

THE WEEKLY PRINT

'Like a bathroom baby': 'Curb' director Jeff Schaffer says new season will bring surprises; The Jewish day school grads covering the World Series; A path-blazing Druze diplomat now empowers a new generation of women; Joe Lieberman still walks the center path; 'Start-Up Nation' starting to tackle its own climate crisis; and Alcee Hastings's Yiddishe Kop.

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'Like a bathroom baby': 'Curb' director Jeff Schaffer says new season will bring surprises

The 11th season of Larry David's fictional comedy series, 'Curb Your Enthusiasm,' premieres tonight on HBO

By Matthew Kassel

Larry David's popular fictional comedy series, "Curb Your Enthusiasm," returns to HBO on Sunday for its 11th season. But viewers hoping for spoilers will be hard-pressed to find them before the show airs tonight, according to Jeff Schaffer, a longtime "Curb" collaborator who directed all but one of the 10 new episodes.

"You know how there are those teenagers who go to prom and their stomach hurts and they go to the bathroom and they're totally surprised that they had a baby?" Schaffer, 51, deadpanned to *Jewish Insider* last week. "That's how Larry wants the season to come out. He wants it to just come out like a bathroom baby. A prom bathroom baby that no one knew was coming."

Schaffer, who helped David write most of the new season over daily FaceTime sessions early on in the pandemic, remained faithful to that wish in a phone interview from his office in Los Angeles.

"From minute one this season, you're going to see that Larry's gotten himself into some strange predicaments," he allowed, only broadly characterizing the narrative

arc. "I will say that at the beginning of the season, it seems like there's a lot of disparate threads, but they do all tie together very nicely by the end, I think in a way you'd never expect."

Still, he was willing to reveal a few noteworthy — and distinctly Jewish — tidbits that viewers should look out for. "There are quite a few places where Judaism comes front and center," said Schaffer, who describes himself and David, now 74, as "the Impossible Burger of Jews."

"We look like one, we sound like one, but on the religious side there's a fundamental difference between us and, I think, your more observant Jew," he said.

There is, for instance, an episode in which David addresses "the issues of antisemitism and hate groups as, of course, only 'Curb Your Enthusiasm' can," Schaffer disclosed. "There's a discussion about how the Jews fled Egypt that features prominently in an episode," he added. "It's sort of part of who Larry is, so these kinds of things are always getting woven into the fabric of our shows."

Elsewhere, David is tasked with instructing Jon Hamm — his "goy Friday," Schaffer quipped — on the intricacies of

Yiddish slang. "Poor Jon Hamm," Schaffer said. "He didn't go to Sunday school. What does he know?"

Hamm is just one of a number of guest stars who are slated to appear in the new season, including Bill Hader, Seth Rogen, Vince Vaughn, Tracey Ullman, Woody Harrelson, Lucy Liu and Albert Brooks (whose brother Bob Einstein, who played Marty Funkhouser on the show, died in 2019).

Schaffer, who has worked with David since the "Seinfeld" days in the 1990s — and whose most recent independent project is "Dave," the FXX comedy series — said he was in the process of putting the final touches on the "Curb" season finale.

"We're basically almost done," he told *JL*. And then?

"And then, we'll see," Schaffer said. "Every season is the last season, and if this happens to be the last season, I think it ends on a very strong note."

But there may be more in store, Schaffer suggested. "I have a feeling Larry might get into more scrapes in the future that he wants to write about."

Jewish Insider: What can you reveal

about the new season?

Jeff Schaffer: Larry really doesn't want any spoilers, but what I can tell you is we sort of pick up from where we were last year. We saw that Larry had burned down Latte Larry's and Mocha Joe's. Mocha Joe had settled into a spite house next door, and at this point maybe Mocha Joe's has moved on, but the lawsuits cost Larry a pretty penny. So he's dealing with that, and he's also maybe thinking about getting into writing again. We've had a lot of seasons with the co-creator of "Seinfeld" not doing a lot of writing, but he may actually pick up the pen.

JJ: *Were you surprised that the stocked-up hand sanitizer that fuels the fire that burns down Latte Larry's in last season's final episode came to be seen as a sort of prescient detail in light of the pandemic?*

Schaffer: It was so strange because, when the pandemic hit, it was like, "Oh, this is a moment tailor-made for Larry." I mean, he's been trying to practice social distancing for as long as I can remember him. Last season, we were going to have a Latte Larry's pop-up. HBO was actually going to build a Latte Larry's at the start of our season. It was February before everything shut down. It was going to happen — the tables, the hand sanitizer, all the stuff. The thing was, they couldn't find any hand sanitizer. All the Purell had been taken. They were like, "We'll just fake some bottles." I'm like, "Oh my god, people are going to steal this stuff thinking it's real Purell, and it's not going to do anything." Then there was a lockdown, and it all went away. But Larry was definitely prescient about the hand sanitizer. His prediction of no defecating in public restrooms? We'll see if that holds true.

JJ: *You wrote most of the show remotely. What was it like working with Larry over video chat?*

Schaffer: The weird thing was, we started writing before the pandemic in the office, and we were sort of throwing ideas and season arcs around. We'd made a teeny bit of headway, and then the pandemic hit and we're in our houses and we just sort of changed. We were like, "OK, well, this is

going to be different now." Every day with Larry, we had a very similar ritual. We would just meet up on FaceTime, and Larry would go, "Ugh, I've got to find a plug for my iPad." He would grouse about how outlets should be at shoulder height so he doesn't have to root around like a raccoon looking behind the couch to try and plug something in. Then he'd go, "Ugh, forget it." We'd write during the day, and every day around 2:30 or 3 o'clock, he would just vanish. I realized, "Oh, he's out of charge. He just didn't charge his iPad. I think we're done for today." I will say this, and I mean this as a true compliment about Larry. That man does not worry about the percentage of battery on any of his devices. He is the same guy at 3% as he has at 87%, and I find that commendable.

JJ: *I often carry a backup charger with me...*

Schaffer: Because you have charge anxiety. He does not. He just blithely goes through life, and then when it's out, it's out. But we wrote remotely all through the spring and into the summer, and then the real question was, are we going to be able to shoot this? We spent a lot of time coming up with very rigorous protocols to make sure that we could do it safely.

JJ: *How did it go?*

Schaffer: It cost a lot of money to test everybody in a big bubble every day. Then our crew was great about sort of having an unwritten social contract that no one was going to get Larry sick, which means when you're out of work, be super responsible — and everyone was. We started shooting in November. We took January off because it just seemed, like, why knife the boat through the COVID storm post-vacation? But from November to May, we shot. The weird thing was, there were a lot of scenes from different episodes— scenes that had a lot of people — that we just pushed to the end of our shooting schedule hoping that things would be better and that there would be a vaccine, which was all smart and good. The consequence of that was, usually you do five two-episode blocks. We were shooting parts of shows one through 10 every block. A total scramble, which is very odd for an

improv show.

JJ: *As I understand it, the improvisational manner in which the show is filmed hasn't changed since the beginning. Is that right?*

Schaffer: Yeah, I mean, we have an outline that's the structure of the show, and then there's a lot of improv. Ideally, if you had your wish of all wishes you'd go in order, because something that's said in the second scene might really affect something that's in the fifth scene. But this season, sometimes we were shooting scene number five in November, and then we shot scene number two in May. It was a tricky season that way, but I think we pulled it off.

JJ: *Do the episodes ever stray, during the filming, from what you had in mind when you wrote the outline?*

Schaffer: Yes, in that a lot of times the overall structure may be the same, but things that are said in certain scenes that are improvised, it's like, "Oh my god, that's so funny, we have to pay that off." So we're rewriting all the time based on improv. Last season, Bryan Cranston was Larry's therapist, and Bryan Cranston looks at his watch, and Larry's like, "I saw that, why don't you just have a clock behind my head? That way, you don't have to be so obvious." I'm sitting there directing, and we're about to shoot the next scene that happens a few days later, because it's all at the therapist's office. So, in 20 minutes, we're going to shoot this scene, and I'm telling the prop people, "Go run out and get a clock." That's part of the story now. It's always things like that.

JJ: *How was the virtual co-writing process different from a more procedural perspective?*

Schaffer: When we're in person, we're writing on these big dry-erase boards. We're always up on the board, and it's a much more tactile way of writing. This year was very different because we couldn't just get up on the board and circle this and cross that out. We've been using these boards since "Seinfeld." I mean, "Seinfeld" and "Curb" are written the exact same way. You make these outlines, and you keep interweaving these stories together to come up with this end

that feels satisfying, and the only difference for “Seinfeld” is you take a few days and write the script. For “Curb,” there’s a few lines. You know why the scene works; the angles are already there. The one thing that we do with “Curb” is that we’ve got really funny people taking these attitudes and bumping up against each other and you get these amazing, magical digressions that you never knew were going to happen when you walked in that day.

JJ: *It goes without saying that “Curb” is a distinctly Jewish show, but is there anything in particular this season that’s explicitly Jewish?*

Schaffer: Larry sort of, I’ll call it cultural Judaism, is a big part of where he grew up and shaped who he is, and this season he’s going to actually explore where he came from a little bit. There are quite a few places where Judaism comes front and center, whether he’s teaching Jon Hamm, his “goy Friday,” the difference between bashert and tsuris.

JJ: *Those are pretty different.*

Schaffer: I know. Poor Jon Hamm. He didn’t go to Sunday school. What does he know? Actually, there’s an episode where we even address the issues of antisemitism and hate groups as, of course, only “Curb Your Enthusiasm” can. And there’s another episode where Judaism is a major plot point, but I can’t spoil it for you. There’s a discussion about how the Jews fled Egypt that features prominently in an episode. It’s sort of part of who Larry is, so these kinds of things are always getting woven into the fabric of our shows.

JJ: *Have you talked with Larry outside the context of the show about his Jewish roots?*

Schaffer: Honestly, for both of us, I think we’re like the Impossible Burger of Jews. We look like one, we sound like one, but on the religious side there’s a fundamental difference between us and, I think, your more observant Jew.

JJ: *What’s next on your docket outside of “Curb”?*

Schaffer: I also have this other show called “Dave.” We finished our second season on FX and Hulu this summer.

JJ: *Not the Kevin Kline movie...*

Schaffer: No, not the Kevin Kline movie. It’s funny, the show is about this white rapper named Lil Dicky — his real name is Dave Burd — and he wanted to call the show “Dave.” He was in his late 20s when we started. I go, “But it’s like the movie.” And he goes, “What movie?” And I go, “Oh, boy.”

JJ: *I guess it’s a generational thing.*

Schaffer: By the way, another funny story, though. So, Bryan Cranston, I was talking to him the other day. He called, and he said, “Hey, so, you know, it’s the middle of a pandemic” — and “Dave” had come out in the first spring of the pandemic — and he goes, “You know, it was just such a bummer looking at the news and everything, and I told my wife, ‘I just want to watch something fun and lighthearted,’ so I wanted to watch the movie “Dave.” I started flipping around and I turned on what I thought it was “Dave,” and this other show showed up. I was like, “What is this? This isn’t “Dave,”” and I really like it, so anyway, congratulations.” So that marketing trick got one person and his name is Bryan Cranston.

JJ: *Seems like a solid audience member to have on your side.*

Schaffer: Yeah, if you’re going to have one, why not have the genius Bryan Cranston? We finished our second season. I actually shot that at the same time as “Curb,” and shooting two all-location shows during a pandemic was a lot. But for that show, the writer’s room for season three will start up in the new year, and then, as for “Curb,” literally this week, like today, I’m going to finish the mix and the color for our season finale. We’re basically almost done. And then, we’ll see. You know, every season is the last season, and if this happens to be the last season, I think it ends on a very strong note. But, I don’t know, I have a feeling Larry might get into more scrapes in the future that he wants to write about.

JJ: *Does Larry carry a notebook like he does on the show?*

Schaffer: He carried a notebook all through “Seinfeld,” and all through a lot of “Curb” he kept a notebook. Now he writes things down when they happen in real-time on his phone, but then they get transcribed into these bigger notebooks, and that’s how the show gets written. He’ll come into the office, and he’ll say, “I was at this dinner party last night, and the host served tap water. Who serves tap water at a dinner party? I wanted to say something, but I didn’t.” And I’ll say, “Well, real Larry didn’t say something, but TV Larry’s going to say something.” And that’s the start of an episode.

JJ: *One of the interesting things that I think is unique about the show is that you guys sort of toe the line a bit when it comes to being offensive. But somehow, Larry gets away with it in a way that other people can’t, perhaps because he comes off as a kind of equal opportunity offender.*

Schaffer: We literally call ourselves equal-opportunity offenders. I always say I know where the line is because I can look back and see it. And that’s the point. To me, nothing’s off-limits; it’s all how you execute. It’s all how you do it, and if you’re clever enough about it, you should be able to handle anything. I mean, Larry has a point. You may not agree with it, and he may take the other side of an argument, but there’s always an argument. I think that’s one of the things that people really like about the show. Look, people aren’t great in general, and they’re also walking double standards, so when the audience sees Larry do something selfish, they know in their cold hearts they would have done that, and when they see him rail against any tiny injustice, they think, “I always wanted to tell someone off like that, too.” ♦

The Jewish day school grads covering the World Series

How Jake Mintz and Jordan Shusterman grew @CespedesBBQ from a parody account in high school to a baseball mini-media empire

By Gabby Deutch

As high school seniors, Jake Mintz and Jordan Shusterman saw a humorous video on the Internet — Yoenis Cespedes, then an outfielder for the Oakland Athletics, roasting a pig over a spit — and made a Twitter account parodying it. @CespedesBBQ was born in Mintz's parents' living room, and soon became a hub for out-of-left-field takes on Major League Baseball's most eccentric and interesting players. (The account's content is not devoted only to Cespedes.)

It's a classic 21st-century story: Teenagers post some jokes online. They get a few friends to follow them, maybe a couple hundred strangers, too, if they're lucky. It's a funny story to tell when they meet new people, a nugget to dish out at college parties.

But for Mintz and Shusterman, now both 26, the Twitter account became a viral sensation in the baseball world (124,600 followers and counting) and led to full-time careers covering the sport.

"Old us is more unhinged," Mintz said, laughing, in a phone call from Houston, where he and Shusterman are covering the World Series between the Atlanta Braves and Houston Astros for the Fox Sports Network. As they gained followers, earned college degrees and signed contracts with big-name brands, their content has gotten less quirky and more professional. "We are not who we were in college. None of us are. I hope so, at least. With time you grow, and you change and you age, and that's OK," Mintz said.

A lot has changed for Mintz and Shusterman since they launched @CespedesBBQ in December 2012. But their story begins years before that — as kids who grew up going to the same synagogue, Ohr

Kodesh Congregation in Chevy Chase, Md.

"We didn't particularly like each other," said Mintz. (Shusterman was not available to be interviewed due to obligations at the World Series.) "We were the loud blonde kids who liked sports, like, 'This town is only big enough for one of us.' And so we clashed a little bit."

The pair attended middle school at Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in Rockville. They began to bond over a shared love of baseball when Shusterman left for high school. "We would post on Facebook about random baseball things," Mintz recalled. "I was like, 'Well, I could talk to him.' It's not like we actively hated each other or anything. It was just a middle school dislike."

They also didn't have many other options for baseball-loving friends, since most of their classmates preferred basketball or football. "We realized that the other person was one of the few people we knew who also liked baseball," said Mintz.

Jewish tweets are peppered throughout the account's content; in 2017, an excited Mintz tweeted that he made the Jewish Division III All-American baseball team. "THIS IS THE HAPPIEST DAY OF MY LIFE," he wrote. A 2017 tweet about Jewish players at that year's World Series (Alex Bregman, Joc Pederson, Garrett Stubbs for the Astros and Max Fried for the Braves) included the hashtag "#MOTsRepresent" — a reference to "members of the tribe."

This year's World Series has its own Jewish twist, with four Jewish players taking the field. "Whenever I run into a Jewish player, it's something I talk about," said Mintz. When he was at Fenway Park earlier this fall, he chatted with Red Sox Chief Baseball Officer Chaim Bloom about the High Holy Days. "I can go to most Major

League Baseball stadiums, and there's probably some writer somewhere who can make shtetl references with me," Mintz added.

Soon after they launched their Twitter account, Mintz departed for a three-month study-abroad program in Israel with his high school.

"I was basically waking up Israel time, watching highlights, writing about it," Mintz explained. Shusterman "would wake up D.C. time, I would have a thing that I would have written, and he would post it." If it sounds like a fine-tuned media operation, "it certainly was not," Mintz noted.

The original intent behind the account was parody, but it was also serious baseball commentary — until they realized plenty of that already existed.

"No one's ever gonna care what two 17-year-olds think about that. You just go to ESPN or you go to Fox Sports, or you go to any number of baseball-specific websites where real adults are doing real analysis," Mintz acknowledged. "So we just made jokes. We pivoted and just started tweeting things that we thought were entertaining. For a long time, no one really cared."

That began to change the summer Mintz and Shusterman graduated high school, before Mintz went to play Division III baseball at Washington University in St. Louis and Shusterman left for The College of Wooster in Ohio. ("If you wanted to oversimplify things, it's like the jock and the intellect," Mintz said of him and Shusterman, who had played recreational baseball as a kid.)

Mintz and Shusterman attended an event for another sports website, where they met more people in their corner of the Internet and began to spread the word. "It just kind of snowballed from there,

gradually,” Mintz said.

In college, the pair continued tweeting. They also created a blog and launched an independent podcast. It was during their sophomore year that Mintz realized @CespedesBBQ had really grown.

“The memory I have that really sticks out is being at a game, and someone in the stands recognizing my voice from our podcasts, having listened to it on the way to the game,” Mintz recalled. “I just remember being like, ‘Oh, well, that’s weird.’”

They continued to plug away at their content in college, and eventually MLB reached out, offering the pair an internship. “We did a road trip for them, where we drove from D.C. to New York to San Diego and back. It took about 30 days, and we saw a bunch of baseball games and wrote about it. It was awesome,” said Mintz. The internship turned into a job offer, and in 2017 they joined full-time — marking a new phase for the scrappy @CespedesBBQ account.

“I never thought that would be my life,” Mintz said.

At the start of this year’s baseball season, he and Shusterman moved to Fox Sports, where they write analysis and create digital videos. They also have a podcast, “Baseball BBQ,” with the sports media company The Ringer.

For Mintz, the driving force behind his work on baseball goes back to his experience as a middle school baseball fan.

“We are obsessed [with baseball]. It is our lives. Any closer that I can bring anybody to me is a worthwhile experience. And whether that’s getting someone who knows nothing, cares zero to go to a game, that’s great. Whether or not that’s someone who’s super obsessed getting even more obsessed, that’s also great,” Mintz said. “We are not a proselytizing people. Jews do not recruit well. I don’t think we’re preachy about it, necessarily. But it’s more just bringing energy and passion to the thing we love and hoping that people catch on to that.”

Mintz is a Baltimore Orioles fan, so he hasn’t had much personal gratification in recent years. But seeing the Washington Nationals win the World Series in 2019 brought what felt like solid vindication for his middle school friends who weren’t into baseball.

“It was cool to see the city that I grew up in care so much about the thing that I care about,” Mintz said. “People I went to high school with were texting me about random players in the Nationals. That was cool for a month.”

Heading into this year’s World Series, Mintz is keeping an eye on the Astros’ and the Braves’ managers. Astros manager Dusty Baker has never won a World Series as a manager (he won one as a player for the Los Angeles Dodgers in 1981), and Braves manager Brian Snitker has never won a World Series at all.

“It’s kind of these two baseball lifers with a lot of respect in the industry squaring off against one another on the biggest stage,” Mintz said.

Hanging over it all is the Astros’ sign-stealing cheating scandal that was revealed in 2020, tainting their 2017 World Series victory.

“People will always hold that over their heads,” said Mintz. “But at the same time, there are only four players remaining on the roster from that team. I’ve been trying to explain to people that some of these players on the team now were in college when it happened. You can’t hold that over them.”

Still, Mintz continued, “It will define the Series. If the Astros win, the narrative in some ways will be, you know, society does not punish those who cheat — and in some ways it will be well, maybe the cheating didn’t matter that much all along, because I guess they were just good.”

While the account has come a long way from its namesake, the spirit of Yoenis Cespedes, the beloved namesake of Mintz and Shusterman’s claim-to-fame Twitter account, lives on.

“He was very gracious,” said Mintz, who has met Cespedes once. The account “has always been kind of a tribute to him and what he represents in baseball, which we see is a fun-loving, joyous player who doesn’t take things too seriously.” ♦

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A path-blazing Druze diplomat now empowers a new generation of women

Sawsan Natur-Hasson, who works on Mideast economic development at Israel’s Foreign Ministry, is paying it forward

By Tamara Zieve

When Sawsan Natur-Hasson was growing up in a Druze village in northern Israel, there was no such thing as a female role model for a budding diplomat. The path from Dalyat al-Carmel, a tradition-minded hill town on Mount

Carmel, to Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where she is today the director of the Middle East Economic Relations Department, had not been blazed. And while a decade has passed since she became the first Druze woman to join the country’s diplomatic corps —

and few have followed her lead — she remains optimistic that the door she kicked open will stay that way.

“This is why I feel that there is a responsibility for how I’m reflecting this position and what I do for the women in my community — but not only in the

community,” she told Jewish Insider in a recent interview. Now a role model herself for a new generation of Druze women whose community is slowly broadening its horizons, Natur-Hasson gives lectures at universities and schools, seeing it as a personal mission to share her experiences and empower other women.

The road from Dalyat al-Carmel to Jerusalem is a long one, but Natur-Hasson leaned on the advice from her parents, who taught her to seek out ways to serve her country.

Druze women in Israel are not required to serve in the Israeli Defense Forces, and Hasson instead carved out a career path through which she could contribute to her country. In 2010, she broke the glass ceiling for Druze women at the Foreign Ministry, taking a post in the Egypt department.

She assumed her current role at the beginning of this year, several months after Israel signed the Abraham Accords with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, normalizing relations with the two Gulf countries, later joined by Morocco and Sudan.

Hasson’s job involves developing economic relations with all the Arab countries with whom Israel has normalized relations in the Middle East, including the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority.

Since the Abraham Accords were signed last September, Israel and the UAE have benefitted from some 3 billion shekels (over \$900 million) worth of bilateral trade, according to Hasson, who added that data has also shown a sizable growth of trade this past year with Egypt, Jordan and Morocco.

The department is part of working groups and joint committees with representatives of Arab countries who together tackle obstacles and barriers faced by the business sectors. It works to push forward the development process of economic agreements, such as the tax agreement between Israel and the UAE that was signed earlier this year. It facilitates business delegations, webinars and regional projects, aimed at assisting business communities in the region to interact.

“Israel has a strategic position in our region that connects continents, and can actually contribute seriously to the

connectivity between the West to the East. And the new peace agreements are highlighting this importance of the State of Israel,” Hasson said.

“This region is under climate risk. One of the things that we see that is connecting all of us is the matter of food security, water security, agriculture and the environment — topics that we all deal with on a daily basis,” she added.

“It requires us all to work together in order to reach solutions. And the solutions cannot be national ones, they should be regional, because we are facing a risk that is common to all of this region and not only to Israel. We have the way, we have the tools, we have the capability, we have the technology to deal with it, and we’re happy to share it and to work together with others.”

Hasson’s department is currently supporting the Israeli Pavilion at Expo 2020 in Dubai, by facilitating various ministerial visits, as well as assisting business delegations to visit the site, meet counterparts and promote business.

The six-month-long Expo, which opened earlier this month, she said, will help establish the foundation of the economic agreements recently signed between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, allowing the business sectors and private sectors to communicate directly.

“It’s a point of contact for so many countries,” Hasson said, adding that joint events led by Israel provide an opportunity for “big business achievements.”

The Israeli Foreign Ministry, Hasson pointed out, has been assisting Israeli businesses to establish themselves in the UAE, Bahrain and other countries in the region, for over two decades — but this is the first time it is happening openly, “in broad daylight.”

In order to enable this new era of business relations, Hasson said, the right intergovernmental agreements and contracts are needed.

“So this is one of the main targets [of the department] — to assist all ministries to do the process as fast as possible in order to start to fulfill the great potential of these Accords and of these peace agreements, and to bring this fruit to the level of people-to-people in the United Arab Emirates and in Israel,” Hasson said.

“We are talking really about bringing the peace agreements from the macro level, between the governments, to the level of the people. [So] they can feel that they can enjoy it, they can get a big benefit from it, and this would strengthen the relations and the political ties,” said Hasson.

Over 250,000 Israelis have thus far visited the UAE since the Accords were signed, according to the Foreign Ministry.

Hasson’s first role at the Foreign Ministry was first secretary at the Middle East Directorate for the Egypt Department. Prior to joining the ministry, Hasson worked as a lawyer, including several years at the Ministry of Labor, Trade & Industry.

Her experience as a lawyer, she said, has supported her work as a diplomat.

“It was just about it being the right moment to join the ministry, to be in the diplomatic service,” Hasson said. The challenge of doing something that no Israeli Druze woman had until that point done before only motivated her further.

“There is no professional difference between a man or a woman doing these things,” Hasson said. “I think female diplomats, or women in general, are capable of doing many things at the same time — we come with very high motivation to bring success to our positions and to our work. So the way I saw it was: ‘I want it, I believe in it, I can do it, I will apply for it and I will get it.’ This is the method I adopted.”

Although she broke that glass ceiling over 10 years ago, to date there is only one other Druze female diplomat who has joined Israel’s diplomatic service, though there are others working in other divisions of the Foreign Ministry. The ministry was unable to provide the number of male Druze working for the diplomatic service or the total number of Druze working for the wider ministry by press time.

Hasson explained that her conservative community is going through a transition period in which women are occupying more senior positions, such as those of lawyers, doctors, judges and academics. “I have a lot of Druze male colleagues that are serving in the ministry. For women to be in such a position — like a diplomat, police or army commander — it took a while because it’s considered to be a male position and demands a lot of time to be absent from

home. And being a mother and having a family, you have other commitments.”

Hasson has two sons, the second of whom was born during her cadets course. “For such a career, no matter where you are coming from or what background you have, you need two to tango,” she said, noting that she had the support of her husband and her family.

“The main challenge is how to deal with the family. And this is something common among all female diplomats.”

“In my perspective, it’s just a matter of adapting to a new life,” she said.

Her community, she said, was overwhelmingly supportive of her career

move and she has been happy to lend counsel to others interested in pursuing similar paths, noting that one Druze woman is currently enrolled in the Foreign Ministry’s cadets course and several others are currently taking the exams to qualify for it while more plan on doing so in several years.

“So this is really encouraging,” Hasson said. “But I think the main message is that you can do it. It’s possible, it can be done, it’s doable. If you believe in yourself and you’re willing to be in it, there is no barrier,” she emphasized.

Having a diverse array of diplomats from all sectors of Israeli life brings “color” to the

ministry, Hasson said.

“I think this is something very special about the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; we’re coming from all different backgrounds in Israel. So everyone is bringing his own story,” she said, adding that it reflects the “unique fabric of communities” that make up the state of Israel.

Foreign diplomats are sometimes surprised by her Arab name, or compliment her fluent Arabic. “It’s not a well-known story that there are minorities in Israel,” she explained. “So these aspects do emphasize the beautiful story of Israel and coexistence, and actually, there is no barrier for anyone in Israel to reach any position.” ♦

OCTOBER 27, 2021

Joe Lieberman still walks the center path

The former Connecticut senator has released a new book urging a ‘centrist solution’

By Sam Zieve Cohen

For more than two decades, former Sen. Joseph Lieberman (I-CT) was among the most moderate of U.S. senators. This centrist streak brought him to the brink of the White House as the Democratic vice presidential nominee in 2000. After losing the Senate primary six years later, he angered Democrats by running in — and winning — the general election as an Independent. Two years later, he endorsed Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) for president in a move he hoped would strike a tone of bipartisanship. The endorsement backfired, earning him criticisms of betrayal from many in the Democratic Party, and setting up an unusual dynamic of a senior party member who was feted on the convention stage only eight years earlier suddenly looked upon with distrust.

Still, Lieberman stands by his centrist political decisions. Now he wants to encourage more politicians to do the same. His latest book, *The Centrist Solution: How We Made Government Work and Can Make It Work Again*, serves as a call to action for

politicians to seek a more collegial middle path towards governance. “I always try to distinguish between centrism as not the same as moderation,” Lieberman explained in an interview with *Jewish Insider*. “Centrism is a strategy, moderation is an ideology. Centrism involves left, right, Republican, Democrat, Independent, moderate, coming to the center and working together to try to find a solution to a problem.”

His book — part memoir, part political manifesto — chronicles what Lieberman argues are the essential qualities of good government. While the last years of his political career offered a stark warning about the political dangers of fully embracing bipartisanship, Lieberman hopes that his legacy can inspire a new generation of centrist politicians.

The following interview has been condensed and lightly edited for clarity.

Jewish Insider: You credit your Judaism and your study of the Talmud as guiding your political beliefs. You write, “the Talmudic ethic is an ideal precondition for

centrism and problem solving politics.” How important is religion in developing a centrist worldview?

Joe Lieberman: As I look back at my own personal history, about the various forces and ideas that were at work on me over my life, it did seem to me that my Jewish upbringing, and particularly the Talmud, was really an important part of how I became a centrist. I don’t think I felt that as I was getting into politics. I always say that my religious upbringing, the whole ethic of tikkun olam, or kiddush hashem, was part of what moved me into public service. But when I looked back at the whole development of Jewish law, of the Talmud, [it] resulted from spirited, respectful discussion and argument. And then, more often than not, agreement on a course to go forward, and rarely ended up in the kind of personal animosity.

JJ: Do you think this is unique to Judaism?

JL: In the brief section about the origins of centrism, I point back to the Greek

philosophers, and then particularly speak of sentiments in Judaism and Christianity, which really talk about the importance of the “golden mean of moderation.” I quote people like Rambam and St. Thomas Aquinas. But I think that Judaism is unique in the development of our comprehensive and detailed system of law, which emerges from discussion and dispute and resolution by rabbis and scholars. I do think in that sense, Judaism is unique. In other words, the other great religions also favor middle centrism; say that wisdom is often found in the center — ‘not too hot, not too cold’ is the metaphor that I use. But I think Judaism is different in the way in which Jewish law has been developed.

JJ: *You have obviously been around many politicians in your life. Do you find that having a religious background or having religious belief is useful in developing a centrist point of view? To put it another way, is a politician who is religious more likely to be moderate or centrist?*

JL: That’s a really interesting question. I don’t know if anybody has ever asked me that before. I can’t say that was the case. In other words, there are people I’ve served with in state and federal government who are quite religious, but they were liberal, conservative or centrist. But I did find something else — it’s a different way I want to distinguish it: Part of what I try to say in the book, and I’ll stress now is that to come to the center and negotiate with people who don’t feel exactly the way you do about an issue requires you to have some kind of trust in the other person or other people. And part of that trust is getting to know those people. For instance, John McCain and I got to know each other a lot because we traveled so much around the world, particularly to visit our troops, but also to visit different countries and leaders. So we trusted each other, even though we disagreed on a lot of things. And we became very good friends, and often successful legislative partners. And I do think, as I say in this book and I’ve written elsewhere, that the fact that I became known as a religiously observant Jew was a source of respect, perhaps trust, from my colleagues, particularly during my years in the Senate, when my religious

observance became more public.

JJ: *In your book, you argue that the majority of Americans still remain moderate in their tastes and in their political interests. Yet, clearly, there’s been a rise in the election of partisan politicians over the last decade. Why is that? If the voters want centrist problem-solvers, why are these partisan politicians winning instead?*

JL: The reason is that the centrists, the independents, the moderates, are not as intensely involved in the selection of nominees for Democratic and Republican parties for Congress and other offices. And that allows the further left and further right of the two major parties to have disproportionate influence on who’s chosen.

One question that is periodically asked in polls is, “Do you want your elected representative in Washington to keep every promise that he or she made about what they’ll do in the last campaign? Or do you want them to negotiate with people in the other party or different point of view to get something done?” It’s always the latter that gets the strong majority of support, which makes sense, of course. But that’s not being reflected in office for other reasons: gerrymandering, money, partisan media, power of the parties controlling money, etc. To take the most handy example, a big reason why Joe Biden was elected our president is because people felt that his background record would be a unifier, [that] he would bring people to the center around him to get something done.

Usually, the American political system is dynamic and moving and reflecting what the people in the country are experiencing, which is a time of remarkable change economically where people are insecure in terms of their economic future because of technology and also because of the tremendous cultural changes which [because of] labor and demographic changes, leave a lot of millions of Americans feeling that they may be on the outside in the future. So they express this insecurity and even anger through the political system, and it really calls on leaders, challenges leaders in both parties to respond to those public emotions in a way that is ultimately unifying rather than divisive, which, unfortunately,

today, it seems to be more often than not.

JJ: *You write of your 2006 Senate reelection: “Was one of the lessons learned in my 2006 Senate campaign that third parties are a good way to disrupt the partisan duopoly of Democrats and Republicans that has stymied our government? American history (past and recent) doesn’t support that conclusion. I was lucky that Connecticut is one of a minority of states that allows a candidate who has lost a party primary to run as an Independent. In most of the states, the two major parties have foreclosed that second chance by law.” How should states create more opportunities for serious Independent or third-party runs?*

JL: A lot of this book, *The Centrist Solution*, is about people of different ideologies coming together and negotiating in the spirit that Talmudic scholars and rabbis have done for centuries. The reality is that the two parties, in addition to ideology, are also divisive now. The fascinating thing to me is that the two parties have assumed a powerful reality in American politics which is not required by the Constitution or the law. Once they settled into a two-party system, the two parties inevitably did things to protect their duopoly. So they’ve made it harder for third-party candidates. I think this is so pervasive a two-party system, that this book and a lot of my effort both in Congress and since, through this organization No Labels, which I chair, has been to encourage, first, the nomination and election of Republicans and Democrats who will be centrist and therefore give us a higher hope that something will actually get done by our government in Washington. But I also think that, if that doesn’t work, and the two parties cannot become more centrist in the way that I mean it, of working together and bipartisan, then it ought to be easier for people to form third parties.

Most states, if you lose a nomination and a primary or a convention, you can’t run after as an Independent. In many states, it’s quite hard to run as an Independent because you have to get a large number of signatures. And let’s go to the presidential level, it is very hard to qualify as a third-party candidate in enough states to have a plausible chance of actually getting elected.

JL: *Should more candidates who have lost primaries run as Independents?*

JL: I think they should have the right to do it. Now, whether they do, or whether they can win, that's a different story.

JL: *Were you shocked by the reaction you got from Democratic colleagues when you ran as an Independent?*

JL: What was really hurtful to me was the reaction. This was more of Democrats in Connecticut, because during the primary most of the Democrats who I served with in the Senate stuck with me.

I talk about one of the unions, the International Association of Machinists, representing the workers at Pratt and Whitney, an aircraft engine company. I'd worked very hard and really produced a lot for them as workers, but also, I think, for the country and our security. And I'll never forget, as I described in the book, the head of the union in Connecticut called me up and said, "This is one of the hardest calls that I've ever made, but our union is going to endorse your opponent in the primary. We really appreciate everything you've done for us, Joe, but our national union just told us they don't agree with you on the Iraq War, therefore, we can't support you." [Lieberman backed the war.]

But you get over it, you go on. I was lucky enough to have an opportunity under Connecticut law to run as an Independent. And of course, when I won as an Independent, it was probably the most gratifying, thrilling moment of my electoral career, just because I essentially came back from defeat, thanks to the voters in Connecticut.

JL: *You write that in 2008, neither then-Senators Hillary Clinton nor Barack Obama asked for your endorsement, whereas Sen. McCain, who you endorsed, obviously did. Had they asked, would you have considered giving your support?*

JL: Yeah, I definitely would have. I met Bill and Hillary Clinton when they were at law school in the early '70s. I had graduated a couple years before, but I started practicing law in New Haven. Bill Clinton helped me in

my first campaign for state senator in 1970. And so I was an early supporter of President Clinton in the '92 campaign. I worked with Hillary. We knew each other well. And when Barack Obama got elected in 2004, as I say, in the book, the Senate had a program which encouraged more bipartisanship where they urged, in some sense, required, incoming senators, to choose two incumbents as mentors, one of each party. I was surprised and honored that Barack Obama chose me as his Democratic mentor. So we got to know each other pretty well. It would have seemed natural for either Clinton or Obama to ask me to support them. They never did. And I understood it, because the [Iraq] war in 2008 continued to be a deeply divisive issue.

There was such a prevailing consensus in the Democratic Party, particularly among voters who voted in primaries, that the war was a terrible mistake. The fact that I had been unwilling to give up on it until I felt we had stabilized the country — which, in fact, by 2008 we had — made me persona non grata among a lot of Democratic primary voters.

I assume that's why Hillary and Barack didn't ask for my support. But it would have been natural. It would have been a hard decision between them because, as I said, I had close relations with both of them. But it would have been more natural for me to support Clinton or Obama than for me to support McCain. But by the time John asked me, around November of 2007, it was clear to me that Obama and Clinton were not going to ask for my support. And also, I loved John, I believed in John, I trusted John. And I knew he was ready to be president of the United States on day one. So I also felt that I was making a statement about bipartisanship. I was still a Democrat that was elected as an Independent, registered Democrat. And obviously he was Republican, but this is what I think is best for the country.

JL: *Do you think that came across as a statement of bipartisanship or was it seen more as a move to the right?*

JL: I don't know. It's possible. But McCain was such a maverick still, and it was seen that way by a lot of people, including Republicans, that I don't think it was seen as a move to the right. It was probably seen as

an expression of our friendship, which had been much written about by that time. But also, I know, among Democrats particularly — again, I'll use the term Democratic primary voters — it was seen as yet another indication that I was really, in their mind, not a good Democrat. And so in that sense, it had an effect.

JL: *Going back to President Biden, you write in the book, "the only way we will solve some of our serious national problems and seize some of our great national opportunities... will require Republican members of Congress to break away from Trump, and it will require Biden and Democratic members of Congress to declare their independence from far-left Democrats who won't compromise." Centrist Democrats have reportedly grown annoyed by President Biden's refusal to take a hardline stance in negotiating with progressives on the infrastructure bill. How do you assess President Biden's strategy?*

JL: I mean, there has to be room and there is room in the Democratic Party for what I would call center-left Democrats like Joe Biden. That center-left group is probably the majority in the Democratic Party. I would never say to exclude the further-left Democrats who don't want to compromise, but they can't be allowed to think that they can control the party, or the president of the party. They don't have the numbers to justify that. There have been times, I will say, in the months since President Biden was elected that I felt that the "Squad," the so-called "Progressive Caucus" in the House, has had more influence in the party and in the Biden administration than they're entitled to. Again, I would never exclude them, but they have to come to the center also and begin to negotiate.

It appears, I say with some hope, now that that's happening, that they all had to understand that the \$3.5 trillion bill was just more than our country could afford and more than could be accomplished politically. Some of the centrists — in the Senate, [Joe] Manchin and [Krysten] Sinema; in the House, Josh Gottheimer and all the Democrats — who said "Stop, whoa, take a step back" [are] having an effect... Some of the programs, in my opinion, have so far

not been well thought-out or well-discussed in Congress. It's gonna lead to tremendous Democratic defeats in the congressional

elections next year, and perhaps in the presidential election in 2024. ♦

OCTOBER 28, 2021

'Start-Up Nation' starting to tackle its own climate crisis

On eve of COP26, Israel is touting greentech innovation as it lags behind in battle to lower greenhouse gas emissions

By Ruth Marks Eglash

When world leaders gather next week for COP26, the United Nations' Conference on Climate Change, in Glasgow, Scotland, Israel hopes to use the forum to position itself as a world leader in providing viable solutions to the global climate crisis.

But the self-declared "Start-Up Nation," known for its advanced greentech innovation in fields such as agriculture, water preservation, clean energy and the growing industry of alternative proteins, lags far behind other countries in tackling climate change and has set itself unambitious targets for lowering greenhouse gas emissions. There are some signs, however, that the current government is now taking major steps to catch up.

In recent weeks, Israel's environmental challenges have burst into public view, with Israel's President Isaac Herzog establishing an Israeli Climate Forum to bring together policymakers and experts, and the state comptroller, the nation's watchdog, releasing a stinging, in-depth report that seeks to serve as a blueprint to improving Israel's approach.

"The audit revealed many findings indicating that the State of Israel has yet to make the necessary perceptual shift," Matanyahu Englman, the state comptroller, wrote in the report's foreword. "Only a minority of public entities exhibited actions for improving adaptation to climate change. Israel is one of the few countries in the world that does not act based on a national adaptation plan that is budgeted and

approved, although it is in a 'hot spot' (high-risk area), and thus even more exposed to climate change risks."

Englman said his report should act as a "warning light" to the public and the government.

"Israel has not yet internalized the risks posed by climate change to the economy and financial system," he wrote, adding that even "in the field of climate innovation, Israel is at the bottom of the list of countries reviewed."

On Sunday, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, who will attend next week's conference, formally declared climate change a matter of "national security" — a step that will require Israel's security agencies to begin preparing for climate-related emergencies — and released a 100-point plan that includes an allotment of some \$225 million to improving energy efficiency, bolstering solar energy production and encouraging innovative greentech.

"The climate crisis is one of the major issues on the world agenda," the prime minister said in a statement. "It concerns the lives of all of us, and also the lives of our children and grandchildren. We are obligated to deal with it in Israel; it is at the core of our being."

However, Bennett, who will lead a delegation of more than 100 Israeli ministers, Knesset members, government officials, diplomats, experts and industry leaders to Glasgow, stopped short of committing to cutting emissions to net-zero by 2050, which would bring Israel in line

with the Biden administration and other Western countries and fulfill the goals of the conference. A spokesperson from the Prime Minister's Office said there would be further announcements in this sphere from Glasgow next week.

"We need a change of direction," former Knesset member Dov Khenin told Jewish Insider. "We are in a state of emergency and the decisions we need to make are not what will happen in 2030 or 2050 but what will affect us today and tomorrow."

Khenin, who will head the president's climate forum, said the country's challenges were multifold and included an urgent need to move from an overwhelming reliance on private vehicles to improving public transport; a switch from fossil fuels to renewable energy; and more sustainable planning for large infrastructure projects.

"There needs to be a deep change in the whole system of planning, and we must prepare ourselves for the dangers ahead — the lack of water, desertification, floods — issues that the whole world is confronting," Khenin told JI.

"I think that the fact that Prime Minister Bennett is going to Glasgow is very important and positive," he continued, adding that the prime minister's and the president's interest in the issue were finally creating an important national conversation around climate change. "People are more aware of the challenges today than before and they know this is no longer an issue of the far future, it is not a crisis happening far away but is something that is influencing our lives here in Israel."

"This is the first time Israel is giving attention to climate justice," said Yosef Abramowitz, CEO of Energiya Global Capital, using a term that frames climate change as an ethical and political issue, rather than one that is purely environmental or physical in nature. Energiya is an impact-investment platform for solar energy in the developing world.

A solar pioneer, Abramowitz is the driving force behind Israel's first solar fields, which have allowed the Negev desert to become 100% powered by the sun during daylight hours. He told JI that Israel lags in the climate battle because, until now, there was "no moral leadership on the issue."

"I hope, with this government, that will now change," said Abramowitz, who will be part of Israel's delegation to Glasgow. He said Israel's renewable goals were still not ambitious enough, however, and that the country needed to make a drastic reduction

of its greenhouse gas emissions.

Gideon Behar, Israel's special envoy for climate change and sustainability, acknowledged that Israel is trailing other countries on its climate goals but said that should not cancel out the innovative and sustainable solutions being developed by its rich tech sector.

"The world needs solutions and Israel can provide them," Behar told JI. "Israel can become a lab providing practical solutions to the climate crisis. It is a very important contribution to humanity."

At an event at his residence on Monday for members of the Israeli delegation heading to the climate conference, Herzog showcased, and sampled, some of the Israel's top innovations in artificial protein production — plant-based vegan eggs developed by Zero Egg and the first-of-its-kind cultured meat made by Future Meat. He was also presented with a "carbon footprint"

calculator, which calculates the quantity of greenhouse gases an individual emits into the atmosphere, and tasted Watergen's water, manufactured from humidity in the air.

"[I]f I had to summarize in two words our participation as the State of Israel at the climate summit in Glasgow next week, I would choose not only the word 'crisis,'" Herzog said at the event. "With your permission, I would add the word 'opportunity.' This is an opportunity — precisely because there is a massive crisis on our doorstep."

"Yes, the crisis is also an opportunity for us as a country to do tikkun olam, to repair the world," he continued. "Although we, as a small country, are not a major actor in the creation of the crisis, we can certainly be a meaningful actor in the response to it." ♦

OCTOBER 29, 2021

Alcee Hastings's Yiddishe Kop

'Goldenberg, how is it that I know Yiddish and you don't?' Hastings once asked his chief of staff

By Matthew Kassel

The special House election to replace the late Rep. Alcee Hastings (D-FL) has, barring a few exceptions, moved along at a relatively lethargic pace — and that dynamic seems unlikely to change as the election wraps up on Tuesday, with a clear frontrunner yet to emerge.

It's anyone's guess who among the five or six top-tier contenders in the 11-candidate primary — including a handful of elected officials and one big-spending CEO — will prevail next week.

One thing remains clear: Hastings, the charismatic former longtime dean of Florida's congressional delegation, who died last April at 84 from pancreatic cancer, looms over the election.

It would be unreasonable to expect that any single candidate could prove capable of harnessing voter enthusiasm as Hastings

did throughout nearly 30 years in the House, and particularly in such a crowded field. But even as some have cast themselves as faithful stewards of Hastings's legacy, the low-profile race has exposed a void in Florida's 20th Congressional District, which includes parts of West Palm Beach and Fort Lauderdale, that has come to feel increasingly palpable as the election enters the final stretch.

"The magic word for me is levity," Hastings's son, Alcee Hastings II, said in a recent interview with *Jewish Insider*, putting a finger on what he views as the missing ingredient in a consequential race that has largely failed to capture the national spotlight.

Hastings, who grew up in the segregated South, seems to have worn light-heartedness like a shield. The trailblazing civil rights lawyer from Fort Lauderdale, whose promising judicial career as Florida's first

Black federal judge was cut short by a House impeachment in 1988, found refuge just five years later in the same legislative body that had only recently taken him down.

The House suited his combative and linguistically dexterous oratorical style, which he put to use as an outspoken advocate for racial justice, human rights and Israel, among other causes. But perhaps most notably, former friends and colleagues say, the 15-term congressman never lost his capacity for warmth and humor as his outsized personality propelled him through a challenging mid-career stumble.

"One of the things I learned about him when we worked together, just in a moment of relaxation, was that he, like me, loved Mel Brooks," said former Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-CT), who developed a close relationship with Hastings during Lieberman's time in the upper chamber.

Their bond, like many aspects of Hastings's improbable trajectory, was fortuitous, not least because Lieberman had served on the impeachment trial committee that would ultimately lead to Hastings's conviction in the Senate.

But Lieberman was unconvinced by the corruption charges, and was among the minority of senators who voted in favor of acquittal. "We had a sort of natural affinity," Lieberman said of Hastings, who returned the favor years later when he endorsed the former senator's failed 2004 presidential bid. "He was very grateful that I had come to that conclusion, although it didn't affect the outcome for him, and we just kept in touch."

A recurring subject of discussion was, he said, one of their favorite comedians. "We always talked about Mel Brooks," Lieberman chuckled.

"He had a delightful sense of humor," Rabbi Mark Winer, the president of the Florida Democratic Party Jewish Caucus, said of Hastings. "He wore very loud socks. He was really an exemplary man. Perfect? No. But we could talk about anything with Alcee Hastings" — in more than one language.

"He could speak Yiddish," remarked Len Ronik, a Jewish resident of Tamarac, which sits in the 20th District, who met Hastings a number of times. "We would say a couple of phrases. I didn't want to push how far he could go."

But Ronik might have been pleased to discover that the late congressman could go further than he expected — more than a *bissel*, at least. Hastings's command of Yiddish, according to those who heard him in action, extended beyond the usual stock expressions, though he was fond of peppering his speech with those as well.

David Goldenberg, who worked as chief of staff for Hastings in Washington, recalled walking into his old boss's office one day and encountering a mystifying utterance. "He was frustrated about something, and he said something to me in Yiddish," said Goldenberg, now Midwest regional director for the Anti-Defamation League. "I gave him this blank stare, and he said, 'Goldenberg, how is it that I know Yiddish and you don't?'"

Hastings wasn't exactly fluent, Goldenberg said, but his command of the language was hardly superficial. On a

separate occasion, Goldberg remembered watching with a mix of awe and fascination when, after introducing Hastings to his future wife's 80-year-old grandmother in Chicago, he began conversing with her in broken Yiddish.

The encounter was a lasting source of amusement between Hastings and Goldberg. "What would *bubbe* say?" Hastings liked to tease his former staffer when Yiddish came up in conversation.

The congressman's knowledge of Yiddish does not appear to have been previously reported, and even his son, Hastings II, pled ignorance when asked for confirmation. "I don't know that, to be honest with you," he told JI. "He never did it with me."

It didn't seem to surprise him, though. "My dad was a country boy, but he could get intellectually unbelievable with the best of them in all arenas," Hastings II said. "It probably is the bat mitzvahs and bar mitzvahs. I went to a few myself, but I don't have any knowledge of that personally."

"He used to joke that he's been to more bar mitzvahs than anybody you'll ever meet," Goldenberg said of Hastings.

An exaggeration, of course, but not entirely unbelievable. Hastings spent a portion of his childhood in and around Jewish households in New York and California, where his parents worked as live-in domestic servants — the moment when, as he recalled in a personal essay, his "lifelong relationship with the Jewish community began."

"As a youth, I have many fond memories of attending bar mitzvahs, learning about the Jewish faith and even working as a short order cook in a Jewish delicatessen named Spector's in Margate, New Jersey," Hastings wrote three years ago, omitting that he had also once been employed as a babysitter for the filmmaker John Landis in Los Angeles. "Although I am not of the Jewish faith, I count myself lucky to be deeply rooted in the Jewish community."

"Half the time you thought he was Jewish, with his jokes and different things," said Mitch Ceasar, the former longtime chairman of the Broward Democratic Party, who knew Hastings for 47 years.

When Ceasar's daughter had her bat mitzvah nearly 20 years ago, Hastings was inevitably there in the audience. "He started

chanting," Ceasar said, recalling that the congressman displayed a firm command of the Hebrew prayers. "Everybody noticed he knew the words and didn't need a book." The rabbi was so impressed that he asked him to come up to the *bimah* and speak. Despite his penchant for sermonizing, Hastings declined, mindful not to steal the spotlight.

Hastings's familiarity with Jewish liturgy — as well as Yiddish — was a natural extension of his boyhood experiences in Jewish homes and synagogues. "He just always marveled at the nucleus of the Jewish family and how they were so warm to each other and committed to the next generation," said Ron Klein, a former Florida congressman who chairs the Jewish Democratic Council of America.

Hastings found particular inspiration in the generation of Jewish immigrants from Europe he got to know as a kid, according to Klein, moved by their resilience in the face of discrimination with which he was all too familiar.

Later, he told stories about studying for the bar exam with Jewish friends during a time of entrenched racial segregation in South Florida that he would work to dismantle. Early in his career, he practiced law with Jewish lawyers.

In many ways, Hastings embodied the coalition between Black and Jewish leaders forged during the civil rights era, and he remained committed to that alliance throughout his time in the House as a member of the Congressional Black Caucus who worked to advance Black-Jewish relations.

Hastings deepened his ties with the Jewish community in South Florida following the last round of redistricting in 2012, when the sprawling Kings Point condominium complex came under his representation. The retirement community of 9,000 residents is home to a sizable Jewish population, and Hastings made his presence known, publishing a column in the Kings Point newspaper and frequently accepting invitations to events and fundraisers.

"He never hesitated, even during the course of his illness," recalled Burt Scholl, a former vice president of the Kings Point Democratic Club. "He made appearances whenever he could. There was always a vitality in his speech that somehow could

stimulate people. Even audiences who were usually tepid about most political issues somehow were energized by what he said.”

Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin, the spiritual leader at Temple Israel of West Palm Beach, a Reform synagogue, met Hastings only once at an anti-gun rally following the Parkland school shooting in 2018. But the memory remains vivid in his mind. “He took my hand warmly,” Salkin recalled. “It was clear that it was his night. He had total command over the audience, and he understood his role as a comforter as well. I saw a humanity and a humility in him in which he did not grandstand but rather spoke the truth about what was on everyone’s hearts.”

“He was a complex and imperfect man, like all good biblical heroes,” Salkin said of Hastings, who later in his career faced allegations of sexual misconduct, which resulted in a settlement paid by the Treasury Department, as well as an ethics investigation that was ultimately dropped. “He left a legacy of community building and deep relationships. That will not be an easy legacy to either replace or replicate. The man exuded confidence and charisma.”

For Hastings, engendering relationships with the Jewish community went hand in hand with his staunch support for Israel. The congressman was among the Jewish state’s fiercest defenders in Congress and visited Israel an estimated 20 times. In 2007, he helped grow a forest in the northern Galilee — named after the civil rights leader Coretta Scott King — that had been destroyed the year prior during the war with Hezbollah. In 2015, Hastings voted against the Iran nuclear deal.

“I never had to worry about his vote,” said Rabbi Leonid Feldman of Temple Beth El, a Conservative synagogue in West Palm Beach.

Luis Fleischman, the former longtime vice president of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Palm Beach County, agreed. “He stood with us, I would say, 100%,” Fleischman said of Hastings, “even at times when I thought he wouldn’t.”

Putting aside the sincerity of his convictions, there was a strong incentive for Hastings to adopt a pro-Israel stance in South Florida, which is heavily Jewish, according to Charles Zelden, a professor of history at Nova Southeastern University in

Fort Lauderdale. “I am sure that there was a firm belief. He found allies in the Jewish community. He was comfortable with them,” Zelden said. “But it also wasn’t bad politics, and he was, if nothing else, a very skilled politician.”

But Rep. Ted Deutch (D-FL), one of three Jewish Democratic House members in Florida, said Hastings’s foreign policy views went well beyond mere political calculation.

“Alcee was a proud defender of the U.S.-Israel relationship because he understood the history of Israel, he understood Israel’s place in the Middle East, and he understood why Israel is such a vital ally and good friend of the United States,” Deutch told JI. “Most importantly, in the Democratic Party, he understood why supporting Israel was entirely consistent with his progressive view of the world, and that’s a really important legacy that he left for all of us.”

As the special election nears, pro-Israel advocates in South Florida and beyond are unnerved by one candidate whose views on Israel threaten to undo that legacy. In a recent interview with JI, State Rep. Omari Hardy, a progressive Democrat from Palm Beach County, came out in support of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement targeting the Jewish state while stating his firm opposition to legislation that would grant \$1 billion in supplemental aid for Israel’s Iron Dome missile-defense system. He also supports conditioning aid to Israel.

Hardy is the only candidate in the race to have espoused such positions. Others — including state Sen. Perry Thurston, state Rep. Bobby DuBose, healthcare executive Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick and Broward County Commissioners Dale Holness and Barbara Sharief — have vowed to continue Hastings’s pro-Israel legacy in Congress.

But while Hardy has struggled to emerge as a leading contender against some of the more established elected officials in the race, for many, his views amount to a refutation of Hastings’s Middle East foreign policy agenda.

“Let me be clear,” said Jared Moskowitz, Florida’s director of emergency management, who counts Hastings as a major influence, “whoever replaces Alcee Hastings, if they are anti-Israel and pro-BDS, by default, not only do they have no respect

for Alcee Hastings, but they are going to undo a big part of his legacy.”

Hardy, for his part, begs to differ. “Everyone in this race has a healthy respect for Rep. Hastings, but none of us are running to be his clone,” he said in an interview with JI this week after Hastings’s son claimed that Hardy’s stance suggests that he is “well out of his arena to understand the dynamic of what Congress is about and what the importance of Israel is to America as an ally.”

“I understand some folks might want to speculate as to what Rep. Hastings would think about my support for human rights,” Hardy went on. “I think it’s hard to tell what he would think, being as he and I have never had an opportunity to converse. I’ve never had an opportunity to explain to him my thoughts on the issue. So the speculation as to what he might believe about my position is just that: speculation.”

Either way, the nature of the debate was telling. Hastings’ presence hangs so heavily over the race that even with just days to go until the election concludes, at least one candidate has inevitably found himself reckoning the congressman’s long shadow. ♦