

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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NOVEMBER 4, 2021

The retirement community that was a microcosm of the Florida special election

Members of the sprawling Kings Point retirement complex lament the waning influence of condo communities on local elections

By Matthew Kassel

The sprawling Kings Point retirement community in Tamarac, Fla., about 15 miles northwest of Fort Lauderdale, has long been viewed as something of a campaign pilgrimage site for aspiring Democratic presidential candidates. The predominantly Jewish condominium complex, situated in deep-blue Broward County, is home to some 9,000 residents who represent a coveted swing vote, not least because, for decades, they have turned out in dependably large numbers.

In 2000, Al Gore made overtures to the Jewish community at Kings Point alongside former Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-CT), his Orthodox Jewish running mate. The following cycle, Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-NY) and other high-profile Democratic surrogates were on the ground in Tamarac, stumping for John Kerry. In 2008, Barack Obama courted the Kings Point community when his pro-Israel bona fides were in question among some Jewish voters in South Florida, and as a vice-presidential candidate in 2012, Joe Biden made sure he had paid a visit to the gated retirement

complex, which is so vast it covers three voting precincts.

Len Ronik, a former longtime president of the Kings Point community who helped coordinate several campaign events, looks back on such political happenings with a mix of pride and amusement, chuckling at one memorable visit from Hillary Clinton some years ago. “We came off the stage, and I’m walking with my arms around Hillary,” said the 89-year-old retired plumber. “My wife, sitting in the front row, says, ‘What are you talking about?’ I said, ‘We’re talking about sex. I told her I could be better than Bill.’ She says, ‘Are you crazy?’ I said, ‘Why do you ask me stupid questions?’”

The special election to succeed the late Rep. Alcee Hastings (D-FL) — which is likely headed for a recount after Tuesday’s results showed a virtual tie between Broward County Commissioner Dale Holness and healthcare executive Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick — presented candidates with a similar opportunity to shore up pivotal support from the Kings Point community. Yet an abiding — and not so stupid — question was whether Jewish voters in Kings Point would coalesce around any of

the 11 House contenders jockeying for the seat. In a low-turnout primary battle with no clear frontrunner, even a few hundred ballots or less could easily have made the difference.

“Not courting the vote in Kings Point in a special election occurs at your own peril,” Mitch Ceasar, the former longtime chairman of the Broward Democratic Party who founded the first Democratic club in Tamarac more than 40 years ago, said in an interview with *Jewish Insider* last week at his office in Plantation, just a few days before the primary. “Kings Point, historically, has a clear pattern of turning out.”

Hastings, who died in April at 84, developed a warm relationship with the Kings Point community, which came under his purview in 2012 after the last round of redistricting. The 15-term congressman wrote a monthly column in the eponymously named *Kings Point* newspaper, sprinkled Yiddish phrases throughout his speeches to Jewish constituents — some of whom speak the language — and was an outspoken pro-Israel advocate. Unlike Hastings, none of the top contenders in the race had especially strong connections with Kings Point going

into the election.

Florida's 20th Congressional District, which encompasses a number of African-American and Caribbean enclaves in Broward and Palm Beach Counties, is predominantly Black, and each of the candidates largely relied on a strategy of engaging their respective bases. But as in past elections, the sizable and politically active Jewish voting bloc in Kings Point — not to be mistaken with a similarly named retirement community in Delray Beach, the subject of an Oscar-nominated documentary short — was in some ways uniquely, if precariously, positioned to push one candidate into first place.

While recent demographic changes have resulted in a dwindling population of Jewish residents within Kings Point, which broke ground in 1983, the special House primary this week in South Florida was a chance for the community to demonstrate its wherewithal at a moment when so-called “condo commands,” once a potent force in South Florida politics, have begun to lose their influence in elections across the state.

This cycle, the community fell short of exerting its political muscle as Jewish voters in Kings Point splintered, somewhat predictably, among several of the leading candidates in the deeply divided field. But the lack of unity also underscores shifting dynamics within the community itself that seem to have played a role in diminishing what was once a more potent political force.

“When we came down, Kings Point was 98% Jewish,” Mike Stern, an 87-year-old retired civil servant from Brooklyn who moved to South Florida more than a quarter of a century ago, mused in an interview with JI last week at Rob's Bageland, a popular diner in Tamarac where local political candidates often host meet-and-greets with community members.

“The only non-Jews were Italians married to Jews,” said Helene Herman, 73, who moved to Kings Point approximately eight years ago from Queens, stopping by the diner one recent morning on her way to Hebrew class. “Seriously.”

“You could say it was back to the ghetto,” Ronik, the former Kings Point president who arrived from New York 27 years ago, said bluntly. “It was predominantly all Jewish. At that time, the vote was probably about 95%

Jewish Democratic.”

Now, longtime Kings Point community members pin the Jewish population at about 60% as Jewish retirees from New York and Jersey settle elsewhere in South Florida — and middle-class Black and Latino residents make their way to Tamarac and its environs, wooed in part by what one resident attributed to a drop in real estate prices precipitated by the 2007-08 housing bust.

“Broward County is changing — it's becoming more diverse, it's becoming increasingly Latin, and, in a sense, it's slowly becoming North Miami-Dade County,” said Charles Zelden, a professor of history at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale. “Liberal Jewish voters or liberal elderly retirees who would have moved down to Kings Point are now moving to Palm Beach County and further north. When those homes are being replaced, they're not being replaced by the same elderly voters.”

For the most part, Jewish community members embraced such changes in conversations with JI. “What I like is that Kings Point has accepted the differences,” said Sibby Heyer, 90, who moved to the retirement complex nearly 30 years ago. But even as Democratic voter participation has held steady in recent years at around 73%, according to unofficial resident historians, growing partisan divisions have nonetheless unsettled the otherwise deep-blue status quo.

“I had somebody tell me, ‘Well, I don't have to wear a mask in the clubhouse because I play mahjong, and if you play mahjong or cards you don't have to wear a mask,’” Herman said, lamenting what she described as a politicization of pandemic safety protocols by some residents. “Yes, you do have to wear a mask if you're playing mahjong.”

Moreover, the political makeup of the community has ever so slightly shifted rightward, at least substantially enough that there is now — much to the chagrin of many Democratic residents — a small but vocal Republican club in Kings Point. It was formed a few years ago. “They had a meeting which they advertised as ‘Jexit,’” said Burt Scholl, 89, a former vice president of the Kings Point Democratic Club, referring to a political effort encouraging Jews to leave

the Democratic Party. “I was livid. I think I complained to the management and the management said something about the First Amendment and ‘you can't do anything.’”

“The condo influence is starting to fade here in Florida,” said Richard Stark, who chairs the Broward County Democratic Party Jewish Caucus and is a former state representative in the Florida legislature. “That generation, you had the big condos here and they controlled thousands and thousands of votes. They could easily swing an election.”

Needless to say, that wasn't the case in Tuesday's special congressional primary. The top vote-getter in Kings Point, Barbara Sharief, a moderate Broward County commissioner who cast herself as a strong supporter of Israel, came in third district-wide behind Cherfilus-McCormick, who now trails Holness by a margin of just 12 votes, thin enough to trigger an automatic recount from which Sharief will be excluded. Whoever prevails will be the prohibitive favorite in the Jan. 11 general election because the district is heavily Democratic.

Sharief's support from the Kings Point community was hardly a show of force. The 49-year-old pediatric home healthcare executive, who personally loaned her campaign nearly \$800,000, pulled in just 495 votes across the community's three precincts, according to the website of the Broward supervisor of elections. By contrast, Holness garnered 309 votes and Cherfilus-McCormick came in with 241. Those numbers are likely incomplete because vote-by-mail results are only partially reported.

Still, the anemic tally suggests that voters in Kings Point were — like the rest of the district — relatively disengaged from the race, which never assumed a national profile as other recent special elections in Democratic districts in Ohio and Louisiana did. That's not to suggest that the candidates were equally withdrawn. Most of the leading contenders, by varying degrees, pursued support from Kings Point voters. Holness, 64, was a steady presence in the community throughout the election, which appealed to Herman, who voted for him. “I feel that he is more ecumenical in his approach,” she said of the Jamaican-born county commissioner, who has positioned himself as the candidate most equipped to advance Hastings's legacy

in the House. “We need candidates who are ecumenical.”

Sherfilus-McCormick, who at 42 is mounting her third bid for the seat, positioned herself as a sort of pro-Israel progressive, including such policy proposals as Medicare for All, the Green New Deal and universal basic income in her platform. She established her main campaign office close to the Jewish community in Tamarac “because she knows how important the voters of Kings Point are in this election,” said her spokesperson, Jeffrey Romeu. Still, the Haitian-American CEO of Trinity Home Healthcare, who spent millions of dollars of her own money on advertising throughout the district, performed better elsewhere on Election Day. “We were very happy about the performance in Palm Beach,” Romeu told JI on Wednesday.

Sharief, who is Black and Muslim, claims to have aggressively courted the Jewish vote. “I’ve spent a lot of time in Kings Point,” Sharief told JI last week at a campaign stop outside the African-American Research Library and Cultural Center on Sistrunk Boulevard, where voters trickled in at a glacial pace during early voting. “We knocked door to door there. We did all the buildings.”

Her pro-Israel message resonated in particular with some voters who questioned the authenticity of other candidates’ Middle East foreign policy views. Sharon Jacobs, a 75-year-old resident of Kings Point, said she appreciated that Sharief had been to Israel two years ago on an AIPAC-affiliated African-American leadership tour. “She also believed in the Iron Dome,” Jacobs added. “Only one of the others didn’t support it. The others said they supported it. But who knows?”

That one candidate was Omari Hardy, a progressive state representative who caused a stir when, in an interview with JI just weeks before the election, he came out against legislation that would provide \$1 billion in supplemental funding for Israel’s Iron Dome missile-defense system. He also favors conditioning aid to the Jewish state and voiced his support for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement targeting Israel.

“That was the end of him,” said Ronik, who voted for state Rep. Bobby DuBose,

the outgoing leader of the Democratic House minority caucus. “This was the kiss of death.” Hardy’s support for BDS, along with his stance on the Iron Dome, garnered an attack ad from Democratic Majority for Israel in the final days of the race. The 31-year-old lawmaker from Palm Beach County came in sixth with just under 6% of the vote.

Ronik expressed hope that whoever wins will uphold Hastings’s firm commitment to the Jewish state, a view echoed by a number of Kings Point community members who spoke with JI. But the longtime resident suggested that he would be taking a wait-and-see approach. “Time will tell,” he said. “We don’t know. Once they’re in office and we see when push comes to shove, when there’s an issue on BDS, we’ll see how they stand up. Remember, there’s another election in one year, so if you don’t toe the mark the right way, you’re out.”

Because the election is so close, experts have speculated that Hastings’s incoming replacement could face a primary challenge in the 2022 midterms.

Rep. Ted Deutch (D-FL), who served Kings Point before Hastings, described the condo’s Jewish residents as “smart, sophisticated voters who take a hard look at all of the candidates before deciding who deserves their vote.”

Israel, he said, is one overwhelming concern. “This is a community many of whose residents have a very strong commitment to Israel because of their own personal experiences,” Deutch told JI in a recent interview. “Their personal experiences of surviving the Holocaust or as children of Holocaust survivors, their personal experiences around the creation of the modern state of Israel in 1948. They’re committed to supporting Israel and the U.S.-Israel relationship. In many instances, it comes from a very personal place.”

Despite outreach from candidates throughout the election, some Kings Point residents said they felt as if the engagement was largely superficial. “Kings Point is an afterthought,” said Stern, the retired civil servant from Brooklyn, who also voted for DuBose. He speculated, for instance, that state Sen. Perry Thurston, the only candidate in the race who represents the retirement complex, was “not relying on the

Kings Point vote” as he built his coalition, though he did campaign in the community.

Thurston suggested as much in an interview with JI last month. “I look at this election as who’s going to lead the Black community of Broward County and Palm Beach County,” he said, “and I think that my record would indicate that I’m the person who is more prepared.” He placed fourth with about 15% of the vote.

But while some Kings Point residents appear to miss the attention once heaped on them in past races, the complex has in many ways closed itself off to the outside world as recent political divisions between Democrats and Republicans have exposed internal tensions that some community members would prefer to keep private, according to residents who spoke with JI.

Voters who congregated at Rob’s Bageland for interviews with JI last week did so largely because they feared inciting controversy by speaking with a reporter on Kings Point grounds. “The very fact that we’re meeting here and not on the Kings Point premises is, in itself, illustrative of what has happened,” said Scholl, the former public school administrator. “There was a time,” he told JI, “when there would have been no hesitation to allow” members of the press in Kings Point.

Entering the community proved difficult. Several Democratic club members declined to escort JI into Kings Point, citing an administrative prohibition favoring political neutrality over party officers participating in any sort on-premises engagement with reporters.

Such cautious tactics would seem to reinforce the shtetl-like ethos of the Kings Point community, even at a moment when the Jewish population is dwindling. Despite that dynamic, the traditionally Jewish character of the complex remains, with a number of clubs devoted to such subjects as American-Israeli relations, Holocaust remembrance, Jewish studies, Yiddish conversation and Jewish social services. “The mahjong club is very strong,” said Julie Fishman, the current president of the Kings Point Democratic Club.

With that in mind, it seems likely Jewish voters in Kings Point could emerge yet again as an influential bloc in future elections with more obvious frontrunners.

One possible template is the special House election in Cleveland this past August. Jewish community members — Democrats and Republicans alike — united behind Shontel Brown, a moderate pro-Israel Democrat facing off against Nina Turner, a progressive stalwart aligned with the far left, in a race that in some ways came to embody a growing schism within the Democratic Party.

But a similar dynamic in South Florida may require that Jewish voters in Kings Point overcome their own political differences, which one resident — who

discreetly ushered JI into the community on the condition of anonymity — indicated was unlikely to happen anytime soon.

Guiding JI on a driven tour of the sprawling network of condominium communities, the resident described a “palpable” sense of unease that has taken hold in Kings Point as Democrats have found themselves at pains to contend with the emerging minority of outspoken Republican voters. “The big thing is the perception that the Democrats are anti-Israel,” she said with a sigh.

Lately, she has found solace elsewhere in

Tamarac. “I’ve expanded my horizons and have a lot of friends outside of Kings Point,” she said, mostly at a local synagogue she attends on a regular basis.

While she enjoys spending time with her friends in Kings Point, particularly at one of the many outdoor pools, the anonymous resident sounded discouraged by what she characterized as a charged — and changing — political dynamic within the otherwise peaceful gated community.

“The only thing we have in common,” she said, “is we’re old.” ♦

NOVEMBER 2, 2021

Meet the creator of the tool that aims to predict — and prevent — suicide

Dr. Kelly Posner Gerstenhaber’s Columbia-Suicide Severity Rating Scale has been adopted around the world, from Israel to Iran

By Gabby Deutch

To recite some of the holiest prayers in Judaism, 10 worshippers must be present in a minyan. It’s one of the most stringent ways that joining together in a community is part of Judaism; in this case, it is a requirement. But the spirit of community — *kehillah* — is also an ingrained aspect of other parts of Jewish tradition.

It’s apparent in the way friends pool resources to deliver meals to a mourner in the days after the loss of a loved one, or the gathering of community members at a *bris* after a baby boy is born.

“When a community comes together, there’s hope,” said Dr. Kelly Posner Gerstenhaber, founder and director of the Columbia Lighthouse Project and an expert in suicide prevention. “Members who are different from one another [are] orchestrated for a collective undertaking for a common good when this *kehillah* is driven by a constructive purpose.”

That common good, Posner, 54, told *Jewish Insider*, can be preventing suicide, a goal that she argues is a collective

responsibility.

“Just ask. You can save a life,” she explained, summing up her philosophy. “It’s a simple message that declares that asking about suicide is not difficult, and everyone is empowered to make a difference, and everyone in the community has a role in preventing suicide.”

But for Posner (who uses her maiden name professionally), “just ask” is more than a philosophy. It’s the basis of a protocol she created to detect suicidal thoughts and ideation that is backed by years of rigorous scientific research and is used in dozens of countries around the world. Known as the Columbia Protocol, the Columbia-Suicide Severity Rating Scale features a standardized set of straightforward questions to identify people who are considering suicide and to determine who is at risk of acting on suicidal thoughts.

Posner called it “a simple set of questions that can be put in anybody’s hands to identify who’s at risk.” She encourages doctors to ask these questions of their patients, but she also seeks societal change — getting the questions in the hands of everyone

from teachers to librarians to parents to clergy members, so that any person feels empowered to ask a loved one about suicide. (A more detailed form is available for clinical professionals.)

“It sets up a sense of shared language and shared understanding of how to conceptualize it and talk about it,” said Nick Magle-Haberek, clinical director at BaMidbar Wilderness Therapy at Ramah in the Rockies, which uses the protocol.

Suicide kills 700,000 people around the world each year, and 47,500 Americans died by suicide in 2019 — with many more, 1.4 million, having attempted suicide that year. It is the tenth leading cause of death across all age groups and the second leading cause of death among people aged 10-34. Americans have reported increased rates of depression and anxiety since the COVID-19 pandemic began, although it is not clear whether suicide rates have risen as well.

A scientific paper published in June found that the Columbia Protocol “robustly” predicted death by suicide, although the research — conducted by a team of Swedish scientists — did not relate to COVID-19.

"A lot of the other programs, there's just a sense of, if you hear any chatter about [suicide], or if you have a gut feeling about it, then it's time to put somebody on what we would call a 'suicide watch,'" said Magle-Haberek, whose organization works with Jewish young adults. "From my perspective, that's unfair to the staff who don't have that training. And so as a risk-management tool, I think it's pretty exceptional."

Posner's work has been endorsed by major government agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institute of Mental Health and the Department of Homeland Security. In 2018 she received the Department of Defense's medal for exceptional public service at a suicide prevention event cohosted by the Department of Veteran Affairs. The six questions in the Columbia Protocol have been translated into 114 languages, according to the federal Health Resources and Services Administration.

Posner's center at Columbia has created over a dozen versions of a one-page pamphlet, each starting with a variation on a command geared to a different audience: "Ask a steelworker." "Ask your spouse." "Ask your foster child." "Ask your coworkers." "Ask your fellow officer." It could be a coach checking in on a student athlete, or a person gathering the courage to ask a friend if something's wrong.

Half the work is about preventing suicide, Posner explained, but "half of it is also about combating the stigma, which also costs lives." When a person is suffering from depression, "they actually want to be asked, and they want help."

"We have to have a public health approach, meaning we have to find people where they work, live, thrive and learn because many people don't ever get to the doctor," Posner said.

One perhaps unexpected place where Posner has been spreading the gospel of the Columbia Protocol is on construction worksites. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the rate of suicide in construction workers is five times the rate of fatal work-related injuries. "I've been talking to the unions for a long time. They said the safety check in the morning can be more than the hardhat," Posner said.

Posner grew up in Miami, the

granddaughter of businessman Victor Posner, who was known for his hostile takeovers of public companies.

"Everybody else went into business, but I was raised with these values of giving back," Posner said of her family. "That fearlessness in the name of service was something, I think, that was fueled by my family background and also my Judaic values — that what matters is what kind of a person you are and giving back."

In two recent phone interviews with JI, Posner spoke with the speed and intensity of a woman on a mission. She jumped from the Columbia Protocol's benefits to its history to the intricate details of the scientific studies that prove it works.

She gets on Zoom calls with public health workers in China and Namibia and Italy in the middle of the night. She thinks big, and has no qualms about owning it.

"I've always been a high-impact person. How can I make the biggest difference if you live once, right? How can I relieve suffering and save lives?" These are the questions Posner asked herself early in her career.

As an undergraduate at Brown University, Posner first expected to be a lawyer working to free innocent people from prison. "That was my crusade at the moment," she said, until a summer spent working with children in an inpatient mental health center convinced her that she should focus on fighting depression. She grew interested in the process of diagnosing mental illnesses. "It wasn't so much mental health, but making a difference in the lives of people and particularly children," said Posner.

She earned a Ph.D in clinical psychology at Yeshiva University's Ferkauf Graduate School of Psychology, which awarded her a "distinguished alumna" award in 2007.

When asked about the genesis of the Columbia Protocol, Posner pointed to 2004, when the Food and Drug Administration commissioned her to do research about the links between prescription drugs and suicide.

She began working with the FDA after a controversial decision by the agency to put a "black box" warning on antidepressants noting that the drugs were associated with a slightly higher risk of suicide in children and young adults. But some studies have found

that, after the prominent warning labels appeared, the use of antidepressants and talk therapy declined among young people, potentially leading to higher rates of suicide.

"We were worried we were in a horrible natural experiment: When you took these medications away from people, would the suicide rate increase? Yep, that's what happened," Posner noted. The FDA had no clear protocol on how to screen for suicide. But with Posner's research, the FDA announced in 2008 that it would screen for suicide risk in all drug trials using the Columbia Protocol. A seminal 2011 study found that screening for suicide using the Columbia Protocol can help predict — and prevent — suicide.

"It's much more detailed than what we were doing before," Dr. Benjamin A. Toll, a researcher and psychiatrist at the Yale School of Medicine, told *The New York Times* in 2008 regarding the Columbia Protocol. "We used to ask, 'Are you feeling down? Are you feeling sad?'"

The anti-smoking drugs Chantix and Zyban are the only drugs that have since had their black box suicide warnings removed, based on research that incorporated the Columbia Protocol. The warning remains on antidepressants, and Posner encourages people considering antidepressants to discuss with a doctor whether the benefits outweigh any potential risks.

The Columbia Protocol has spread "like wildfire," said Posner, and as more institutions start using it, they produce more research showing that it works. One country that has introduced the Columbia Protocol nationwide — schools, governments, medical professionals — is Israel.

"Israel was one of my first great partners," said Posner. "They were one of the first countries to show how we have to do it everywhere. That work started so many years ago, and that partnership with Israel and that ability to help save lives has been something I'm so grateful for and proud of." She has worked with the Israeli Defense Forces to help identify soldiers at risk of suicide, and the protocol has also been used with Holocaust survivors in Israel.

"The Columbia Protocol has proven its power to bring diverse communities together for the single purpose of saving lives," she said. Perhaps this could be true

of global geopolitics, too: Posner is a Jewish American proud of her work with Israel, and she is also currently helping an Iranian hospital fully implement the protocol.

“Somebody who runs one of the hospitals or works at one of the hospitals said, ‘We’ve been using this for a long time, how can we do X, Y and Z?’ And I said, ‘Let’s

get on a call, so we can figure out how to help your nation,’” Posner recalled. ♦

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Threading a needle on social media reforms in Israel

With hate and disinformation on the rise, the country’s point person on internet regulation has the trickiest of portfolios

By Tamara Zieve

The problem is Talmudic in complexity: How to regulate the ill effects of social media platforms — algorithms that push people toward radicalism, the dissemination of false information and the spread of antisemitism and other forms of hate — without trampling on free speech and privacy rights?

That knotty question, which no Western government has been able to answer even as the influence of the internet has evolved at breakneck speed, is now on the shoulders, in Israel at least, of Communications Minister Yoaz Hendel.

Just back from a visit to the U.S., where he shared ideas with members of Congress and Jewish groups about ways to regulate social media platforms and hold them accountable for their actions, Hendel is getting to work. He is establishing two parliamentary committees to focus on the matter: one that he will head; and an umbrella committee to be led by Justice Minister Gideon Sa’ar.

“As I see it, there was a vacuum in the last few years, and no one knew, actually, what the social media networks are doing and how the government should treat them — and I’m talking about democracies,” Hendel told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview.

Tehilla Schwartz Altshuler, head of the Israel Democracy Institute’s Media Reform and Democracy in the Information Age programs, told *JI* that legislation has lagged behind technology partly due to the faster pace at which the latter evolves.

“Legislators are not necessarily tech

savvy enough to understand and foresee implications of new technologies,” she said. “Finally, the big data companies are a force to be reckoned with and have a very powerful lobby in place to minimize overseeing regulations that might impact the bottom line.”

“Israel urgently needs legislation addressing social media, one that will not leave us exposed in areas in which first-world citizens elsewhere are protected,” Shwartz Altshuler stressed.

This legislation, she said, should include “privacy protections that will outlaw the targeting of users based on their emotional vulnerabilities; requirements to explain decisions to remove content and to delete accounts; provisions making it easy to sue social media providers in Israel; establishment of a framework via which Israeli courts can quickly issue orders for harmful content to be taken down; and requirements to invest resources in monitoring and blocking toxic content in Hebrew.”

Efforts are also underway in the U.S. and Europe to regulate social media platforms in a way that will make them take more responsibility for their conduct and the content they promote, and hold them legally accountable for behavior that harms their users and beyond.

The so-called Facebook Files, leaked by former Facebook employee Frances Haugen — who testified before Congress last month that the platform’s algorithms funnel users toward extremist content and

that the company puts its own profit above the safety of its users — is the latest wake-up call.

Enabling incitement to violence, intentionally pushing users to consume radical political content, spreading misinformation and having a damaging impact on teenagers’ mental health and body image are among accusations that have been leveled against social media platforms in recent years.

As Hendel works to address the issue, which he says has been sitting in “no-man’s land” for too long, he is looking to other democracies to share ideas on this universal challenge.

On his visit to Washington and New York, Hendel discussed the topic with Sen. Ben Ray Lujan (D-NM), chair of the Senate Commerce Subcommittee on Telecom, Media and Broadband. Lujan is, in turn, set to appear before Hendel’s committee to share ideas.

“It’s now time to ask ourselves what kind of tool the social media networks are,” Hendel said.

“I want to learn from them,” Hendel said. “They are in a long process and I think that they can help and donate a lot to our discussion. And it’s important to understand by the way, that from day one, we actually are using the material from overseas and from Europe trying to understand how they got to those conclusions and what they are doing now. And again, it’s not a lot — everything is in process, but I believe that in 2022 you will see changes in the public atmosphere

regarding those social media networks.”

Hendel also met with representatives of the Israeli-American Council, AIPAC, the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish American Organizations and the Israel-U.S. Chamber of Commerce, as well as tech giants Google, Amazon, Twitter, Netflix, Cisco Systems and Lockheed Martin.

A key question to be tackled by his parliamentary committee is how to categorize social media platforms.

“It’s now time to ask ourselves what kind of tool the social media networks are,” Hendel said. “Are they a kind of mailman, delivering letters — doesn’t matter what they carry, if it’s a bomb or threat — or are they a kind of broadcaster, responsible for editing the material, choosing what kind of headline they will pick, and what kind of audience they are trying to recruit or to influence.”

“I think that most of the government understands today that we are in the second option,” Hendel continued. “It’s exactly like the media, and if I’m regulating the broadcasters and I’m kind of responsible for the media in my country — not the content but in the way they are acting — why not make sure that everything we’re taking care of under the law is also happening in the internet.”

Several times during the conversation he stressed that he wasn’t seeking to handle the content itself, noting that there is no place for a “Minister of Truth” in a democracy.

In 2018, a “Facebook bill” put forward by then-Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked and then- Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan would have allowed the state to remove content from social media networks that it classified as illegal or inciting violence, but was viewed by many as a move that would trespass on civil liberties. Then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ultimately blocked the bill from passing into law.

“The law in 2018 would have enabled the state to decide whether or not content violates the Israeli penal code and remove such content, including anything from insulting a state employee, or a call for a tax boycott, to incitement to murder or terrorism,” said Shwartz Altshuler.

“Decision-makers realized that it could have set Israel back decades in terms of freedom of speech. Any future regulation

has to focus on protecting individual privacy while upholding democratic values such as freedom of speech and freedom of the press,” she added.

Hendel believes in “minimum regulation” but also in “equal duties and rules for everyone.” If a social media company blocks a user, for instance, they are not required to report to anyone or explain themselves, Hendel noted, while news publishers are required to provide a public service and answer to complaints or accusations of wrongdoing.

He noted that in today’s reality, where broadcasters are regulated but content they transfer to the internet is not, “you are actually regulating the past and not the present and tomorrow.”

In the U.S., meanwhile, a controversial law currently on the books is the only point of reference for social media conduct.

The Anti-Defamation League is part of a growing movement pushing for reform of Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, the legal provision that shields websites from legal liability for the content their users post.

Lauren Krapf, technology policy and advocacy counsel at the ADL, told JI, “We haven’t had any increased regulation or opportunity for liability in the U.S. since 1996 — the internet looks very different now than it did in 1996 (when Section 230 was passed into law.)”

Krapf continued, “Social media platforms’ influence now is quite different than it was in 1996, so we need to have the opportunity to hold platforms accountable, to be able to bring them to court when their role in certain violent and unlawful acts is so clear that at least we have to get to the stage where we can have discovery and be able to understand a platform’s specific knowledge or specific contribution to illegal conduct.”

In March, in the wake of the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol, the ADL released a comprehensive agenda to fight hate in the digital world, called the Repair Plan.

The group has been working with law and policy makers to address the different facets of its plan, which include regulation and reform, enforcement at scale, and ensuring that people are put over profit when it comes to companies’ choices regarding the safety and security of their users.

Last week, Dave Sifry, vice president of the ADL’s Center for Technology and Society, participated in a panel of experts at a Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee hearing about social media’s role in spreading extremism.

“Self-regulation is clearly not working,” Sifry said. “Without regulation and reform, they will continue to focus on generating record profits at the expense of our safety and the security of our republic.”

The experts and several of the lawmakers present appeared to be in agreement that additional regulations would be necessary to increase the companies’ transparency.

Committee Ranking Member Rob Portman (R-OH) said he and Sen. Chris Coons (D-DE) are currently working on legislation that would impose such transparency requirements “so that we can all work together on solutions to these problems that all of us have identified.”

In an opinion piece published in *The Jerusalem Post* last week, Jordana Cutler, public policy director for Israel and the Jewish Diaspora at Facebook, sought to dispel views that the social media giant is in opposition to external regulation.

“The internet has transformed the world over the last two decades, but it has also introduced new challenges, and legislation has not kept up,” she wrote. “In the coming weeks, the Justice Ministry will discuss new rules for harmful content online with both tech companies and some of their staunchest critics. While there will no doubt be differing views, we should all agree on one thing: the tech industry needs regulation.”

Cutler said Facebook welcomes the new Justice Ministry committee and stated that, “At Facebook, we’ve advocated for democratic governments to set new rules for the Internet on areas like harmful content, privacy, data and elections, because we believe that businesses like ours should not be making these decisions on our own.”

According to the latest results from ADL’s third annual survey of hate and harassment on social media, despite tech companies claiming to have stepped up self-regulation measures, the level of online hate and harassment reported by users remains high.

Forty-one percent of Americans who responded to the survey said they had

experienced online harassment in 2021, down slightly from the 44% reported in 2020. LGBTQ+ respondents reported higher rates of overall harassment than all other demographics for the third consecutive year, at 64%. Meanwhile, 36% of Jewish respondents experienced online harassment, compared with 33% the previous year.

Incitement, hate and antisemitism on social media were central topics in a meeting between Hendel, U.N. Secretary General António Guterres and Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. and U.N. Gilad Erdan, during the minister's recent visit to New York. The three discussed the influence that algorithms can ultimately have on teenagers via the content pushed their way, and the need for transparency and accountability. They agreed that Israel would be part of a U.N. committee dealing with the subject and

that Erdan and Guterres would join forces to fight the problem and share information.

"I found there a real partner for this effort," Hendel said of Guterres. "He understands it completely."

"I think that you have a kind of consensus all over the world, and the U.N. can really raise its flag on it," he added.

California appears to be making progress, with a transparency bill for social media that has moved through the state Assembly and is now in the Senate. Bill A-587 would require social media companies that generated at least \$100 million to post their terms of service in a specified manner and with additional specified information.

Krapf said the ADL has been working closely with lawmakers there, and she expressed hope that "in California we'll be able to get increased transparency sooner rather than later."

"I think there is a lot of motivation to enact change in the U.S. at the federal and state level," Krapf told JI. She said a multi-pronged approach is needed, covering privacy, antitrust, increased liability and transparency issues. "I do see there is motivation and we are glad to see a leadership in the U.S. for moving the needle forward; we just have to make sure we get across the finish line."

While different countries are working at different paces and in different ways to try to combat the negative impact social media can have on their citizens, many are now on a similar path.

"When you have a common interest and when you have a lot of similar challenges," Hendel said, "at the end of the day the regulation probably will look the same." ♦

Marc Rod contributed to this report

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The new rabbi in Charleston, S.C. is stuck in Gibraltar

Born in Gateshead, Mimran is building a career serving small, diverse communities

By Helen Chernikoff

This article first appeared on ejewishphilanthropy.com.

Just like any newly hired rabbi, Sholom Mimran of the Orthodox Congregation Dor Tikvah in Charleston, S.C., is spending his first few weeks meeting with congregants and colleagues and speaking from the pulpit. Only Mimran is conducting his duties from Gibraltar, the tiny British territory at the southern tip of Spain where he has been studying and serving as a rabbi for the past seven years. Due to difficulties in obtaining a U.S. visa, Mimran has been forced to begin his tenure from afar. Having visited Charleston as a candidate for the job, he knows the seemingly disparate

communities have a lot in common, Mimran said.

"They're both open and welcoming places where all the Jews work together," Mimran said. America, however, is not quite as open — especially in the second year of a global pandemic. "Americans don't know how hard it is to get into America," he said. Dor Tikvah, which hired Mimran right before Rosh Hashanah, was planning to bring him into the country on a religious visa, but synagogue leaders learned that would necessitate an official site visit, and could take almost two years.

Now the plan is for the Orthodox Union to sponsor the rabbi, with his arrival expected by February. In the meantime, he has made YouTube his pulpit, given congregants his WhatsApp number, held virtual meetings

about kashrut and the burial society and is waiting patiently.

"I have never seen him angry or upset in all the years I've known him, and he deals with teenagers and other stressful situations all the time," said Benjamin Hassan, an artist who is Mimran's student at the Gibraltar kollel, an institute of advanced Jewish study that focuses on Talmud. Mimran, 28, was born in Gateshead, a city in North East England that's known for its yeshivas and flourishing haredi community.

The oldest of 16 children, he studied in those yeshivas, including the world-famous Gateshead Yeshiva, and at Mir Yeshiva in Jerusalem. At age 21, he married, and conceived a plan to complete his rabbinical studies at the kollel in Gibraltar.

Gibraltar's Jewish community of 750

people, which dates to the mid-1700s, boasts Jewish day schools and four synagogues. The kollel drew Mimran because he knew that even as a student, he would be given a lot of responsibility in such a small community: “I wanted to be able to do as much toward becoming a rabbi as I could.”

When he arrived in Gibraltar, one of the community’s leaders told Mimran that hopefully he would “get something done,” a directive he took to heart. In addition to his rabbinical studies, he helped manage the kollel; taught Jewish law and other topics; and made himself available to the community, including one Passover eve when he spent three hours in Hassan’s kitchen to avert a potential kashrut disaster, Hassan said.

At the beginning of his time in Gibraltar, Mimran also served as a chaplain in the town’s prison, where three Jewish brothers were in the middle of a seven-year sentence for financial crimes. He describes that work as a learning experience, not knowing when he started what he could say to the prisoners.

He prepared a class for them, but ended up listening to them talk for 40 minutes.

“It was easier than I had thought to inspire people, even those in the most difficult of circumstances. You just have to be willing to hear them out and be there for them in their time of need,” he said.

After seven years in Gibraltar, Mimran was starting to think about his next steps when he saw a job listing for the rabbi position at Dor Tikvah in a publication from the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA). Dor Tikvah started as a prayer group meeting in family homes in the mid-2000s and was officially incorporated as a synagogue in 2012, said Jonathan Zucker, a founder of the congregation. It dedicated its sanctuary in August 2018 in a building that once housed a JCC, and has a membership of about 55 families.

Mimran liked what he learned from afar about Charleston. As different as the deep Southern city might seem from a stamp-sized British outpost on the Mediterranean, the two communities are both religiously

diverse and tolerant of difference. They include a range of observance levels yet also boast a high degree of cooperation between different groups.

Dor Tikvah’s leadership also saw Mimran’s Gibraltar experience as an asset.

“He has the unique experience of living away from major metropolitan Jewish communities, which is a very relevant perspective for a rabbi who will serve in Charleston, South Carolina,” Zucker said.

When Mimran and his wife and three children visited in August, he liked the genteel city even more. People had told him how polite Southerners were, but he wasn’t impressed. British people are also famously well-mannered.

“But there was something more,” he said. “A warmth. British people are cold.”

In his final formal speech during his visit, as Shabbat was about to end, he laid out his vision for the community.

“I told them, ‘If I do come to be the rabbi, I’m not coming to change anything. I’m going to enhance it. I’m going to grow it.’” ♦