

## THE WEEKLY PRINT

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NOVEMBER 17, 2021

## Is the Green Party over?

*Inside the breakdown of Canada's Green Party, riven by tensions over Israel. At the center of the storm stands 37-year-old Noah Zatzman. Did he overreact to Israel critics or is the party 'Corbynized' and beyond saving?*

By Matthew Kassel

It wasn't too long ago that the Green Party of Canada had been gaining notice for what seemed like all the right reasons.

Newly emboldened by a series of milestone achievements, the party had entered 2021 on unusually strong footing. The Greens, whose influence over federal policy had for years been limited to just one parliamentary seat, now boasted three members in the House of Commons, while their new figurehead, Annamie Paul, had just been elected as the first Black and Jewish party leader in Canadian history.

Heralded as the new face of Canadian politics, Paul, now 49, had won election the previous fall on a platform that would embody something of a new direction for the party long associated with environmental activism. The former civil rights lawyer from Toronto — whose unprecedented victory, she suggested, called for unprecedented change — had emphasized a broad array of progressive social policies that she viewed with as much if not more urgency, it seemed, as climate change. Her perspective contributed to a growing sense of optimism among Green members who believed the party was finally realizing its oft-stated

goals of diversity and inclusion.

Then, last spring, everything fell apart when escalating violence between Israel and Hamas lit a fuse on Green Party tensions that had long been festering behind the scenes. The resulting detonation almost immediately gave rise to a fierce, unusually personal and ultimately unresolved war of attrition, replete with allegations of antisemitism and other recriminations that have cropped up with increasing regularity in recent internecine political battles, particularly within left-wing circles, where divisions over Israel have fueled tension.

Now, the party is in shambles as it strains to move on from a dramatic implosion culminating last week in Paul's high-profile resignation after months of turmoil that dominated Canadian headlines throughout the summer and into the fall. The party breakdown represents an extraordinary reversal of fortune for the Greens, who, until recently, seemed well poised for a banner year. Instead, the ensuing wreckage has left some Green members wondering whether the party will ever recover.

If so, any proper accounting will need to contend with accusations that the party has become inhospitable to Jewish members

whose support for Israel now seems largely unwelcome, at least among an outspoken contingent of anti-Israel critics who have recently gained power. Over the past several months, these critics— whom one Green insider described, with a sense of frustration, as “single-issue” members fixated almost exclusively on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict — have in many ways asserted their dominance over party dynamics, even as Jewish community activists and other political observers allege that their rhetoric has crossed the line into overt antisemitism.

Noah Zatzman, a former senior advisor in Paul's office who is credited with precipitating the recent party meltdown, argues as much. Zatzman, who is Jewish, believes the Greens are most likely irredeemable now that the “single-issue” members have claimed victory following what he characterizes as a hostile takeover in which Paul was all but forcefully expelled from the party. Among other things, she had refused to condemn Zatzman, a family friend, over his controversial vow to unseat Green members who perpetuated what he viewed as antisemitic tropes when criticizing Israel.

“We will not accept an apology after

you realize what you've done," Zatzman, who identifies as a pro-Israel progressive, wrote last May in a defiant Facebook post, concluding with an emphatically punctuated pledge to "defeat" unnamed Greens and replace them with "progressive climate champions who are antifa and pro-LGBT and pro indigenous sovereignty and Zionists!!!!"

Soon after leveling that threat, Zatzman was expelled from his post when, last June, the Green Party's executive committee voted against renewing his six-month contract that was set to expire the following month. Zatzman, who is no longer a member of the party, says the feeling was mutual.

Still, that two formerly high-ranking Green officials, who happen to be Jewish, are now viewed as outcasts within the party is proof enough, Zatzman suggested, that the Greens have a problem with antisemitism. Moreover, he argues, the recent blow-up represents the troubling fulfillment of what many Jews have feared possible elsewhere across the globe but have nevertheless proven capable of repelling, including in the recent U.K. Labour Party scandal where Jeremy Corbyn, the former leader, was suspended amid reports of rampant antisemitism from within his own ranks.

"In this case," Zatzman observed in an interview with *Jewish Insider*, referring to the Greens, "the party looks as if it will be Corbynized."

Zatzman, 37, is a public relations specialist and former Liberal aide who entered Green politics last year after joining Paul's historic leadership campaign. His short-lived experience within the party, he said, was animated by a mounting sense of disenchantment with Green activism. "The main issue that I came across as I entered this world," said Zatzman, who lives in Toronto, "is that it's very much a community of people who are motivated more by an anti-Israel bias than they are anything related to the climate, anything related to the environment or what you would ostensibly think would be what the Green Party would be about."

Richard Marceau, vice president of the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs, a nonpartisan advocacy arm of the Jewish Federations of Canada, echoed that view. "There is a form of antisemitism

in progressive circles that leads to this type of response," said Marceau, whose organization helped coordinate a national summit on antisemitism this summer following a rise in antisemitic incidents coinciding with the recent Middle East flare-up. "If I were the Green Party, I certainly would want to take a long, hard look in the mirror, because if they want to be the party for diversity and inclusion and equality, treating its Jewish members this way is certainly not the way to go."

Last Wednesday, Paul formally resigned from her leadership position and turned in her membership card just over a year after she had made history after prevailing through eight rounds of ranked-ballot voting.

Her departure, while expected, marked the conclusion of an unusually hostile divorce that Paul had previously described as "the worst period" of her life following an abysmal showing in the recent Canadian snap election this past September, where the Greens lost a parliamentary seat as Paul's long-shot bid for federal office in the liberal redoubt of Toronto Centre proved unsuccessful. The embattled party chief announced her resignation soon after her defeat rather than face an automatic leadership review that would likely have resulted in her ouster.

"When I was elected and put in this role, I was breaking a glass ceiling," Paul said during an emotionally charged press conference in late September, after months of party infighting in which Green members had conspired, among other things, to remove her as leader, revoke her membership and deprive her of campaign funds in the lead-up to the election. "What I didn't realize at the time is that I was breaking a glass ceiling that was going to fall on my head."

Throughout her brief if unusually tormented run as party leader — and even before — Paul endured what she has described as an onslaught of racist and antisemitic harassment, including from fellow party members, one of whom suggested that reporters should follow her into synagogues "to observe her membership drives and fundraising."

Paul's experience is part of a broader trend across Canada in which antisemitic incidents have been on the rise, as a recent

audit conducted by B'nai Brith Canada reports. In 2020, antisemitic incidents in Canada were up 18% over the previous year, according to the audit, which notes that an average of seven antisemitic incidents occurred every day last year.

Last June, Irwin Cotler, Canada's former justice minister and current special envoy on preserving Holocaust remembrance and combating antisemitism, said in an interview with the French-language newspaper *Le Devoir*, in Montreal, that antisemitism in Canada had reached levels not seen "since the end of World War II."

In recent high-profile incidents this past August, two Liberal candidates in Montreal, both Jewish, found that their campaign signs had been vandalized with swastikas just before the election.

In an interview with *JI* in September, Paul, who converted to Judaism in 2000, said that antisemitism "is the constant companion of Jewish people in politics."

The former party chief had butted heads with Green officials who took issue with what some members have characterized as an unaccommodating leadership style, but she has argued that efforts to remove her from office were largely motivated by systemic discrimination that she believes the party has failed to address.

Paul, a spokesperson for whom did not respond to a request for comment, has eschewed interviews in recent weeks. She is expected to address her experience in a conversation with the Canadian Jewish Political Affairs Committee on Nov. 30.

But while Paul's saga has been covered exhaustively in recent months, Zatzman's has largely gone unaddressed, though he has spoken publicly about procedural details behind the controversy. In the interview with *JI*, however, Zatzman discussed his own personal experience navigating a conflict that, he says, exposed him to a constant barrage of antisemitic attacks, even after leaving the party.

Zatzman, who stands by his comments, said he remains subject to an effluvium of hateful and in some cases violent rhetoric, including a Facebook comment from a Green Party member who called for his beheading, that has lasted for months and continues to this day. But such invective, he believes, only underscores his initial point.

“When they say that Zionists are not welcome in the party, it leads one to think that, for the Green Party of Canada and for the progressive movement in Canada, when it comes to Jews, none is too many,” he charged. “I think one thing that made the major anti-Israel activists in Canada crazy was, in my Facebook post, I’m linking Zionism with all these left-wing causes, and they’re working every day to link Zionism with colonialism.”

His detractors, of course, don’t see it that way. “Zatzman was clearly in violation of the GPC code of conduct attacking Green MPs,” Constantine Kritsonis, a Green member in Toronto who is among the most vocal anti-Israel critics in the party, told JI via email. “In any other party with any other leader a staffer attacking sitting MPs with libelous accusations would be renounced and booted from the party instantly. Politics 101.”

But some Greens remain loyal to Zatzman, thanks in large part to what they describe as his pivotal role in Paul’s leadership bid as well as her strong if unsuccessful showing in a by-election last year, where he put his years of media experience to use.

One Green staffer even speculated, at the time of his Facebook post last spring, that Zatzman was intentionally courting controversy as part of a counterintuitive strategy to ensure that Paul would remain relevant heading into the fall election. “I thought, ‘Oh, my god, did he do this on purpose just to generate media?’” said the staffer, who spoke with JI on the condition of anonymity to discuss a sensitive matter. “Just because he was such a savvy operator.”

She now sees other factors afoot that were beyond Zatzman’s control. “People’s reaction to that post was more loaded,” the staffer told JI, while acknowledging that the unsanctioned social media missive may not have been worded in the most diplomatic fashion. “It wasn’t proportionate. Who’s to say he wasn’t experiencing antisemitism in a very real way, so why discount what he’s saying?”

Sean Yo, a Green Party operative who worked with Zatzman on Paul’s leadership bid as well as her by-election campaign, agreed. “The reaction seems out of proportion,” he said of the criticism Zatzman received. Over the past year, Yo said he had

witnessed harassment campaigns against both Zatzman and Paul that led him to believe antisemitism was at play. “I think there’s something here about who Annamie is and who Noah is that intersects with how this was responded to,” he said. “I think the fact that they’re Jewish plays a role.”

Zatzman sees no way around that explanation. He described a visceral sense of unease that set in as the controversy spun out of control. His parents had been sufficiently spooked that they delisted their address. For his part, Zatzman, who had recently moved into a new apartment around when the conflict took off, was fearful that hanging a mezuzah outside his front door would expose him as a target. So he didn’t put it up. “I told one of my rabbis this and she felt terribly,” he said. “I never thought I would feel that way.”

“We’ve given Noah a lot of support because he’s been battered,” said Baruch Frydman-Kohl, rabbi emeritus of Beth Tzedec Congregation, a Conservative synagogue in Toronto attended by Zatzman. “Politics is a bloodsport, and people have been after him for blood.”

Nevertheless, Frydman-Kohl argues that Zatzman’s critics have yet to address the content of his allegations. “Even now what some of the members of the Green Party are trying to do is shift the responsibility and the problems onto Annamie Paul, saying it was her leadership style, it was her unwillingness to listen, it was her desire for control,” he said. “None of them are willing to address the issues that Noah brought up, which is that there were some really negative things about Israel and about Annamie Paul, as a Jew, that came out during this campaign.”

Steve Wernick, a senior rabbi at Beth Tzedec, and former head of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the Conservative Movement’s congregational arm, summed up his view of the controversy more succinctly. “I think that Noah’s experience is indicative of a larger problem,” he told JI, “and that larger problem also relates to Zionism.”

Looking back, Zatzman said he had never anticipated that his short but admittedly combative Facebook post would trigger the party’s eventual unraveling when he pledged to take down fellow Greens in Parliament, including Jenica Atwin and

Paul Manly, whose accusations, respectively, of Israeli “apartheid” and “ethnic cleansing,” he viewed as irresponsibly inflammatory. Moreover, he believed, such comments were in clear contravention of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s working definition of antisemitism, which he notes is recognized by the Canadian government.

“You might laugh at me, but when I wrote my post, I thought, ‘Oh, my God, it’s so vanilla,’” he told JI. “I think that I knew it could maybe cause a little bit of a ripple in the party internally. I don’t think anybody could have predicted, like, five or six full months of this.”

The first major indication that he had been woefully misguided came a month or so later, when Atwin, citing tensions over Israel, announced that she was defecting to the Liberals, reducing the Green Party’s record three parliamentary seats to just two. But while Atwin had publicly repudiated an official Green Party statement as “totally inadequate” amid rising tensions in the Middle East last May, she soon softened her stance after crossing the floor in June — expressing “regret” if her “choice of words caused harm to those who are suffering.”

Zatzman, for his part, said he “did commend Atwin for apologizing and changing her position on Israel,” but questions her motivations, speculating that her statement was written by Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s “comms folks.”

Neither Atwin nor her former Green Party chief of staff responded to email inquiries from JI.

Despite the reversal, some high-ranking Greens still maintain that Zatzman’s comments are to blame for Atwin’s defection from the party. Elizabeth May, the former longtime party leader and elected Green Party member in British Columbia, told JI via email that, but for “Zatzman’s initial Facebook posting” as well as “multiple media interviews” in the following weeks, then “Atwin would still be a Green and our election results would have been far more positive.”

But Zatzman suggested such arguments are a form of scapegoating that Green officials have used to avoid taking stock of deeper issues now permeating the party. He believes that May, in particular, has been disingenuous because, a week after his post,

she appeared to express sympathy for his plight in a group email with high-ranking Green officials. Zatzman, who shared the exchange with JI, had voiced concerns over a blog post by the far-left anti-Israel activist Yves Engler, whose headline, “Crazed anti-Palestinian Green adviser must be removed,” had functioned as a call to action.

Hours later, May replied: “Just to you.. Yves Engler is vile.. but we do need to have Annamie make a clear statement so it does not look like we are divided... do you have a plan?? xo.”

The affectionate sign-off was in stark contrast with an interview just a month later — after Atwin’s departure — in which May had described Zatzman’s Facebook post as “a serious transgression for anyone in any leader’s office in any party in the history of any democracy that I can think of.” May, asked to explain the shift, said the reason was simple. “To your query, what happened between my email and the June 10th loss of one-third of our caucus?” she told JI. “Mr. Zatzman made it worse through his multiple media interviews and the leader did nothing to arrest a growing crisis.”

David Suzuki, the prominent Canadian environmental activist, offered an even harsher assessment in email correspondence with Zatzman this past September. Before the hubbub, Zatzman said he had periodically exchanged courteous emails with Suzuki while working as a publicist for a prominent climate advocacy group in Canada. But two months ago, he came across an interview in which the acclaimed science broadcaster was on the record in arguing that Paul, by not firing Zatzman over his Facebook post, had “totally destroyed” what he characterized as a longstanding ethos encouraging “diversity of opinion” among Green Party members.

Somewhat perplexed, Zatzman reached out to confirm whether the quotes attributed to Suzuki were indeed accurate, mentioning in aside that he would “be organizing for a number of NGOs and a number of provincial governments” ahead of the U.N. climate summit that concluded last weekend in the Scottish city of Glasgow, and “hope it is still OK to contact you for speaking opportunities.”

Suzuki responded later that day. “OK, I finally read the article,” he told Zatzman.

“Of course it was fact checked before but he left out what I said that might interest you. I said Anaimie [sic] should have fired you immediately and repudiated your vow to work against party members. She declared Greens aren’t what they claim and that’s when she lost me. Don’t bother contacting me any further.”

In an email to JI, Suzuki stood by his comments, adding, of Zatzman, “What he didn’t tell you is I told him before that that simply supporting Palestinian complaints is not antisemitic.”

But Zatzman had mentioned that detail, which JI neglected to include in the initial email to Suzuki.

While Zatzman said he couldn’t help but feel some level of respect for Suzuki’s unvarnished response, he believes the exchange speaks more broadly to a growing tendency among progressive climate activists who undercut their own interests in rejecting alliances with otherwise likeminded pro-Israel advocates. “I’m a young person who’s one of the most active political operatives in the country on climate,” Zatzman, whose involvement on such issues includes campaign work with the youth activist network Climate Strike Canada, claimed. “And he said, ‘Don’t talk to me again,’” Zatzman said of Suzuki. “How’s it going to help the climate?”

Meanwhile, Zatzman rejects the notion that pro-Israel sentiment in any way obviates concern for the Palestinians. “I believe in a two-state solution,” said Zatzman, who has family in Israel. “I feel strongly about Palestinian self-determination. I accept partition.”

Zatzman believes his values align with a progressive mandate that has existed within Israel, he argues, since its foundation. “The Labor Zionists who founded Israel were leftists, the kibbutzniks were socialists,” he said. “Moreover, and I think we have to shout this loud and clear from the rooftops, the Jewish people are the indigenous people of Israel! You cannot colonize land that is yours,” he emphasized. “It is also the Palestinians’, but we recognize two states for two peoples.”

At the height of the controversy, Zatzman said he was frustrated by Israel critics that he came to regard as uninformed about on-the-ground dynamics. “During this time,

one of my big lines was, if anybody has any need to know what is what, I encourage you to go to Pride in Tel Aviv and then go to Pride in Ramallah, and you tell me the difference,” said Zatzman, who is gay. “The difference is that at Pride in Ramallah, they push you off a fucking roof.”

“This is a very complicated thing,” Zatzman sighed. “I believe in a two-state solution and the peace process that has been defined since Oslo. I am a left-wing Jew who is, like, still mourning Yitzhak Rabin. So to be presented in this light just shows you how far we’ve gone.”

In many ways, however, Zatzman’s position within the Green infrastructure had always made for something of an awkward fit, even if his deep involvement with Jewish life was what first drew him to the party. “I grew up in the Jewish community in a way that not many others have,” said Zatzman, who attended Jewish day school in Toronto, where his roots go deep. His mother’s family, for instance, owned Hyman’s bookstore, which is now closed but was once a nexus of cultural activity for Jewish immigrants in the first half of the 20th century.

Zatzman was vice president of the Canadian Federation of Jewish Students while studying at York University in Toronto and Carleton University in Ottawa, where he established himself as a prominent pro-Israel activist on campus. He has long been involved with the organized Jewish community and currently serves as the LGBTQ co-chair for the UJA Federation of Greater Toronto. He says he has led four Birthright trips to Israel.

As a special assistant and then a senior advisor for Kathleen Wynne, the former premier of Ontario, between 2015 and 2018, Zatzman helped coordinate a trade mission to Israel and spent a month in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv working with the Canadian mission to Israel. In 2016, he was part of a successful effort in which Ontario’s legislature passed a motion rejecting the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against Israel.

It was all of that work that would lead him to receive a phone call, last July, from his close friend Elise Kayfetz, a gerontologist who runs a “senior prom” for Holocaust survivors in Toronto. Her mother’s best friend is Paul’s mother-in-law, who knows Zatzman and had asked that Kayfetz relay



a request: Paul was running for office and needed help. Could he lend a hand? His response was immediate: "Of course." A few months later, Paul had made history, thanks in part to Zatzman's counsel. "Was that the best idea?," he wonders now of his split-second decision. "I don't know."

Zatzman said he has not spoken with Paul since he left the party, though he claims to have assisted some campaign staffers behind the scenes during her failed bid for federal office in September.

The Green Party has long struggled with internal tensions over Israel that have occasionally spilled into public view, even as Zatzman's experience stands out as a particularly high-profile example. In 2014, for instance, Green Party President Paul Estrin, who is Jewish, resigned from his position after members took issue with a blog post in which he expressed pro-Israel sentiments while criticizing Hamas. Five years ago, the party passed a controversial resolution supporting BDS, despite objections from May, who was then the party leader. She had considered resigning in protest before a new resolution was agreed upon.

This past election, a Green candidate in Nova Scotia was nominated despite a series of social media posts in which she had compared Israel to Nazi Germany — and for which she had previously been blocked from running as a candidate with the left-leaning New Democratic Party. (She has since apologized for the tweets.) Elsewhere, a Green candidate in Ontario likened vaccine passports to "Gestapo" tactics during the Holocaust — echoing far-right protesters across Canada who have used Nazi symbols such as yellow stars in objecting to vaccine mandates.

While other parties have by no means been immune to such incidents, they seem to have worked with more alacrity than the Greens in removing suspect members from their ranks. In September, for example, two NDP candidates were forced to resign over antisemitic social media posts including one that questioned whether Auschwitz was a real place.

A Green staffer familiar with internal dynamics, who requested anonymity for fear of reprisal, argues that the recent implosion stems from a lack of leadership

from the top. The party's governing body, known as the Federal Council, failed to hold "toxic" members accountable for expressing antisemitic rhetoric, according to the staffer, while simultaneously threatening sanctions against Paul for "failing to openly condemn" Zatzman's remarks. Behind the scenes, many party members believed the infighting was unproductive, "and should have been resolved" privately, the staffer said. "This council behaved in a way that we have never seen in the history of the Green Party."

The council did not respond to a request for comment, nor did a party spokesperson.

For the most part, the Green staffer said that the rank-and-file members with whom he interacted were prepared to move on from the controversy after two or three weeks, even if some expressed concern over Zatzman's comments. "They were just exhausted with the whole topic," he recalled. With the election looming, he said, most Green members viewed the drama as an unwelcome distraction from more pressing environmental issues, including protests against old-growth logging around the Fairy Creek watershed on Vancouver Island, that have long been central to the party's mission. "That's our bread and butter."

But not all members were fully aligned. "Others said, 'This is my moment and this is the issue I've been waiting around for, let's go,'" the staffer told JI. "There really isn't any talking down of these people."

While the Green Party has always existed as something of a loose and anarchic agglomeration of climate activists who have often struggled to unite behind one common goal, the recent tensions have created deep divisions that, as some members have suggested, may be insurmountable.

The Green staffer familiar with internal dynamics, for his part, wonders if the party will ever again be capable of enticing candidates of Paul's caliber to join their ranks. "To have a Black Jewish woman speak to these really pressing issues that had really come about in 2020 and 2021 and also be really qualified, I thought, was exceptional, as did many members," he said. "And I don't see us being able to attract that kind of leadership because of how Annamie was treated."

Impartial observers are equally pessimistic. "The party might not recover

from this," Nelson Wiseman, a professor of political science at the University of Toronto, said bluntly in an interview with JI.

It remains to be seen who will next take the helm as the party looks for an interim leader to steer the ship before an official election is held. Manly, a former Green elected official in British Columbia, whose allegation of "ethnic cleansing" during the May conflict between Israel and Hamas had partly motivated Zatzman's Facebook post, has been named as a possible contender for the interim post following his defeat in the September election.

True to his word, Zatzman said he "actively worked and organized to defeat" Manly, whom he describes as "Parliament's number one anti-Israel legislator," this past September, though he did not provide further detail. Manly did not respond to a request for comment from JI.

Atwin, for her part, won reelection as a Liberal in New Brunswick this September. "I hoped to defeat her," Zatzman said, "but was much more active in the Manly situation."

As for other leadership candidates, Dimitri Lascaris, who competed in a close race against Paul last cycle, said he is mulling options. "I have not yet made a decision," Lascaris, a lawyer in Montreal, told JI via email. "I am currently consulting with friends, family and colleagues in the Green Party about the possibility of my mounting another leadership bid. Completing those consultations will take me some time."

In 2018, Lascaris drew scrutiny when he suggested that two Jewish members of Parliament were more loyal to "apartheid Israel" than their own party — comments that Trudeau criticized as "vile antisemitic smears."

The next leader will likely help indicate what direction the party is headed. But given his recent experience, Zatzman is cynical that the outcome will be positive for Israel supporters, not least because Manly seems poised for a comeback after losing his seat.

Either way, Zatzman has no regrets about speaking out last May, despite the blowback. "I'm very proud of what I did," he told JI. "Whatever I do for the rest of my life, I will be standing with the Jewish people and with Israel, no matter what the consequences are."

After months of tumult, Zatzman was

hired last month as a principal at Aurora Strategy Group, a public relations firm in Toronto whose environment he has found to be much more hospitable than his previous role. Just last week, the firm announced that it would be opening new offices in Israel as well as the United Arab Emirates.

But while Zatzman — and Paul, whose future outside the party remains an open question — have since moved on, active Green members are still assessing the

damage. Yo, the Green operative and former Paul campaign staffer, believes the party now stands at a “consequential and existential crossroads” that will only be rectified with a level of widespread “inclusivity” he isn’t sure all members are capable of mustering at the moment.

In the meantime, he is left wondering who, if anyone, has gained in the equation. Atwin, he notes, left the party only to walk back her previous criticism of Israel after

joining the Liberals. Manly lost his seat, he adds, while Paul lost the election, along with her leadership position, and is no longer a member of the party. Zatzman lost his contract, Yo said, and left the party as well.

“It just feels so tragic because for all the energy spent, all the media coverage, all that people have suffered, I don’t think we’ve improved anything for anyone,” Yo told JI. “It’s heartbreaking that this is the outcome.” ♦

NOVEMBER 18, 2021

## Jazz Lewis steps out

*The Maryland legislator and Steny Hoyer aide spent seven years as a staffer on Capitol Hill. Now the pragmatic progressive says it’s his time to serve*

By Gabby Deutch

On a cold and rainy morning earlier this month, Jazz Lewis sat outside a Starbucks two blocks from the U.S. Capitol — the building where he had worked for seven years, until October.

Though the weather had dissuaded walkers from strolling around the neighborhood that day, Lewis was holding court: First a campaign staffer for House Majority Whip Jim Clyburn (D-SC) walked by, hoping to catch up with the former Hill staffer. Then the legislative director for Rep. Anthony Brown (D-MD) passed and waved hello.

It was “kind of weird,” Lewis said, to be on Capitol Hill as a visitor and not an employee. But he doesn’t expect his hiatus from the central hub of American democracy to last very long. He resigned from his position as senior policy advisor to House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-MD) last month to run for Congress in Maryland’s 4th Congressional District.

“Folks ask me about the why,” said Lewis. “We are grounding it in issues that are really important to our district, like food deserts and access to healthcare.” The big draw of Congress is “resources,” said Lewis, who also serves part-time in Annapolis as a member of the Maryland House of

Delegates, where he chairs the Democratic caucus. “Especially with the ability to talk directly to the secretary of agriculture or [Housing and Urban Development], we can direct resources to communities like mine that lack access to fresh food.”

Lewis hopes to succeed Brown, who announced last month that he will run for Maryland attorney general, leaving his congressional seat — a heavily Democratic district encompassing most of the majority-Black Prince George’s County and part of Anne Arundel County — wide open. Glenn Ivey, a former county prosecutor who has run for the seat twice before, has also declared his candidacy. The pair will face off in a June 2022 primary, and the deadline for additional candidates to enter the race is not until February.

Lewis, 32, will face a tough competitor in Ivey, who is nearly twice his age and has been a political mainstay in the county for more than two decades. Ivey’s wife, Jolene, is on the Prince George’s County Council, and their son Julian serves alongside Lewis in the House of Delegates.

But Lewis garnered an early boost from his former boss, Hoyer, who endorsed him last week. “Jazz has always fought for our community,” Hoyer said in the endorsement. “He is a dear friend, and I can think of no

one I would rather have as my partner in representing Prince Georgians in Congress.”

In an interview with *Jewish Insider*, Lewis spoke of Hoyer as a mentor, and someone who has shaped his approach to politics, particularly when it comes to bringing together different constituencies.

“What I have learned watching him is really how to bring people together,” Lewis noted. “Sometimes there’s things I want to say, but I don’t, from watching him, because I realized there’s going to be a tomorrow. Even though someone may not be with me on a particular issue today, there’s no guarantee that tomorrow they won’t.”

Lewis is “unabashedly a progressive,” he says, but one who intends to make compromises to pass legislation — an identity that echoes Hillary Clinton’s 2016 comment about being a “progressive who gets things done.” (Lewis served as Clinton’s Maryland political director during the 2016 presidential primary.)

“Folks want change today, right? Not something perfect five years from now,” Lewis explained. “They want something that will help them today. And I think we need to keep that in mind as we’re working with legislation.”

After Hoyer endorsed Lewis, Ivey announced a slate of endorsements from

local elected officials in Prince George's County. But many in the district remain undecided, observers say.

"I think we're fortunate we've got two really good candidates, both of whom I feel confident will do the job," said Albert Wynn, who represented the seat for 15 years until losing in a primary to Donna Edwards in 2008. "They're both pragmatic in terms of how they approach politics. They want to get things done. I don't think either one of them are going to run down to Washington and join the Squad."

Edwards, who represented the district from 2008 to 2017, is the wild card in the race. She has not made an announcement about running, but a source with knowledge of the situation said she is strongly considering it, and the pro-choice political group EMILY's List is helping her recruit campaign staff. (A spokesperson for EMILY's List did not respond to a request for comment, and JI was not able to reach Edwards for comment.)

"If former Congresswoman Edwards gets in the race, it's going to become a national race," said Ron Halber, executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington. Edwards ran unsuccessfully for the Senate in 2016, with an endorsement from EMILY's List and a strong national following. Edwards has also faced criticism from leaders in the Maryland Jewish community for her stances regarding Israel.

Edwards "probably paid attention to national issues more than local leaders would have liked," said Josh Kurtz, founding editor at the nonprofit news site Maryland Matters. "All that said, I think she'd be formidable in the race, particularly if it's two guys and one woman. I think that gives her some advantages right there." The state's current congressional delegation is all male.

Ivey "is probably the early favorite," said Kurtz, given how long he's been active in Prince George's County politics. But Lewis "absolutely is to be taken seriously. He's been regarded as kind of an up-and-comer ever since he got to the legislature."

As a student at the University of Maryland, College Park, Lewis got his start in politics "for selfish reasons," he noted.

"I thought I was going to be an architect growing up, because my dad was an electrician, and I thought he and I would do

something like 'Property Brothers' together," said Lewis. "But when the recession happened, there was a proposed tuition hike to try to balance the school's budget. I worked my way through school, and that would have priced me out of my education."

He joined several hundred other students in protesting the tuition hike, even showing up at the university president's office.

"I realized, this is how people power happens. We organized," Lewis recalled. "Between pressuring him as well as the state legislature, they found the money and the tuition hike didn't happen."

His architecture career didn't pan out, but "the organizing bug stuck," said Lewis, who joined the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) as a community organizer in Baltimore after graduation. After going back to College Park for a master's in public policy, Lewis thought he would focus on international development after doing research with the State Department. "Steny Hoyer called me, and I went a different route," he said.

Lewis worked first for Hoyer's campaign and then for his congressional office, where he advised the majority leader on issues including transportation, small businesses and economic development. Running for office was not something he actively thought about — "I thought about it in the sense of anyone who works around politics thought, like, 'I might run for office one day'" — but when a member of the Maryland House of Delegates stepped down after being indicted on bribery charges, things changed.

The replacement for the seat was chosen by members of the Prince George's County Democratic Central Committee, who voted after hearing speeches from Lewis and eight other interested candidates at a packed union hall. He quickly gained a foothold in Democratic leadership in the statehouse.

"Jazz is bright. That's clear just from the conversations I've had with him, seeing him run the caucus meeting, and so on. He would come [to Capitol Hill] as experienced with the ways of the Congress, by virtue of his work for Steny," said Sandy Rosenberg, who has represented Baltimore in the Maryland House of Delegates since 1983.

Since getting to Annapolis, Lewis has prioritized work on public safety and police reform. "My mom's a retired cop, so I think

I have a more complex understanding of the situations that law enforcement lived through, while also being a young Black man and having to experience the other side of law enforcement," said Lewis.

It's this issue, he argued, that illustrates his approach to compromise and coalition-building. Lewis was initially opposed to a controversial bill to allow Johns Hopkins University to employ its own, private police force, but he saw that the bill had the votes to pass — so he added amendments to "make this the most accountable, responsive police force in the nation," Lewis explained. "And the catch for that — because this is the way things work — if you're going to amend it, you have to vote for it."

The bill passed in 2019 with the amendments from Lewis and a handful of allies. "I got a lot of flack for that," Lewis acknowledged. "But then now, after George Floyd passed and Breonna Taylor and everyone else, the state had its own reckoning with police violence. A number of our colleagues who were apprehensive [about] police accountability were open now because they already voted for it for Johns Hopkins." A new police accountability law — applying to all police forces in the state — took effect last month, after legislators overrode a veto from Republican Gov. Larry Hogan.

Police reform is one of the key issues Lewis hopes to tackle as a congressman, naming the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act as a priority. He is also eager to work on foreign policy again. "I'm really interested in how we leverage our aid dollars to help grow domestic industry across the world, particularly among the developing world," said Lewis. "I would say, I'm into community-building. How do we grow bilateral arrangements that are beneficial for everybody, while also taking care of our friends?"

He named Israel as "one of our core friends," and said he thinks U.S. foreign aid should be increased. "I think the aid is well spent. I think if anything, we could increase our aid, not just to Israel, but to other partners around the world who need it," said Lewis.

He added that he "would have 100% voted" for a recent bill providing supplemental funding for Israel's Iron

Dome missile-defense system that passed the House in September 2019. (The bill remains stalled in the Senate.)

"I think if folks have criticism of the American government, or the Israeli government, that's fair. It's fair for friends to criticize each other," Lewis explained. "It's not fair for friends to put the safety and security of their people at risk. And that's what was on the line there. That wasn't a vote of conscience, of saying you criticize some specific policy."

It's on this issue, too, that Lewis takes inspiration from his longtime boss.

"Jazz shares my view that the U.S.-Israel relationship reflects both our strategic interests and our enduring values," Hoyer told JI in a statement. "He's worked for years to build stronger ties of unity and allyship between the African-American and Jewish communities in Prince George's County and in Maryland, and I know that this effort has played a central role in his commitment to standing up for Israel and rejecting efforts to hold it to a double standard or to mislead about its history."

Lewis traveled to Israel before the COVID-19 pandemic with the American Israel Education Fund, a nonprofit

education affiliate of AIPAC. "I was kind of shocked when I arrived at the airport in Tel Aviv, and then we drove to Jerusalem, where we stayed the first night," said Lewis. "The distance, I timed it, was, like, an hour. It's about the distance between D.C. and Baltimore. It's not a large country, which put [it] more in perspective, for me, a number of the security concerns that they have."

Lewis is positioning his support for Israel as part of his progressive worldview, and he urges progressive members in the House who are critical of Israel to visit the country. "The amount of aid that the people of Israel do for not just their own youth, but Palestinian youth," he explained, "takes the conversation out of whether you agree with everything the Israeli government did or didn't do, and the importance of the relationship between the American people and the people of Israel."

On his trip to Israel, Lewis would wake up early and go on a run through the winding streets of the Machane Yehuda market in Jerusalem, meeting shopkeepers and workers. "I fell in love with the people. And that is the message I would carry to progressives on the Hill, to get to know the people," Lewis reflected.

"A lot of people in the Jewish community view him as not only a potential... pro-Israel voice, but potentially a strong progressive pro-Israel voice like Ritchie Torres," said the JCRC's Halber, referring to the freshman Democratic congressman from the Bronx.

Like Torres, Lewis did not express a desire to align with the Squad, the group of several far left members of Congress including Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) and Ilhan Omar (D-MN), most of whom have staked out positions harshly critical of Israel in Congress. "I see myself as a consensus-maker. I hope to make friends of the Squad as much as I hope to make friends of anyone who's willing to work with me to move forward the issues that are important to people in my district," Lewis said.

It's those bread-and-butter issues that kept Lewis going when he grew demoralized in the Trump years.

"I [would] do a full workday here on the Hill, and then on Monday nights, I would drive from the U.S. Capitol to the Maryland State Capitol. It's about an hour," he recalled. "I would be transformed from frustrated and pissed off to energized — well, here we can do something. Here we can make something happen." ♦

NOVEMBER 15, 2021

## Minister Elharrar outlines Israel's biggest climate challenges

*Less than six months into Israel's new government, Karine Elharrar said she has already begun to implement key changes in Israel*

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By Ruth Marks Eglash

With the pressures of addressing climate change falling to politicians around the world, in Israel it is Karine Elharrar, a relative newcomer to environmental issues, who is feeling the heat.

The 44-year-old minister of national infrastructure, energy and water resources, who earned a reputation for championing social causes in Israel's Knesset, is determined to figure out a way to have Israel pivot away from fossil fuels.

"From my perspective, Israel's biggest challenge is in transitioning to green energy," Elharrar told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview, referring to the climate crisis. "We live in a region that is very reliant on old forms of energy — oil, gas and petroleum — and we need to become a green arrow in this field."

Less than six months into Israel's new government, and freshly returned from the United Nation's COP26 climate summit in Glasgow, Scotland, Elharrar told JI that she

has already begun to implement important changes in the country.

"The energy ministry deals with big infrastructure projects and we need to be looking far into the future," she said. "Every step we take today deals with what will happen in ten years from now."

But for some local environmental entrepreneurs and green activists the steps are not being taken fast enough. They believe that not enough is being done to challenge the old order and ease Israel's



regulatory burden or move to embrace clean energy practices.

Taking on the planet's biggest challenges might seem like a surprising career swerve for a politician who, for the last eight years, focused more on matters of education, welfare and health but, when Yesh Atid received this portfolio as part of the coalition deal back in June, Elharrar, who joined the party in 2012, said it was the office that "spoke to me to the most."

"I wanted something different," she told JI. "It is an amazing ministry that involves issues of security, geopolitics, foreign policy [and] economics, and I felt it was an amazing opportunity, even though many people do not even know what we do."

That looks set to change.

As the new government, led by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, prioritizes finding ways to tackle the global climate crisis at home, the Ministry of National Infrastructure, Energy and Water Resources — Energy Ministry for short — will become a key component.

And Elharrar, who has muscular dystrophy and uses a wheelchair — and who made international headlines earlier this month after being unable to physically access the summit in Glasgow, Scotland — will be a key player.

"The conference was accessible, the entrance was not," stated Elharrar in her clear and articulate manner. "They closed the streets around the conference, and were providing shuttles to the entrance, but those were not accessible to wheelchairs."

Though Elharrar appreciated the security concerns for such a high-level event, "at the end of the day, a minister representing the government of Israel was not able to gain access," she said.

"If that is how someone at my level is being treated, then just imagine what happens to others," said Elharrar, who, accompanied by Bennett the next day, was personally welcomed by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson — from whom she received a personal apology.

"This should not have happened," she said matter-of-factly. "And we need to make sure this kind of thing doesn't happen again."

Elharrar applies the same kind of sharp response to dealing with the climate crisis.

"Israel has some amazing innovators with incredible abilities, and we need to take advantage of this," said Elharrar. "There are so many pioneers who get initial assistance here, but end up leaving for the U.S. or Europe to continue their work. We need to fix this problem and stop them from leaving."

Elharrar believes Israel must break down bureaucratic barriers that prevent innovators from developing and implementing their work in the country, including access to land, permits and basic resources and create what she described as a "one-stop shop that can help innovators not only invent their ideas in Israel, but also develop and build them here too."

Yosef Abramowitz, CEO of Energiya Global Capital and a pioneer in Israel's solar energy sector, told JI that he was a good example of the country's failure to harness its startup prowess.

"Together with my partners, I created Israel's first utility-scale solar company and now I only invest in solar fields in Africa, not Israel," he said. "There is not enough certainty for green energy investors in the Israeli market, mainly because there was no climate leadership under the previous government."

Abramowitz said he is still waiting to see if the new government will make "any meaningful changes."

"In Israel, there is a complexity associated with going green," he said. "There are so many easy, tangible steps the government can take to advance green energy, but they have not yet advanced those steps."

He explained that resistance was derived mainly from the country's influential gas companies. "The current political decision is to reinforce the gas monopoly for another generation," said Abramowitz.

But hopeful that the new government will chart a new course, he added. "Elharrar has the best values of any energy minister from the last 15 years, and we are hoping that those values will lead to real climate leadership."

Already, Elharrar said she is implementing changes. She told JI that she was in the process of establishing a department for new energy, which did not exist previously. She also spent time in Glasgow meeting with counterparts from

around the world to explore options for Israel's move to cleaner energy. And, she's excited about the prospects afforded by the normalization agreements Israel signed with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco.

"I think the Abraham Accords are an incredible opportunity for Israel," said Elharrar, who will travel to the Gulf on Nov. 22. "I think our nations are very similar. We are both young countries with a great deal of innovation."

Yoni Sappir, chairman of Israeli grassroots green movement Home Guardians, said, however, that he has not yet seen too much change between the new and previous energy ministers.

"It seems like she is sticking with the same policies, even though she makes different announcements," he said of Elharrar. "Israel still has about 200 fossil projects in the pipeline and the new minister has not stopped any of the projects initiated by the previous minister."

"Israel needs to wake up, including Ms. Elharrar," Sappir said. "She and her staff do not see the whole picture. They all need to turn the page and initiate a totally different concept for Israel's energy market."

Elharrar does appear to understand the urgency, however. Among the many people with whom she met at COP26 was Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates. She told JI that she asked the American businessman, innovator and philanthropist not for money, but for help in designing a new work model for Israel.

"We did not ask for funding; finding money is not the problem," she said. "What is more important is how to apply that funding in an efficient way." ♦

# An interview with the University of Austin's founding president

*'We don't want to create controversy just to create controversy,' said Pano Kanelos of the new liberal arts college*

By Gabby Deutch

**B**uzz tends to follow Bari Weiss, the former New York Times writer who now writes a popular Substack newsletter called "Common Sense." So when her subscribers received an email last week announcing a new private university Weiss had a hand in creating, the social media snark began immediately: comparisons to the fraudulent Trump University, accusations of "monetizing moral politics," an assertion that the enterprise is a "Boss Level grift operation."

Her newsletter was heralding the creation of a new, as-yet-unaccredited liberal arts college called the University of Austin. The college will be helmed by Pano Kanelos, who until last summer was the president of St. John's College, a liberal arts school in Annapolis, Md., with just a few hundred undergraduates that is best known for its Great Books program of classic works from the Western canon.

In his essay about the new university, Kanelos bemoaned that "illiberalism has become a pervasive feature of campus life," and wrote about a desire to restore "open inquiry and civil discourse" in education at a time of "censoriousness." Rather than "waiting for the legacy universities" — schools like Harvard, Yale and Stanford — "to right themselves," Kanelos writes, he and a host of other academics and public intellectuals are instead creating a new one.

Contrary to the claims of some critics, Kanelos said the goal is not to create a safe space for conservative thinkers.

"If everybody at University of Austin, or most people, are on the right or on either end of the political spectrum, if it's so dominated in one way or the other, we will have failed," Kanelos told Jewish Insider in an interview Friday from his home in Austin, where he

moved this summer.

The university's founding trustees include Weiss; the historian Niall Ferguson; Heather Heying, an evolutionary biologist who has garnered attention recently for remaining unvaccinated against COVID-19; and Joe Lonsdale, a co-founder of Palantir and managing partner at the venture capital fund SVC and the university's main financial supporter. Its board of advisors includes some conservative figures, such as Harvard professor and former American Enterprise Institute President Arthur Brooks and the activist and researcher Ayaan Hirsi Ali, but other notable members include former ACLU President Nadine Strossen and former Harvard President Larry Summers.

The University of Austin will begin teaching master's students next fall, and it hopes to enroll undergraduates — eventually serving 4,000 undergraduate students at a time — in 2024. (Critics have pointed out that the university is not yet accredited, but its website says the school is undergoing that process.)

"My dream would be that we could become, like, the Stanford to [the University of Texas at Austin's] Berkeley," said Kanelos. "There's a world-class public institution here, and if we can have a complimentary world class private institution, I think that would be wonderful."

In a wide-ranging interview with JI, Kanelos spoke about how the University of Austin will approach critical race theory, why a culture of "grace and forgiveness" is necessary for a university to succeed and where the university will draw the line when it comes to the most repugnant political views.

*This interview has been condensed and edited for length and clarity.*

**Gabby Deutch:** *Why did you leave St. John's? It seems to have similar goals to the University of Austin.*

**Paul Kanelos:** I think St. John's is one of the finest institutions in the country, one of the most rigorous educations; it's kind of like the platonic ideal of a liberal arts school. But St. John's is very particular in its mission. It has a single curriculum, a single reading list. What I wanted to do was take the spirit of St. John's and the deep commitment to liberal arts education, and expand it to a full comprehensive university. St. John's only ever intends to be a small place. What would it look like if we could take that spirit, that approach, and enjoin it to a university that has programs in tech and entrepreneurship, where you can have a school of education and study politics?

**GD:** *When thinking about the future size of the University of Austin and the ideal number of students, is there another school that you could point to where you could say, we want to be that size or have that many programs?*

**PK:** The target size we have right now is probably about 4,000 undergraduates, and maybe 1000 graduate students. You want a university that's going to be large enough to have a broad range of resources, programs, different types of scholars, and students doing lots of different things. But we don't want to get so big that people are strangers to each other. Because one of the things that we're trying to achieve is to create an environment where we can all ask and answer life's big questions together. And to do that, you have to have a degree of trust with people. And trust comes from

interpersonal relationships and human contact. So trying to find that balance point between what it means to be as expansive an institution as you can be, but still remain human-scaled. If we're growing, and we find that the human-centered community is being stretched too thin, then we will stop growing. Our North Star is to create a place where we can bring people together and promote open inquiry and civil discourse and do that in a context where students and faculty are leading an exciting life of the mind.

**GD:** *To that point about free inquiry — in the letter announcing the school, you talk about “thinking the unthinkable” and “challenging the unchallengeable.” Do you and the other folks who are involved with the University of Austin intend to solicit perspectives that perhaps make you uncomfortable? Things, for instance, like critical race theory, which I know many of the people in this project have been critical of?*

**PK:** Yeah, of course. Absolutely. We would only be replicating the problem; if one of the things we're identifying is that universities — some universities, not all — are not allowing the broadest range of perspectives on campus, then if we were to do the same thing, we're missing the point. I completely expect discussions of critical race theory, serious ones, reading the original texts, discussing the ideas that are out there, because these are ideas that are very impactful right now in our society and having a lot of influence. I think a university has an obligation to try to understand what's behind them and discuss them openly and see what the merits and faults of any kind of belief system are.

**GD:** *Would there be any steps taken to promote scholars or students who work on those issues, when a lot of the people who are involved with the university are seen as critics? Presumably a lot of the people who are most vocal in support of critical race theory will look at this university and think, “That’s not the place for me.”*

**PK:** I think there's a difference between institutions trying to understand the ideas that are in the world and promoting those

ideas. There's a dividing line there. I think a university is a place where people explore ideas, it's not a place where a university takes a stance and promotes particular ideas or ideologies. And the people that I know, even those who are critical of critical race theory, are interested in trying to understand it as part of their critique. If there was somebody who was so exercised by critical race theory that they couldn't have a rational conversation about it, they're probably not going to like our institution, because that's the kind of conversation we want to have.

**GD:** *What leads you to believe that the University of Austin will be immune to some of these problems that led you to create the school? If there were students at the University of Austin who end up objecting to a speaker or a professor with whom they disagree, how would you handle that situation with those students? Would there be any consequences for them trying to, say, shut down an event?*

**PK:** If they tried to shut down an event, then of course there'd be consequences. I think objecting to and protesting something is totally fine. But there are hard and fast lines. If we're an institution that stands for civil discourse, anybody who's acting outside the bounds of civil discourse is transgressing one of our fundamental tenets. We want speech to be as open and expansive and elastic as possible. But you can only have broad-ranging discussions and ideas if you all agree that nobody is allowed to prevent others from expressing their opinions. If students want to protest, if they agitate against somebody, that's fine. That sort of stuff should happen in all political directions. But if they actually tried to prevent somebody or intimidate somebody, that's not acceptable. And there would be consequences.

**GD:** *Is there a point at which engagement with controversial issues crosses the line into validating repugnant views? Are there any points at which you would draw a line and say, This person is not welcome on my campus, or this perspective is not welcome?*

**PK:** I don't think I would draw the line at somebody with ideas that were controversial that wanted to express his ideas, because

I think hearing those ideas in debate is an appropriate safety valve for our culture. But if somebody had acted upon their ideas in the public in a way or in any setting that was harmful directly towards other people, or cruel — if this person married those ideals with action that was harmful to other people, that person would not be welcome.

**GD:** *It sounds like, for instance, if you were to take one of the people currently being sued for arranging the violent neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville, that would be different from a person who maybe espouses those same white nationalist principles but didn't march with machine guns in Charlottesville?*

**PK:** We don't want to create controversy just to create controversy. We're not really going to be seeking out people who have opinions that most people find repugnant. But if there's an occasion to try and provide a forum to have a critical discussion about those things, and I think this is one of the things that I think sometimes people miss about the purpose of universities. The purpose of universities isn't to provide a platform for free speech. Our whole society is a platform for free speech. The purpose of universities is to provide an opportunity to come to a better understanding about the world and the ideas in this world. So for me difficult ideas that are presented in a way that allows for discussion, debate, critique — that's within bounds for university. Just to give somebody a soapbox or a platform to say what they want to say, if it's not conducive to the general purpose of the institution, which is to understand things better, or learn more, then there's no obligation for that.

**GD:** *So when you and the other people involved with the university talk about some of these unpopular ideas, or some of the topics that might lead to a person being “censored,” what are some of those topics that you would like to explore at the University of Austin that you feel have not been “allowed” to be discussed at other educational institutions?*

**PK:** The most pressing issues that we have in our society, the ones that we're really wrestling with — it's the role of universities to provide a way for society to engage and

work through those issues. It's not to want to embrace controversy, or be contrarian. We always talk about dialogue. If we don't have somewhere where that actually can happen, then we're at a stalemate. And we see the kind of polarization that we have today. I think issues like gender or race, things that are very much on the forefront of everybody's mind, can be discussed if we create a culture of trust and a culture of openness and grace and find a way to do that within the Academy. The first thing you have to do is create that culture. You have to create a culture where people will understand that they can speak openly, make mistakes, be wrong — that everybody will be eager to forgive one another when mistakes are made. Because the higher order end is for people who understand the world differently to try and understand each other better.

**GD:** *To that point about understanding people who are coming at things from different perspectives, I think a lot of people are looking at the University of Austin and seeing the backers and thinking, this is just a haven for conservative academics, conservative students, conservative thinkers. Is that a fair assessment of what you're doing?*

**PK:** A substantial portion of the people involved in the project are not conservative in any identifiable way. I think it's interesting that if an institution has embraced people who are on the right as part of their constituent population, that it's characterized as a right-leaning institution. It doesn't seem to go in the opposite direction. If you look at institutions and 75 to 80% of people are on the left, we don't say that's a left-leaning institution. I don't know how to untangle that knot. I think it's just a habit of the culture, to assume that if you have people who are on the right gathered in some sort of critical mass that they can only be interested in things that are endorsed by or appealing to the right. I think that's a false assessment.

**GD:** *You say that people will look at an institution where 70 to 80% of the people are on the political left, and the first thing that people think isn't necessarily that it's a left-wing institution. But it seems like that is what*

*you're saying about institutions like, say, Harvard or Yale — that they are left-leaning, and not open to points of view beyond left-wing orthodoxy.*

**PK:** I have no interest in identifying an institution as being left or right. There's institutions on the right that are also very committed to that particular political stance. I think the main issue in higher education is asymmetry. If things are so asymmetrical that you look around, and there's really only one set or a small set of positions that are represented, I think that limits the possibility of the institution to be truth-seeking, to have enough viewpoints that people can step out of their own viewpoints and better understand themselves in the world. So I don't necessarily think it's problematic that the legacy institutions are on the left. I spent my whole career in higher education, and people would have a hard time identifying me politically. I've never felt oppressed by left or right. But I think what we've seen happen over time — and this is not just in universities, this is a society in general — is a kind of sorting that's happened that has allowed many institutions to be politically or ideologically asymmetrical. I think we should resist that. I think we should find a way to balance things out. If everybody at University of Austin, or most people, are on the right or on either end of the political spectrum, if it's so dominated in one way or the other, we will have failed. Our vision will have failed. That is not our vision. Our vision is for there to be — I don't think proportional equal representation, I think those are quixotic things — but for people to be engaged in university not because of their politics, but almost, I would say, in spite of politics, because they're actually interested in things that are above and beyond our political designations, things that are generally human.

**GD:** *I'm curious if the current climate on campuses for pro-Israel, Jewish students factored at all into any of the conversations around the university of Austin.*

**PK:** We have had no specific conversations about that.

**GD:** *The reason I ask is because of the*

*association, of course, with Bari Weiss, who as a student at Columbia had been involved in activism around a professor with pro-Palestinian views, who was accused of discriminating against students who had more pro-Israel views. So I'm curious how that issue fits into the commitment to liberalism. Would a professor who doesn't think that Israel should exist be accepted and welcomed at the university?*

**PK:** It depends on what you mean, 'not exist.' If there's somebody who wants to make a political case about Israel one way or the other, I think these are things that have to be heard. If there's somebody who thinks that the Jewish people, as a people, don't have a right to — I think there's a dividing line there. It would be very difficult for us as an institution that's dedicated to the broadest possible open inquiry not to allow people to hold perspectives that are in tension with others. As soon as we start to do that, then I think the cards start to fall in general. The core of civil discourse, the absolute centerpiece of civil discourse, is the recognition of the mutual dignity of all human beings. That to me is a non-negotiable. You can't have civil discourse which then enables free speech or open inquiry if you don't have at the very center of that the recognition of the absolute and mutual dignity of all human beings, because civil discourse is predicated upon the idea that we're all rational human beings, and we all share the same value. So that's nonnegotiable. I mean, if somebody at any point, students, faculty, guests or what, were somehow to impugn the dignity of other human beings. That's a bridge too far. That's unacceptable.

**GD:** *I want to talk as well about the other piece that the University of Austin wants to focus on. The website mentions that roughly 40% of the students who want to pursue a college degree aren't able to attain one. But presumably the reason they're not graduating from college isn't because of the political climate or "illiberalism." It's because college is expensive, and they have to take care of family or have other responsibilities. And some of the schools you're critical of — schools like Harvard, Yale, Stanford — don't have those problems around graduation rates. So*



*I'm curious how you reconcile these two sides of your mission. What will the University of Austin do to address that problem of people who want to go to college and aren't able to finish their degree?*

**PK:** I think you're right. I think the primary reason that students do not complete is because of financial stress. So solving that piece, making sure that college is affordable, is an important part of that. But the second piece of that is making sure that the outcomes of college make sense. In other words, it's not enough to say, it's not very expensive to go to this college, come here and spend four years. The front end is the expense of college, building an institution that is lean and purpose-driven and not given to financial inefficiencies or excesses. You make it affordable. At the back end, you have to make sure you're providing very clear outcomes and pathways to careers and professional development and further study. If you put those two pieces together, you'll see that students do much better, because on the one hand, you're relieving some of the financial distress along the way by making education affordable. And on the other hand, you're motivating them to push through the challenges of college because the end game is much clearer to them and much more accessible to them.

**GD:** *What does affordable mean to you? Do you have a number in mind for what is considered affordable tuition?*

**PK:** The goal is to have tuition be set at less than half the average of the leading private institutions, and that as a top-end goal. If most private institutions are charging \$60,000 a year, our goal would be to charge no more than \$30,000, but still try to work downwards from there so that it can be hopefully significantly less than that.

**GD:** *There are larger policy solutions to the affordability issue that go beyond just creating one new institution — things like free community college or student debt relief. Does the University of Austin intend to take a position on issues like that or otherwise get involved in some of those broader conversations?*

**PK:** We have no intention to be involved

in any political issues or take any political stances. Happy to consult on those issues if people wanted to hear from us about what we think the impact would be on issues like that, we would give our perspective on it. But I don't think we want to take any particular stances.

**GD:** *Why did you make this announcement now, several years before you will accept any undergraduates?*

**PK:** What happened was, once we decided that we were fully committed to this, and we knew we were building this institution, we wanted to do it publicly and openly. Part of the reason is exactly what's transpired: We wanted to spark the kind of conversations that are going on about higher education right now. By proposing an institution with the value set that we have, [we want] to enliven the conversation about higher education in general. And the other thing is, we want to be open to ideas as we develop the university. We're a dedicated crew who are working on this. But there are a lot of really, really insightful, smart, experienced people in the world out there, who we'd like to engage in the conversation as well.

**GD:** *Who are your initial major financial backers?*

**PK:** The person who's given us the kind of runway here at the beginning is somebody who's on our board, Joe Lonsdale. We're in the process right now with seven or eight other lead donors. But we haven't made any conclusions yet, so I don't want to put any names out there.

**GD:** *Your website mentions "forbidden courses" — what are some of the questions that you intend to ask in those courses? What counts as "forbidden"?*

**PK:** I think that just sounded like a sexy title. What we really mean is the difficult topics. That's the less interesting way to put it. The stuff that because it's difficult doesn't get discussed enough in other settings, usually at other universities. We'll take at least two scholars in each class who will team-teach the course, but who bring very

different perspectives to the subject at hand. Thinking about things like the question, let's say, of gender, or questions like, Is empire evil? The idea is to help students learn how to assess, critique, evaluate difficult issues, then come up with their own perspectives, and then figure out how to express those perspectives in a productive way.

**GD:** *In the last year and a half since George Floyd was killed, there have been conversations around race and diversity and broadening what's taught at universities, as well as students' legitimate concerns about racism and language that's used in those courses. How do you address that? Is it important to the University of Austin to include perspectives from underrepresented groups — from people who have felt discriminated against at their institutions of higher education because of, say, their race?*

**PK:** Of course, it is, without a doubt. We're interested in the entirety of the human experience. How do we address those questions — that's what the university is trying to solve for. I'll give you an example. After George Floyd, while I was still at St. John's, I decided that fall to teach an elective course on Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, which is a really rough novel. It brings up issues of not only race, but violence and sexual exploitation and all these things. There's a strong voice that's very critical of the status quo when it comes to race. I'm not gonna lie, it was such a politicized moment, that I was really anxious. Everything was so sensitive and challenging. The very first class, I said, Look, guys, this is a tough moment. And these are issues that we're facing together and individually. If we're going to be able to talk about things in this novel, which are going to be upsetting to some and challenging and difficult to face, we have to be able to do it together. We have to start with the notion that we need to have an impulse towards grace and forgiveness, because we all understand the world only imperfectly. And we're gonna bring our imperfect understandings of the world to the table and share those. If somebody says something that is not easy for you to hear or not right, before we get our guard up, let's just remember that that person is a human being, and may be wrong. Address them

with a sense of openness and grace and if somebody does offend you, let's have our first impulse be to talk about it. This was one of the best classes I ever taught. It was one of the most fraught moments in our country's history. I picked, maybe foolishly, one of the most difficult novels out there. By approaching it from the kind of, let's say, human vulnerability, and exposing all of us as being vulnerable and imperfect, we were able to learn together.

**GD:** *Have you connected at all with the University of Texas? Are there any plans to collaborate with them?*

**PK:** I have connected with them and with the leadership there. The first thing I said is, don't worry, we're not starting a football team. There's already a lot of crossover in terms of people at the university who are interested in what we're

doing and who have come to events and conversations that have happened. I feel like institutions need to collaborate. My dream would be that we could become, like, the Stanford to UT's Berkeley. There's a world-class public institution here, and if we can have a complimentary world-class private institution, I think that would be wonderful.♦

NOVEMBER 9, 2021

## Israeli startup 'cracks code to saliva' with world's first pregnancy spit test

*Salignostics had the 'toolbox of technologies' ready to adapt for COVID-19 home tests*

By Tamara Zieve

**S**pit, it turns out, is the scientific glue that binds an Israeli medical startup's rapid COVID-19 test, which it developed last year, and what is now being billed as the first-ever saliva-based pregnancy tests.

The founders of Salignostics, the company behind the SaliCov kit COVID-19 tests and the Salistick pregnancy tests, are graduates of the Hebrew University's Faculty of Dental Medicine who all dealt with various aspects of saliva during their doctoral studies.

"In that environment we thought about saliva diagnostics and how to take it to the next generation of IVD [in vitro diagnostics] products," Guy Krief, co-founder, deputy CEO and director of business development of Salignostics, told *Jewish Insider*.

Founded in 2016, the Salignostics team observed that pregnancy tests were the most common tests in pharmacies, and set out to investigate how pregnancy could be detected via saliva instead of the common blood or urine tests.

In an initial experiment, the researchers added the b-hCG pregnancy hormone to samples of water, and blood and saliva from males (to be sure the samples were free from b-hCG); they found that only the saliva didn't

show up positive on commercial pregnancy tests. "That was an enigma because we just put it in so we knew it had b-hCG, and that was a key experiment which made us understand that saliva possesses a lot of information, but for some reason you can't see it."

Krief said there were dozens of reasons why the saliva samples didn't test positive, one of which was related to the concentration of biomarkers in saliva. "The threshold of the lateral flow strips is limited to a certain concentration; if it's below you cannot recognize it, so you need to increase the concentration," he explained.

"That's when we started all the developments, all the technologies, and today we have a toolbox of technologies which we can combine and optimize for any application," Krief added. The technology, for example, can be used to detect malaria.

The Salignostics team had their toolbox ready to adapt for COVID-19 home tests, and did so within about a year.

The startup's focus on COVID-19 delayed its progress with the Salistick, but it aims to start commercializing it early next year in Europe and in Israel. Krief also hopes it will have approval from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration by the end of next year.

Salignostics says it is in advanced stages of receiving the European Union's CE mark for Salistick and has completed its initial submission of the test kit to the FDA in the US. The company has successfully completed clinical trials in Israel on more than 300 women, both pregnant and not, and has completed thousands of analytical trials.

Like the SaliCov kit, Salistick comes individually wrapped for hygienic purposes and has a handheld applicator for collecting saliva. Once the sample is collected, which takes about one minute, the applicator is placed via a twist-and-click mechanism into the analyzing unit. The results are then displayed on the results window within 10 minutes, with two lines indicating a positive result, and one line a negative one.

The pregnancy tests have a 95% sensitivity rate when taken from the first day of a woman's missed period. The company will make the results digitally available so they can be shared with loved ones via an app. The cost of the tests, Krief said, will be in the same range as the premium brands of the urine pregnancy tests such as Clear Blue and First Response.

The Salignostics team is displaying its product at the Medica 2021 exhibition in

Düsseldorf, Germany, this week.

“As an industry, medical science must move forward,” Krief said. “By cracking the code to saliva, we are helping advance how

medical professions can perform diagnoses and give individuals the power to make informed decisions about their own health and well-being. With Salistick, we hope to

empower women by making the discovery of pregnancy more dignified and inclusive.” ♦

NOVEMBER 12, 2021

## Is Young Kim the future of the GOP?

*The freshman congresswoman is hoping she can defend her seat in the coming election cycle as Republicans vie to reclaim the majority*

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By Matthew Kassel

Rep. Young Kim (R-CA) arrived in Washington last year under somewhat auspicious circumstances. The freshman lawmaker, 59, was among a group of Southern California Republicans who beat back the so-called “blue wave” of the 2018 midterms, reclaiming four of the seven seats in California that Democrats had flipped in capturing the House the prior cycle.

The GOP upsets, part of a broader “red tide” in which Democrats underperformed but still maintained their now-tenuous majority, helped contribute to the most diverse Congress in history. Kim, for her part, was among the first three Korean-American women in the House, along with Reps. Michelle Steel (R-CA) and Marilyn Strickland (D-WA).

On top of that, Kim placed first in an office lottery for new House members, winning free reign to post up at an office of her choosing. It was a relatively minor triumph, but Kim couldn’t help but notice a fortuitous parallel, since former Rep. Gil Cisneros (D-CA) — the first-term incumbent she had picked off in a 2020 rematch following a narrow defeat the previous cycle — is also a lottery winner, albeit of a higher order: He hit the jackpot more than a decade ago after purchasing a handful of Mega Millions tickets on a whim.

“I joke about how, gosh, does that mean you have to be some sort of a lottery winner in order to occupy the California 39th congressional seat?” Kim marveled last week in an interview with *Jewish Insider*,

referring to the district she now represents, which encompasses parts of Los Angeles, Orange and San Bernardino Counties. “That’s a side joke,” she hastened to add, lest her comment be taken at face value. “I really don’t mean it. I really hope that people choose their representative because they really believe that Young Kim can do the better job.”

Kim, a former state assemblywoman and longtime aide to retired Rep. Ed Royce (R-CA) — whose old seat she now holds in the House — expressed confidence that voters will send her back to Congress for a second term next year. The rookie lawmaker is already facing at least two challengers in the 2022 non-partisan jungle primary, even as Cisneros, who now serves as under secretary of defense for personnel and readiness in the Biden administration, has yet to indicate his plans.

Either way, Kim seems well-poised to defend her title, not least because she has already raised more than \$2 million in campaign contributions, according to the latest filings from the Federal Election Commission. The congresswoman also appears to have benefited, once again somewhat serendipitously, from a new proposed congressional draft map that may tip the scales in her favor.

The map, which was released this week by California’s independent redistricting commission, augurs poorly for a number of Republicans, including Steel, Kim’s fellow Korean-American Republican in the House. But Kim was among a small group of lawmakers who emerged in better shape

than they had been before. While her district leans leftward, according to a partisan voter index tabulated by *The Cook Political Report*, it now represents a significantly lighter shade of blue, as it currently stands. The map is expected to be finalized in the coming weeks.

Even without such favorable boundaries, however, experts say that Kim would likely be in solid shape for re-election, in spite of demographic shifts that have helped put the traditionally conservative district in play for Democrats. During her time in office, Kim has made inroads not only with Republican voters but independents and some Democrats as well, according to Lori Cox Han, a professor of political science at Chapman University in Orange County, who describes the congresswoman as a moderate who has ably navigated the tumultuous internecine politics of the Trump era.

“She likes to say of herself that she’s the future of the Republican Party, and I think she’s been very smart about how she’s crafted this,” Han told *JL*, noting that Kim has kept herself at something of a safe remove from the former president, in style if not in substance. While the congresswoman has voiced disapproval of Trump’s behavior, she has also made sure to emphasize her favorable view of at least some of his policies, including what Han describes as a “pro-business” approach that remains popular among the old-school fiscal conservatives of Orange County.

Scot Zentner, a political scientist at California State University, San Bernardino, agreed. “She seems to have played things

deftly enough,” he said of Kim, pointing in particular to a pair of early House votes that, he suggested, reflect the unique cost-benefit analysis required of center-right Republicans working within a party that remains largely in thrall to Trump.

Last January, Kim joined the majority of her Republican colleagues in the House in voting against Trump’s impeachment, sparing herself of the former president’s enduring wrath as he has vowed to unseat the 10 GOP lawmakers who broke with the party. The following month, though, Kim was the lone Republican member of California’s congressional delegation to affirm a Democratic-led motion that successfully stripped Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) of her committee assignments over past comments in which she had endorsed violence against her political opponents and perpetuated antisemitic conspiracy theories, among other things.

In a statement at the time of the vote, Kim argued that “antisemitism, conspiracy theories and threats should never be part of our political discourse,” adding: “I came to Congress to focus on policy issues that unite our country and improve the lives of my constituents in the 39th District. Comments like what we’ve seen from Rep. Greene make that more difficult and are not what the Republican Party stands for.”

“I think she is the future of the party,” Han said of Kim. “If the rest of the party would get on board with her.”

That remains to be seen. But recent surprise GOP victories, including last week’s high-profile gubernatorial upset over Terry McAuliffe in Virginia — where Glenn Youngkin successfully distanced himself from Trump despite opposition efforts to associate his candidacy with the former president’s extremism — point to a strategy that Republican candidates in swing districts across the country are likely now studying as the midterms approach.

For her part, Kim believes that the Virginia race bodes well for her prospects, and she is bullish that Republicans are on track to flip the House next year, as others have predicted. “I feel really good about it,” she told JI. “The momentum is on our side.”

But the congresswoman also suggested that last week’s outcome “should be a wake-up call for my friends on the left,”

she told JI, arguing that raising taxes and “throwing money” at social issues, as she characterizes some policies of the Biden administration, are both misguided and fiscally irresponsible. “It doesn’t appear that they’ve gotten the memo.”

Despite such criticism, however, Kim, who sits on the Problem Solvers Caucus, was more eager to highlight what she describes as a steadfast commitment to bipartisan cooperation, which she views as a natural reflection of the diverse district now under her purview. “I made it very clear that I will be an independent and bipartisan voice for California’s 39th District,” she said, boasting of her success in ushering 10 bills through the House over the past 10 months, beginning in March with a piece of bipartisan legislation extending loan application deadlines for the government’s Paycheck Protection Program by two months.

In conversation with JI, Kim explained that her dedication to bipartisanship also extends to upholding support for Israel among Democrats and Republicans, even as some members of both parties have questioned that approach in recent months. “Our relationship with Israel is very, very important, and we can find common ground and work on this in a bipartisan, non-political way,” Kim said. “I am not a fan of a ‘Squad’ of this, ‘Squad’ of that,” she added, referring to the group of far-left lawmakers, including Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) and Ilhan Omar (D-MN), who are among the most outspoken Israel critics in the House. “That’s not me.”

“Our relationship with Israel is a matter of national security, and it should be the central part of our greater strategy in the Middle East,” Kim maintained, “where we have enduring national security interests.”

As a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Kim has signed on to a number of letters addressing such concerns, particularly with regard to the Iran nuclear deal. Last March, for example, she was among two dozen House lawmakers who signed a bipartisan letter — led by Rep. Josh Gottheimer (D-NJ) and Foreign Affairs Committee Ranking Member Rep. Michael McCaul (R-TX) — urging Secretary of State Tony Blinken “to outline a better, comprehensive deal with Iran” in consultation “with Israel and other partners

in the region who are heavily impacted by Iran’s malign activities.”

During the May conflict between Israel and Hamas, Kim remained adamant “that Israel has the right to defend itself against the rockets fired by Hamas targeting our very good friends Israeli civilians,” she said, summarizing public statements she made at the time. “Israel also has a responsibility to work to protect the people of Palestine and ensure that they do not live in fear of violence,” she added. “I called for both sides working together to reach a ceasefire as soon as possible and return to negotiating a peaceful settlement where respect, forgiveness and mutual understanding are prioritized.”

Her even-handed foreign policy positions have earned plaudits from the pro-Israel community, including an endorsement in July from Pro-Israel America, the bipartisan advocacy group. The congresswoman, PIA’s executive director, Jeff Mendelsohn, said in a recent statement to JI, “proudly stood with Israel during the rocket attacks fired by Hamas in May and has taken a strong stand against Iran’s malign activities.” Kim, he added, “has already declared her strong opposition to” the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement targeting Israel and “openly advocated for security assistance to Israel without unnecessary political conditions.”

This coming February, Kim said she will embark on her first visit to Israel with a delegation of freshmen House Republicans. The trip, sponsored by the AIPAC-affiliated American Israel Education Foundation, had been planned for August but was postponed due to pandemic-related concerns.

As an immigrant from South Korea whose grandparents lived through communism — and whose in-laws, she said, defected from North Korea — Kim described what she regards as a personal obligation to speak out against human rights violations in that region. She characterized such activism as “the cornerstone” of her foreign affairs work. “People still live under oppression,” she said. “People are still trying to defect from North Korea because of starvation while the regime is benefiting from all these illicit activities.”

“What’s happening on the Korean Peninsula, what’s happening in the Taiwan



Strait, what's happening in Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, especially those who came to the United States in pursuit of happiness and freedom after the fall of Saigon — my friends from Vietnam, from Cambodia, I talk to them on a regular basis," said Kim, whose constituents include a sizable population of Asian-American voters. "I need to speak out and be their advocate and champion."

On the domestic front, Kim has watched with dismay as anti-Asian violence has risen sharply during the pandemic. "It's really sad that COVID-19 has exacerbated the rise in hate crimes against minorities," she told JI, expressing her support for legislation, introduced by Rep. Grace Meng (D-NY), increasing Justice Department resources to track and combat hate crimes. "But the more important thing is this," Kim said. "No

matter what we do legislatively, we cannot legislate a people's hate out of our hearts and minds."

"We need to make sure that we don't put blame on one person, one ethnicity," she added, making what seemed like a thinly veiled jab at Trump, whose racially insensitive comments during the beginning of the pandemic, including one in which he described the coronavirus as "kung flu," Kim was quick to condemn. "Those perpetrators of hate crimes," she said, "should work to make restitution of those affected."

Sam Markstein, national political director at the Republican Jewish Coalition, said that Kim was among the group's "first round of House endorsements for the 2022 midterms," describing the congresswoman as "an independent voice for her district"

who has "showcased her ability to win voters' support across the political spectrum, including key support from independents and Democrats."

In 2022, Markstein told JI, "we expect she will do so again."

Regardless of how her district is drawn, Kim said she hopes that voters of all stripes will feel positively about her tenure when they cast their ballots in the coming cycle.

"Over the past couple of decades, the district has turned slowly to what is now a very purple district, and so people are looking for someone who can exercise their own independence and their own thinking," she told JI. "I believe that I have provided that." ♦

NOVEMBER 19, 2021

## Making hiking boots bloom in the desert

*The scion of the family behind Timberland launches a footwear company focused on the unique conditions of deserts*

By Gabby Deutch

Growing up in an outdoorsy New England family, Noah Swartz didn't have a choice when it came to hiking. The family business was Timberland, the footwear company known for its iconic brown boots, that his father sold for \$2 billion a decade ago. But that didn't mean the young Swartz was always excited to take part in family treks.

"Every 100 feet or so, [my mom] would give us another jelly bean to keep us going and kind of initiate us into the outdoors," Swartz recalled of childhood hikes. The bribe worked; this week, Swartz launched his own footwear company, Erem, a sustainability-focused brand selling hiking boots for use in the desert. Erem's initial investors include Jeffrey and Sidney Swartz, Noah's father and grandfather who have each helmed Timberland.

"It always struck me as odd when I'd be in the Southwest or in Israel, and you'd see people wearing the same products

and brands that you would see in New Hampshire or Vermont," said Swartz, 28, who grew up in Newton, Mass. "Very different places, very different performance challenges. And yet, same brands, same products."

Erem intends to offer a solution for a population that Swartz believes is underserved by the outdoors industry: the 1 to 2 billion people who live in the planet's deserts and drylands.

"We are fundamentally first and foremost focused on desert landscapes and desert people," Swartz told *Jewish Insider* in an interview from Los Angeles on Wednesday. The name Erem comes from Eremos, the Greek word for desert, and it's also an acronym, for "exceptional, responsible, enduring and motivated."

The company is headquartered in Henderson, Nev., a Las Vegas suburb, although its all-remote five-person team is spread around the country. Erem has partnered with the Arizona Trail, an 800-

mile hiking trail that traverses the entire length of Arizona from Mexico to Utah, by committing 1% of profits to the nonprofit that oversees the trail. The company is also currently selling its shoes in two family-owned hiking stores in the Copper State, but most of its business will be direct-to-consumer.

"It's one of the most rugged and extreme terrains on Earth," Swartz said. "Arizona has got a population of 8 million people. Israel's got the same population. So you start to throw in California and Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, lots of Colorado, lots of Montana, lots of Idaho, you actually kind of get to the point where, in fact, deserts are home for a ton of outdoor recreation."

Right now, Erem offers two different boots, one for trail hiking and one for off-trail expeditions. Both are "biocircular," a proprietary term used by Erem to describe the company's sustainability ethos.

"Biocircular means two things: 'bio,' made only from materials and constructions

that have a 100% proven path back to nature, and then 'circular,' which means they can be re-streamed into responsible next lives, including new Erem footwear," said Swartz. This is different from calling them "biodegradable," and it also doesn't mean that they are entirely without plastic — but Swartz said they use high-quality materials and try to limit the use of plastic.

"Greenwashing is rampant in the outdoor industry," Swartz said, referring to companies who claim to be more sustainable or eco-friendly than they are. "We are trying to raise the sustainability bar for the entire industry."

This focus on sustainability is what Swartz says sets Erem apart, but it's also the emphasis on creating shoes that are built for the surroundings where they are actually being used.

"The outdoor industry is really focused on cold and wet, which is really not what you want in the desert, at least most of the months of the year, where you really would want to be focused on hot and dry," he explained. A waterproof hiking boot would work well for visitors to, for instance, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, which straddles North Carolina and Tennessee,

the most-visited national park last year. But hikers in Utah's Zion National Park, which had 3.6 million visitors in 2020, might want something more breathable — or at least that's what Erem hopes.

An insulated, waterproof boot "is going to make your feet sweat and feel hot and feel gross" when hiking in hot and arid conditions, explained Swartz, who said it was an uncomfortable, blister-filled hiking trip in Utah that led him to think about desert-specific footwear.

At this point, Erem is limiting sales to the United States, although international markets factor heavily into the company's future plans. "If you are recreating in North Africa, if you're recreating in Morocco, you are recreating in the desert," said Swartz. Some of Erem's product testing occurred in Israel, where Swartz spent much of the pandemic with family who live there. "The search-and-rescue folks out of Beersheva are like, 'Wow, yes, finally, somebody speaking our language.'"

As Swartz sees it, there's something special about starting a company that also offers a value proposition. "For-profit businesses really can be the most efficient drivers of social environmental change,"

Swartz argued, and Erem combines that belief with "this deep, forever passion for the outdoors and this decade-old obsession with the desert."

Swartz now lives much closer to desert landscapes than he did growing up in Boston. He recently moved to Los Angeles with his wife after departing Cambridge, Mass., one semester shy of a Harvard MBA. "Harvard MBA dropout starts desert gear company," he joked, offering a potential tagline for his business.

"I really fell in love with the desert, maybe just the contrast of coming from the very wet Northeast to going to a very different landscape like that," said Swartz. "There's really something about the desert that kind of makes my soul rest a little bit differently. I think, for me, it's a combination of the vastness and the extremes of the desert combined with the fact of, I think in some ways, really unparalleled beauty."

He ties the company's mission to that trick his mom used to get him to hike as a child: "I guess I carry that jelly bean sweetness with me now still in the outdoors." ♦