,” the chapter’s statement said. “Given our commitment to racial justice, self-governance, and indigenous sovereignty, we oppose Zionism and any state that enforces its ideology.”

Sunrise Movement DC has stood by its statement in the face of criticism from Jewish activists and organizations that the sentiment is antisemitic. Yesterday, the group’s Twitter account retweeted a local activist who wrote, “anti zionism != [does not equal] anti semitism. hope that clears things up #FreePalestine.”

“This idea that you are told that you have to reject your support for Israel to participate in American public life on issues that you care about, that is what’s antisemitic and anti-democratic,” said Joel Rubin, the executive director of American Jewish Congress who previously served as Bernie Sanders’s Jewish liaison during his 2020 presidential run. “This is a rally to support democratic rights, and one organization is trying to get other organizations banned from using their democratic rights.”

None of the Jewish organizations named by Sunrise Movement DC have a core mission focused on Israel.

“If you look at NCJW, for example, nowhere on their website does it say that they’re a Zionist organization,” said Hadar Susskind, president and CEO of Americans for Peace Now, an organization that advocates for a two-state solution.

“This is not boycotting the ZOA [Zionist Organization of America] or AIPAC or even [Americans for Peace Now]. This is boycotting groups because they are Jewish and state a general ... support of Israel, which is the position of 90% of the American Jewish community.” (A recent Pew Research poll found that 80% of American Jews view caring about Israel as crucial to their Jewish identity.)

Susskind said such a view “crosses any line.”

“To say that any group that is in any way supportive of Israel should be excluded from our civic life is unacceptable,” said Susskind.

The national staff of the Sunrise Movement did not respond to multiple requests for comment to clarify whether they support the Washington chapter’s position. *Jewish Insider* also did not receive a response to multiple messages sent to the Declaration for American Democracy Coalition, the umbrella arm for the more than 230 organizations supporting the relay.

The Sunrise Movement has significant clout in progressive spaces and a major grassroots following. It endorses very few candidates, explaining on its website that the organization “support[s] candidates who, if elected, would represent a significant break with the status quo for their district.”

JI reached out to the offices of all the current members of Congress endorsed by the Sunrise Movement, asking whether they agree with Sunrise Movement DC’s position. Reps. Jamaal Bowman (D-NY), Rashida Tlaib (D-MI), Cori Bush (D-MO), Marie Newman (D-IL), Mike Levin (D-CA), Ilhan Omar (D-MN), Ayanna Pressley (D-MA) and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY); and Sens. Ed Markey (D-MA) and Bernie Sanders (I-VT) — did not respond to JI’s requests for comment.

A handful of members — including Reps. Jerry Nadler (D-NY) and Grace Meng (D-NY) — condemned the statement. “Refusing to participate in civic life with Jewish groups — especially those groups who are committed to social justice here in the US, in Israel and around the world — is misguided, unproductive, offensive and wrong,” Nadler tweeted.

In separate statements to *Jewish Insider*, senior leaders at the RAC, NCJW and JCPA expressed commitments to dialogue and

coalition-building but did not criticize the Sunrise Movement by name nor call the group’s stance antisemitic. When asked specifically what they thought about the Sunrise Movement statement and its language about Zionism, all three declined to elaborate.

“It’s unfortunate that any organization would refuse to join together to protect voting rights,” said Rabbi Jonah Pesner, director of the RAC. “As an organization committed to social justice and our progressive Zionist values, we will continue to work toward the passage of comprehensive voting rights legislation.”

“We fight for access to the ballot, an end to gender-based violence, increased equity, and for women to build power despite systemic barriers at every turn. All of this work is done in coalition,” NCJW CEO Sheila Katz told JI. “Our commitment to working across lines of difference includes our willingness to engage in dialogue with groups that take issue with our policies.”

Melanie Gorelick, senior vice president at JCPA, said the organization “will continue our ongoing engagement on voting rights efforts in coalition with interfaith and diverse communities, including our involvement in the Freedom to Vote rally.”

Two other Jewish groups — Bend the Arc and The Workers Circle — are also part of the voting rights coalition, but were not called out by Sunrise Movement DC. A spokesperson at Bend the Arc declined to comment, and The Workers Circle did not respond to an email from JI.

Other left-leaning Jewish and Israel advocacy groups have also criticized the move. The Jewish Democratic Council of America called Sunrise Movement DC’s decision “antisemitism, plain and simple.”

Kevin Rachlin, J Street’s vice president of public affairs, expressed his support for “the critical work of the Sunrise Movement in combating the urgent dangers of climate change.”

But, Rachlin told JI, “we find the statement by the local Sunrise DC Chapter to be saddening, harmful and wrong,” he said. “Seeking to bar liberal pro-Israel and Zionist groups and individuals from progressive coalitions and spaces disrespects and alienates a large portion of the American Jewish community — and does nothing to

actually help the Palestinian people, combat occupation or promote peace. Progressive advocates for Palestinian rights and other important causes should seek to engage and share views with liberal Jewish institutions — not treat them with dismissive contempt.”

Update at 12:29 p.m. ET on 10/21/21: After the article was published, Rep.

Mondaire Jones (D-NY) condemned Sunrise Movement DC’s “call for the exclusion of these Jewish organizations” in a statement to JI. “With our democracy in crisis, we need everyone to stand up for the right to vote, free and fair elections, and the transformative legislation this moment demands,” he said. “We must focus on building a broad coalition to support our democracy, not excluding

groups for unfair and arbitrary reasons. I condemn the call for the exclusion of these Jewish organizations from this event.” ♦

OCTOBER 13, 2021

L.A.’s Wende Museum opens a new center for Russian-speaking Jewry

The museum is dedicated to commemorating and understanding the Cold War

By Helen Chernikoff

The recent death of Ida Nudel, the celebrated dissident who endured Siberian exile in order to immigrate to Israel from the Soviet Union, triggered both grief and anxiety among the dwindling community of dissident activists, said Alexander Smukler, a Soviet-born businessman who as a young man in the 1980s helped lead the refusenik movement of Jews refused permission to emigrate. The opening of the Robin Center for Russian-Speaking Jewry at the Wende Museum last month has helped to ease survivors’ fears that their stories will die with them.

“We are getting old, and more and more of us are departing from this world,” Smukler told eJewishPhilanthropy. “We lost Nudel, so I think it’s the perfect timing.”

Raised by secular Communist parents, Smukler first gained an inkling that Jewish culture existed in the Soviet Union when he glimpsed people wearing Stars of David on the beach in the summer of 1977. He ingratiated himself with them by playing chess — he was a highly skilled player — and read a contraband copy of Leon Uris’s *Exodus*. He eventually applied to immigrate; was refused and became one of a small group called the Mashka, which coordinated Hebrew teaching and care of refuseniks,

who were often ostracized and deprived of their livelihoods, and their families.

Smukler has contributed materials to the museum, and is a member of its Soviet Jewry Archives Advisory Committee. The center is the brainchild of Edward Robin, who with his wife, Peggy, is also funding it. The Wende is both an art museum and an archive. It will digitize the museum’s collection of samizdat — printed materials banned by the state — that are a primary source of information about the world of Soviet Jewry and the refusenik movement.

“The refuseniks had lives,” Robin said. “And not all of them were public figures.”

A former chairman of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, Robin co-chaired Freedom Sunday for Soviet Jews, the 1987 march that drew 250,000 people to the National Mall in Washington, D.C. He and Peggy traveled to Moscow to help refuseniks by teaching language skills and giving them goods to sell on the black market.

The stories of the American Jews who traveled to Russia on missions to help Soviet Jews have been much-told, Robin said, while the world knows less about the Soviet Jews who needed that help.

“Everybody thinks their trip report is a document of historical importance, but that’s not true,” he said.

The pandemic played an inadvertent

role in the conceptualization of the center, Robin said. He had introduced Bill Aron, a friend and photographer known for his photos of Soviet Jews, to staff at the Wende, who scheduled an exhibit of Aron’s work. The exhibit was delayed by coronavirus pandemic. At the same time, Robin began to realize the prominent role Russian-speaking Jews were playing in the museum’s oral historical witness project, and he realized that Soviet samizdat was at risk.

He created the center to preserve those materials. The Aron exhibit will finally be mounted on Nov. 14 as “Soviet Jewish Life: Bill Aron and Yevgeniy Fiks,” the center’s inaugural event.

Both the center and the exhibit are a milestone in the ongoing work of giving the history of Russian-speaking Jews the attention it deserves, said Marina Yudborovsky, CEO of the Genesis Philanthropy Group (GPG). The strengthening of Jewish identity among Russian-speaking Jews is one of GPG’s three primary program areas.

“It’s been a good 30 to 50 years, and it’s exactly that timeline when things stop being recent news and become history,” said Yudborovsky. GPG is “incredibly excited” that the Robin Center isn’t their initiative, because that suggests that it’s not only Russian-speaking Jews who recognize the

importance of the Center's artifacts.

Robin said the museum's "hybrid" nature makes it the ideal location for the center. It's a scholarly institution that emphasizes outreach through programming and encourages the public to draw connections between its collections and current events. The Aron and Fiks exhibit will be accompanied by public programs and educational workshops.

"They use history to talk to the present," he said.

GPG is funding some of the programs that will happen under the auspices of the Robin Center, Yudborovsky said.

The role that the struggles of Russian-speaking Jews played in the fall of the Soviet Union is inadequately understood, she said, and both the Wende Museum and the Robin Center will help rectify that.

"We all always felt like we were victims of the Cold War, because the door was open and then closed, and it depended on the political situation in the world," Smukler

said.

Now Smulker hopes the center will convey a "simple message" to younger people — that they shouldn't take being Jewish for granted, and should give careful consideration to what their faith means to them.

"What makes them Jewish, even if they aren't a religious person?" he asked. "I want them to understand what we went through, and how we discovered that we were Jews." ♦