

THE WEEKLY PRINT

Milwaukee's son makes a Senate run; Tom Friedman contrasts Middle East approaches: 'Trump did crazy well, Biden doesn't do crazy'; From start-up nation to foodtech destination; Spoon U founder Sarah Adler Hartman brings innovation to the Times; Still pressing the fight for press freedom; 'No timelines' on adding Israel to Visa Waiver Program, senior DHS official says; and In a first, AIPAC to enter campaign politics

DECEMBER 15, 2021

Milwaukee's son makes a Senate run

Wisconsin Lt. Gov. Mandela Barnes rejects the BDS movement and has expressed support for Iron Dome funding

By Matthew Kassel

On a brisk evening in late November, Mandela Barnes, the Democratic lieutenant governor of Wisconsin who is now emerging as a high-profile Senate candidate in one of the most consequential races of the upcoming midterm elections, was celebrating his birthday at a post-industrial community center on the east side of Madison.

Despite the festive occasion, the fundraising event was, at points, relatively subdued, perhaps in part because the gathering had been scheduled on the Monday after Thanksgiving, two days before Barnes would officially turn 35. But it was also hard not to feel as if the tumultuous events of the past week or so had contributed to a lingering sense of unease in this liberal redoubt of south-central Wisconsin.

As the governor's gregarious sidekick, Barnes is something of a ubiquitous presence at public events throughout the Badger State, and so it was hardly unusual that he had been planning to attend the holiday parade in Waukesha at which a driver had careened his maroon SUV into the crowd and killed six bystanders. Instead, Barnes was in Kenosha that day, an hour's drive south, where protesters were objecting

to the acquittal of Kyle Rittenhouse, the teenager who, armed with a semi-automatic rifle, had killed two people and injured a third amid widespread demonstrations following the police shooting of Jacob Blake in the summer of 2020.

The last-minute schedule change had clearly shaken Barnes, who described "a bitter irony that encapsulates all the stress and pain of this past week" in social media comments the day after the car attack in suburban Milwaukee. "The only reason I wasn't at the parade in Waukesha yesterday is because I needed to be in Kenosha."

During the unrest in Kenosha two summers ago, Barnes spoke candidly of his exasperation with racial disparities in the criminal justice system — and, as the first Black lieutenant governor of Wisconsin, his national profile rose in tandem with a growing awareness of police brutality that placed Wisconsin at the red-hot center of an intensifying and all but unsettled political battle. Barnes expressed disappointment with the Rittenhouse ruling in a recent statement, but he struck a note of evenhandedness that seemed to eschew some of his rawer prior comments on the issue. "While we can easily view this as a setback," he said, "we have to transform this moment."

At his birthday bash, speaking before a modestly sized crowd of contributors, Barnes made no mention of the controversial ruling, which, aside from his written statement, he appears to have avoided discussing publicly. Still, the lieutenant governor stuck to a similarly optimistic message as he outlined his quest to become Wisconsin's first Black senator, occasionally lightening the mood with a series of aw-shucks asides that he has honed over the past two years in countless appearances throughout every region of the state.

"I looked at this race long and hard because I honestly very much enjoy my time as lieutenant governor," Barnes, who was sharply dressed in a dark blue suit, bright orange tie and brown-leather solo monk-strap shoes, told supporters. "I've had an incredible wealth of experiences," he added, teeing up for the punchline. "I've been able to tap a maple tree."

He paused for effect as the audience chuckled. "I got to go to a *cranberry* marsh — and before somebody corrects me, it's not a bog," he clarified with bemused authority, speaking through a purple face mask emblazoned with the logo of a local union. "We have cranberry marshes in the state. It's a little fun fact. You'll also be happy to

learn we've got *five* Springfields in the state of Wisconsin — another interesting fact for you to use."

Barnes holds no major procedural authorities in his current role, which he has occupied since 2019. "You cut a whole lot of ribbons," he said self-effacingly. "It's a function of the job." But the veteran elected official, who sits on a number of task forces and is first in the line of succession for the governorship, was perhaps underselling himself for effect. His historic victory alongside Gov. Tony Evers three years ago — when Barnes positioned himself as an outspoken and unabashedly progressive foil to his even-tempered running mate, now 70 — was widely viewed as a transformative moment for Democrats.

"Wisconsin is a much different state since 2018," Barnes said at the community center, indirectly alluding to the tenure of former Republican Gov. Scott Walker, who assumed office in 2011 as a brash Tea Party prototype and would wage fierce battle with labor unions in Wisconsin. Walker was unseated by Evers in 2018, but Barnes suggested that Democrats still had unfinished business.

The perennially purple swing state of Wisconsin is one of the most closely divided in the nation, with bright-red rural swaths encircling predominantly Republican suburban areas as well as reliably Democratic metropolitan enclaves like Milwaukee and Madison, the latter of which has been described as "77 square miles surrounded by reality."

The pair of Wisconsin senators currently in office present a study in contrasts that underscores the state's unique political identity. Elected in 2012 as the country's first openly gay senator, Tammy Baldwin, 59, is an old-school progressive Democrat who remains popular among the majority of voters throughout the state. Ron Johnson, on the other hand, assumed office in 2011 as a business-friendly Tea Party insurgent whose political transformation during the Trump era has made him one of the most endangered Republicans in the Senate. In recent years, Johnson, 66, has pushed conspiracy theories around the 2020 presidential election, and he is now leading a GOP effort to take control of federal elections in Wisconsin. All the while, he has repeatedly amplified misinformation

about the pandemic. Last week, for instance, Johnson suggested that gargling mouthwash "has been proven to kill the coronavirus."

While Johnson has yet to announce whether he will seek re-election next year, most observers speculate that he is likely to run again, notwithstanding his apparent vulnerability, because of what is expected to be a windfall year for Republicans as they seek to regain control of the Senate.

For Democrats, the GOP-held seat represents a chance to hold the line, if not by expanding their razor-thin Senate majority then at least by preserving it. At the Madison gathering, Barnes made no mention of Johnson, but indicated that he was prepared for whatever fight lay in store for the general election. "It's important for us to get the train on the tracks, for us to be pointed in the right direction, and it's important for us to deliver for the people of this state, the people of this country," Barnes said. "That's one of the biggest frustrations folks have about Democrats — that we don't fight hard enough and that we don't do the work to deliver. And I can't say that I completely disagree."

The answer, Barnes suggested, lies in reshaping the ideological makeup of the upper chamber. "That's why not just expanding the majority but making sure that we have a *progressive* majority in the United States Senate," he emphasized, "is so important."

After his speech, a chocolate cake with multicolored frosting was presented before him, and those in attendance sang "Happy Birthday." Rather than blowing out the candles, Barnes, conscious of the emerging Omicron variant, waved his hand forcefully over the flames, extinguishing them in just a few seconds. Then, clutching a long, serrated knife, he carefully cut the cake.

The image of Barnes, the man of honor, dutifully divvying up dessert for his guests was a classic demonstration of midwestern manners. But it was also an apt visual shorthand for an abiding tension that has hung conspicuously over his Senate campaign since he entered the race this past July.

Barnes, who boasts that he is the most progressive candidate in the race, has so far established himself as an early frontrunner

among nearly a dozen other Democratic primary candidates. But even as his message appears to be resonating, at least at this incipient stage, political experts who spoke with *Jewish Insider* are divided as to whether the qualities that might propel Barnes to a primary victory next August would backfire in the general election.

"I do worry personally that if we put forward the most progressive candidate in a tight year for Democrats, that may not be the best strategy," said one Democratic consultant in Wisconsin who is not active in the primaries. Barnes will "very clearly be seen as the most or one of the most progressive members in the Senate," the strategist added. "He would have a big national profile in that role in the same way that the Squad members do in the House."

"But knowing that's what's coming, it could work against him."

Barnes, who favors progressive policies like Medicare for All and the Green New Deal, is a staunch supporter of Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT), and he has expressed admiration for such far-left Squad members as Reps. Rashida Tlaib (D-MI) and Ilhan Omar (D-MN). Those affinities have already drawn conservative attacks that are sure to intensify if Barnes advances to the general election.

"Republicans are, I think, salivating to face Barnes," said Jessica Taylor, a Senate elections editor for the nonpartisan *Cook Political Report*. "They argue that he's too progressive for the state."

The conservative editor Charlie Sykes, who lives in Milwaukee, offered an even blunter assessment. "If Mandela Barnes is the Democratic nominee, then Democrats can take Wisconsin off the board," asserted Sykes, a founder of *The Bulwark*. "I could put that more diplomatically, but that's what I believe."

"For Republicans, the anti-Mandela Barnes playbook is already written," Anthony Chergosky, an assistant professor of political science at University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, told *Ji*. "What I'm wondering is if Mandela makes some movement back to the ideological center or if he doubles down on his progressive views."

While Barnes has made no public indication that he is interested in tempering his beliefs, some of his recent public remarks

do hint, ever so slightly, at a more cautious approach. But even if Barnes remains largely unbending, the aspiring senator argues that, given the stakes of the race, his campaign is about more than ideology. In many ways, Barnes is engaging in something of an audacious experiment as he embarks on his first bid for federal office — that is, whether his approach will allow him to not only have his cake but eat it, too.

“I’m not going to ever compromise my values,” Barnes said in an interview with JI last month over coffee in Washington, D.C., where he was in town fundraising while also tending to some official duties in his capacity as lieutenant governor. “I do fully believe and support the same things I’ve always supported, and in many ways, I feel like maybe I’ve gotten even more progressive in this position having traveled the state and seeing the challenges folks are dealing with.”

Barnes, who is tall and thin, with a shaved head and a short, scruffy beard, gives off an athletic bearing that befits his reputation as a long-distance runner — a hobby highlighted in his first campaign video. He had already been on a jog before arriving at Dua Coffee in downtown Washington on an early morning in mid-November. It was chilly outside, and the wind was picking up, but Barnes, dressed in a slim gray suit and sneakers, scoffed at the suggestion that he would need a coat.

The first-term lieutenant governor, who grew up in Milwaukee, knows from cold — and in many ways, his political ascendancy is one of endurance. Born Jesse Mandela Barnes, he has long gone by his middle name, a salute to Nelson Mandela, the late South African anti-apartheid activist. Like many families in Wisconsin, Barnes was raised in a proud union home, and an activist spirit was instilled in him at a young age.

As a kid, Barnes attended Walter Reuther’s United Auto Workers camp in Black Lake, Mich.

His father, who is also named Jesse, is a retired autoworker who identifies as a socialist and in 2011 participated in widespread demonstrations against legislation in Wisconsin that would end collective bargaining rights for public-sector

unions, according to an interview with the journalist Dan Kaufman in his 2018 book, *The Fall of Wisconsin: The Conservative Conquest of a Progressive Bastion and the Future of American Politics*.

After attending Alabama A&M University, Barnes took a low-level job in the Milwaukee mayor’s office and was subsequently hired as an organizer with Milwaukee Innercity Congregations Allied for Hope, a nonprofit organization dedicated to social justice causes. While with the group, Barnes developed a reputation as something of an interfaith bridge-builder, engaging a number of local lay and religious leaders.

Richard Schwalb, a Jewish community activist in Milwaukee who now serves on the Wisconsin chapter of the Jewish Democratic Council of America, described Barnes as a trusted ally during that time. “I was part of a larger group of activists that organized a counter rally that took place, essentially at the same location, before this neo-Nazi rally,” Schwalb told JI. “We worked side by side planning the event.”

In 2012, Barnes launched his first bid for public office, successfully picking off an entrenched incumbent in the state Assembly. Barnes, who went on to lead the now-defunct Black and Latino Caucus, earned a reputation as something of a “proactive” policy wonk among his fellow Democrats, according to Jonathan Brostoff, a longtime friend and state assemblyman. But Brostoff also appreciated that Barnes was, on occasion, capable of striving for levity in the service of advancing his goals.

“He does great impressions,” said Brostoff, who has endorsed Barnes’s Senate bid. At one point, he told JI, Barnes delivered a “significant part of his floor speech” in the gravelly voice of Bane, the villain in Christopher Nolan’s final Batman movie, “The Dark Knight Rises.” As Brostoff understood it, Barnes was critiquing what he viewed as a lack of transparency around a set of bills the Republicans were seeking to advance. “These bills were born in darkness,” Brostoff recalled Barnes intoning during his monologue. “That was pretty funny.”

Four years into his Assembly tenure, Barnes embarked on an ill-fated campaign for higher office, challenging Lena Taylor,

a popular Democratic state senator in Milwaukee County. His friends and colleagues tried to talk him out of it, but he remained steadfast. “I begged him, ‘Oh, my God, please, Mandela, don’t do this, you’re gonna lose, you’re gonna get beaten, you’re gonna get crushed, don’t do it!’” said Rep. Gwen Moore (D-WI), a friend and mentor who has endorsed his campaign for U.S. Senate. “But he did it out of a sense of idealism about what representation ought to be about. He did it out of a sense of the importance of collegiality and being able to make public service more horizontal than vertical.”

He lost, miserably, and was out of a job because he had given up his Assembly seat to run. But Moore was still impressed with what she described as Barnes’s natural ability to connect with voters, even as he had taken on her own state senator. “When he was running against her, the now-deceased, beloved mentor of mine, Vel Phillips” — the former secretary of state who, along with Barnes, is the only Black elected official ever to have won statewide office in Wisconsin — “called me up and asked me, ‘Do you know this Mandela?’” Moore recalled. “I said, ‘Sure, I know Mandela.’ She says, ‘Well, would you give him my phone number? I want to talk to him.’ And I said sure.”

Soon enough, they had forged a close relationship. “This old, old lady and this young man struck up an *independent* relationship,” Moore marveled. “She *liked* him, and I think she supported him in that run for that Senate race. I had nothing to do with it.”

That relationship would, as it happens, prove somewhat fortuitous. Following his defeat, Barnes worked briefly with the State Innovation Exchange, a national progressive policy organization, in Madison, before mounting another quixotic campaign for the lieutenant governorship. “Barnes is the luckiest politician in Wisconsin politics in my lifetime,” said Mordecai Lee, a professor of urban planning at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, who previously served in the state legislature. “The fact that Barnes won his primary and then had this shotgun marriage with Evers was totally a roll of the dice.”

“He was out of a job, he was out in the wilderness and then two years later, he ran

for lieutenant governor in this lower tier race and won,” Lee added. “Now, suddenly, he goes from this former defeated position to being lieutenant governor. That’s a fairy-book story.”

Throughout his two years in the role, Barnes has proven himself as something of a workhorse who, as the governor’s chief pitchman, has been enthusiastic in his support for Evers without, according to Lee, drawing undue controversy. “He’s done a lot of events throughout Milwaukee,” Lee said of Barnes. “In all those events, he has never put his foot in his mouth.”

While Barnes and Evers have markedly different personas, their yin-and-yang relationship has worked, Lee suggests, because Barnes isn’t the sort of progressive whose style and rhetoric match up with the flame-throwing ethos of the far left. “He’s always been, if there is such a thing, a moderate progressive,” Lee surmised. “He’s very much in the mainstream silo of the progressive wing.”

Interviews with nearly 30 political scientists, Democratic strategists and elected officials in the state, as well as friends and acquaintances of the lieutenant governor, suggest that many believe the same, even if Barnes has expressed an affinity for some of the most outspoken progressives in Congress.

“He’s really running with the Obama playbook in lots of ways,” said Paul Nolette, an associate professor of political science at Marquette University. Barnes, he said, has smartly framed his campaign around “moving forward,” echoing the former president’s hopeful message, which helped him win Wisconsin in both 2008 and 2012. “An important point is staying optimistic and having an upbeat attitude,” Nolette said, “which I think Obama was very good at.”

Joe Zepecki, a Democratic strategist in Wisconsin, believes that Barnes would be successful in a statewide general election matchup, where he will need to consolidate support in urban centers while holding down the margins in rural and suburban portions of the state. Zepecki compared Barnes to such Wisconsin senators as Russ Feingold, whom Johnson unseated in 2011,

and Baldwin. “Pretty independent, you know where they stand and even if you don’t agree with them, you at least respect where they are on the issues,” he said. “That’s more the mold that I would expect than anyone in the Squad.”

In conversation with JI, Barnes described himself as an admirer of Sens. Cory Booker (D-NJ) and Jon Ossoff (D-GA), the latter of whom won election this January in a remarkable upset. “Prior to Ossoff, I was the youngest Democrat elected to statewide office, so I should probably talk to him,” Barnes said of the 34-year-old Democrat from Georgia. “He’s younger than me by, like, three months, three or four months. His birthday is in February. You research these kinds of things.”

But even as he ties himself to some of the more even-tempered Democrats in the Senate, Barnes says his progressive values are right at home in Wisconsin. In the early 1900s, Robert La Follette, otherwise known as “Fighting Bob,” presided over the state as governor and then senator before mounting a failed bid for the presidency as a member of his own Progressive Party. “We have proud progressive traditions in Wisconsin,” Barnes said. “We have a responsibility to live up to that. We can’t just can’t rest on our legacy. We’ve got to continue to build upon it.”

“When I’m out of town, if I’m at a conference or something, I tell people about the things Wisconsin had led,” Barnes went on. “The first state to declare the Fugitive Slave Act unconstitutional, the first state to ratify the 19th Amendment, the first state to have anti-discrimination laws based on sexual orientation on the books, the first state to have anti-discrimination laws based on ability on the books. This is who we are as a state. Unfortunately, we’ve back-slid a bit, but I have no reason to believe we can’t do this — that we can’t lead the nation once more.”

With eight months to go until the primary, Barnes has already far outpaced his opponents in the limited publicly available polling on the race, while amassing a war chest sizable enough to afford him some leeway against two well-funded challengers, Alex Lasry and Sarah Godlewski, who have collectively spent nearly \$2 million of their own money. For his part, Barnes, who launched his campaign later than

most contenders in the crowded field, has raised just over \$1.1 million — a total that some elections experts have assessed as somewhat modest for a candidate of Barnes’s stature.

Still, the lieutenant governor has raked in a number of big-name donations that suggest he is gaining traction on the national stage. Among his most high-profile contributors are the actors Bradley Whitford and Edward Norton, the billionaire business executive Laurene Powell Jobs, the former Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick and the political arm of the Congressional Black Caucus.

Barnes has also gained backing from a diverse and influential group of elected officials in Washington. In September, Barnes earned dual endorsements from Rep. Ro Khanna (D-CA), a close ally of Bernie Sanders, and Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), who is among the most progressive Democrats in the Senate. Last month, Rep. Jim Clyburn (D-SC), the powerful House majority whip whose endorsements have helped boost President Joe Biden as well as Rep. Shontel Brown in Ohio to victory in recent primaries, gave Barnes his coveted imprimatur.

Lasry, who is on leave from his position as a senior vice president with the Milwaukee Bucks, has been shoring up major support from statewide labor unions, while Tom Nelson, an Outagamie county executive who is running in the progressive lane, has notched an endorsement from the Wisconsin chapter of the Sunrise Movement, the national climate advocacy group.

Barnes, who chairs the governor’s climate change task force, has put environmental issues front and center in his messaging — even as, like most of the leading candidates, his campaign site includes no policy section. “As an agricultural state, I do fully believe that the answers lie within what we’re already doing,” he said last month, seated in a nook at the back of the D.C. coffee shop. “We’ve brought so many farmers into this conversation about climate change because they’re the ones getting hit.”

As he concluded his thought, a small bug flew into his mouth, and he appeared to have accidentally swallowed it.

“Excuse me,” Barnes said as he began to cough. “Ugh. A bug.”

Still, Barnes remains confident. “This is an incredibly broad coalition,” he told JI. “Like, I’m a progressive. That’s how I got here. I started in grassroots organizing. But we are building a coalition of everybody. We are uniting all shades of blue. That’s what this is about. That’s how we win. We can have arguments when we’re in power, but right now, we’ve got to win.”

His endorsements indicate that, at least up to this point, Barnes is transcending some of the bitter intra-party divisions that have driven a wedge between far-left and moderate Democrats in recent elections. While Clyburn has expressed resistance to far-left messaging on police funding and socialized medicine, issues that Republicans will likely use against Barnes if he makes it to the general election, the South Carolina congressman said he had given no thought whatsoever to the lieutenant governor’s platform before making his endorsement. “I have not studied his policies at all,” he said in a recent interview with JI, noting that he had made the endorsement on the enthusiastic recommendation of Gwen Moore, his close personal friend.

That’s not to say the congressman didn’t check Barnes out. But Clyburn suggested that because his instincts have treated him well in the past, policy considerations were perhaps beside the point. “I like his demeanor,” he said of Barnes. “He would be a refreshing presence. Wisconsin has been in the news a lot these days for many, many reasons, like South Carolina is in the news for many, many reasons,” Clyburn elaborated. “And oftentimes, those reasons are not positive. I think Mandela offers an opportunity for some real positives to come out of Wisconsin.”

Last week, Barnes released the first policy plan of his campaign, advocating for such proposals as ending the filibuster, strengthening voting rights and overturning the Citizens United Supreme Court ruling.

“There’s so much at stake right now, so much on the line, just the things that are keeping this country together,” Barnes told JI. “We can talk about the policies, climate change, rebuilding the middle class, health care, but we’ve got to think about the social and political infrastructure, as well, like

voting rights and access to democracy in general.”

Sean McElwee, a co-founder of the polling firm Data for Progress, said that “Barnes is the example of what” he hopes “to see more often from progressives.” McElwee, whose firm conducted a poll on the race but is not involved with any of the campaigns, believes that progressive candidates have too often acted against their own interests in primary elections by positioning themselves in opposition to their own party rather than presenting progressive values as the embodiment of Democratic ideals, as he suggested Barnes is doing. “Barnes,” McElwee told JI, “is absolutely what it means for the progressive movement to move beyond adolescence and into adulthood.”

“I am very deliberate about reaching out to people who are a part of my own party, not just the ones who I agree with 95 to 100% of the time, but the ones who I’m maybe with 75% of the time,” Barnes said. “We want you here, want you to be a part of this big tent.”

“It’s not just the ideology,” he added. “This is multiracial, multi-ethnic, intergenerational, people from all across the state.”

But a number of players have yet to get on board. The Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, for example, is currently evaluating the race but has not decided whether it will make an endorsement, according to a source familiar with the group’s thinking — as is the case for all non-incumbent candidates in contested primaries.

Most Jewish groups are also taking something of a wait-and-see approach, if an endorsement is even in the pipeline. Marvin Tick, a member of the Wisconsin chapter of the Jewish Democratic Council of America, says the organization has interviewed a number of candidates but will otherwise be staying out of the primary. Pro-Israel America, the bipartisan advocacy group, is “keeping close track” of the race but has not determined who it will be supporting, according to Jeff Mendelsohn, PIA’s executive director. Democratic Majority for Israel declined to comment on the record.

J Street, the left-leaning Israel advocacy outfit, is backing four candidates in the primary, including Barnes, Lasry, Godlewski

and Nelson. “Mandela Barnes, like many of the candidates in this race, has been pretty clear about his support not only for a two-state solution but understanding the importance of really calling out some of the negative actions that move us farther away from peace,” said Laura Birnbaum, J Street’s national political director. “For someone who doesn’t necessarily have a foreign policy background, he has a decent understanding of both the nuances of the policy issues but also how they play out in American politics — and I think that he’s someone who has been very sensitive to making sure that he’s representing both the views of the folks in his state and listening to all kinds of groups.”

Barnes says he has long-standing ties with Jewish community members in Wisconsin going back to his organizing days. “That’s just my natural positioning, engaging people from all communities,” he told JI. In 2013, Barnes attended an African-American and Jewish community leaders mission hosted in Philadelphia by the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, after which he was invited to speak about voting rights at a JCPA plenum.

“As a former interfaith organizer, Mandela is part of a long legacy of Black and Jewish leaders standing together to support human rights and civil rights,” Rep. Mondaire Jones (D-NY), who has endorsed Barnes’s Senate bid, told JI in a statement. “His long record of delivering for Wisconsin is proof that he won’t settle for what is when he knows what can be.”

Shahanna McKinney-Baldon, who was Barnes’s English teacher at John Marshall High School in Milwaukee, said she is “excited” for the lieutenant governor’s “collaborations with members of the Jewish community.” McKinney-Baldon is now the executive director of the Edot Midwest Regional Jewish Diversity Collaborative, an organization promoting Jewish racial and ethnic diversity. “I continue to be impressed by Mandela’s commitment to building relationships across our diverse Wisconsin,” she told JI in an email, noting that the lieutenant governor “embodies” such Jewish values as “responsibility,” “honoring the collective” and not standing “idly by the blood of your neighbor.”

Barnes has continued to engage with the Jewish community since entering politics,

but the lieutenant governor said he has often been dismayed by the circumstances of his meetings amid rising incidents of antisemitism across the state.

"We're not building real inroads right now," Barnes argued. "Of course, we're standing together in community, which we should do. But the more that we do when it's not a tragedy, the better off we'll be, the less we'll see these things happening. That's what it comes down to, like genuinely working to build those bridges, to have those conversations, to develop understanding."

Several Wisconsin Jewish leaders say they are unclear on where Barnes stands on the Middle East and Israel, which has become something of a litmus test for progressive Democrats who have veered sharply toward the critical end of the political spectrum.

Moshe Katz, the immediate past chairman of the Milwaukee Jewish Federation, said he had met Barnes on a few different occasions over the years. "He is extremely likable, and I underline likable," he told JI. "He's funny. He's got a great sense of humor. He's extremely bright. He's well-spoken. He is a potentially really great representative of Milwaukee." But Katz, who says he is now supporting Lasry as well as Steven Olikara, a political activist in Milwaukee, remains unsure of Barnes's foreign policy views. "I am a little concerned because he is affiliated with much of that progressive side, and I don't know what that means," he told JI. "I want to see some of his policy statements. I have not seen them yet. That will help me make the decision one way or the other."

While J Street asked that candidates submit position papers on Israel as part of its approval process, the Barnes campaign declined to make one available for JI. But in the interview in Washington as well as a series of follow-up questions conducted via email, Barnes laid out his broad-strokes approach to Middle East foreign policy. His views, in part, are informed by a trip he took to Israel in 2012, after his election to the Assembly but before he assumed office, on an African-American leadership tour sponsored by the AIPAC-affiliated

American Israel Education Foundation.

"It gave me a perspective," Barnes said. "You know how it is. You read, watch the news, but I had a chance to go there and see a lot for myself, to develop a certain understanding. It was the AIPAC-tilt trip, so it was a little bit different than where I'd normally be. But it was good to be there and to hear that perspective." He said he had been in Israel when the United Nations Authority nonmember observer state status. "I personally thought it was a good thing," Barnes told JI. "But people on the trip didn't."

Barnes would not reveal whether he has had more recent conversations with AIPAC. A spokesperson for AIPAC did not confirm whether the group had reached out to Barnes.

In conversation, Barnes suggested that he would take a somewhat more balanced approach to the Jewish state than might be expected of a candidate who identifies with some of the most vocal Israel critics in the House. He says he opposes the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement targeting Israel, for instance, and supports additional funding for Israel's Iron Dome missile-defense system that is currently stalled in the Senate.

But Barnes admits to some reservations over how the Iron Dome supplemental aid was introduced. "That vote was taken out of a larger package, and it was pretty hasty, and it was also in the middle of us figuring out infrastructure, still figuring out Build Back Better," he said. "Personally, military spending is something that's always difficult for me, just in general. Like, I think about communities and community development, just things that aren't happening here domestically."

"Now, I get it," Barnes clarified. "This is to defend Israel against many threats that do exist around it. Understood. And I support it."

Broadly speaking, Barnes said he will always support funding for Israel "that goes toward legitimate security purposes," as he wrote in a recent email exchange with JI. "I want to ensure that no American taxpayer dollars go toward activity that violates human rights, including the demolition of homes, forced evacuations or promoting

new settlements."

But Barnes was less forthcoming about how he would do that. Some House members have, with varying degrees of specificity, called for conditioning U.S. aid to Israel that is guaranteed in a 10-year memorandum of understanding between the two countries. Last spring, Sanders sought to block an arms sale to Israel but abandoned the effort after he learned that the deal had already been finalized, according to a Senate aide who spoke with *The Wall Street Journal*. In April, Rep. Betty McCollum (D-MN) sponsored a bill that would place restrictions on American military assistance for the Jewish state. And J Street now advocates for placing what it describes as "end-use restrictions" on U.S. aid to Israel.

Barnes, who said he had not read McCollum's bill, was otherwise reticent on what approach he would take.

"I believe that true friendship between the United States and Israel means speaking out, clearly and directly, when the policies of the Israeli government undermine the values that connect us and our own national security interests," Barnes told JI. "In the Senate, I'll continue to be a friend and ally of Israel, and I'll speak out when I feel our friends take actions that are counter to our interests and to human rights."

As a state elected official, Barnes has rarely commented publicly on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In May, however, amid escalating violence between Israel and Hamas, he weighed in on social media. "Normalize saying Free Palestine," Barnes wrote in a short Twitter thread. "We cannot be more comfortable with chaos and the deaths of innocent children than we are with those two words. There's a lot of history and context, but this approach has not previously brought about a resolution, and it won't now. Innocent people on each side deserve a ceasefire."

Daniel Riemer, a friend of Barnes who serves in the Wisconsin state Assembly, said he took issue with the lieutenant governor's statement, which, like many comments from left-wing progressives at the time, had avoided direct criticism of Hamas. "Let's say I disagree with the way he's talking about it," Riemer, who is Jewish and describes himself as a strong supporter of Israel, told JI.

Despite his disagreement with Barnes's

approach to the conflict, Riemer, who has endorsed the lieutenant governor for Senate, said he was in no way indignant, because he trusts that Barnes is open to engaging in good-faith dialogue on the matter. "I can say sincerely he's a guy where, if I disagreed with him on an issue, including an issue related to Israel, I would still trust him," Riemer said. "I think he's the kind of leader who's not doctrinaire in his positions. I don't think he's too rigid or too wishy-washy."

Elana Kahn, the former director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of the Milwaukee Jewish Federation, got to know Barnes as an organizer early in his career. "My understanding is that he wants to be on the right side of history," said Kahn, who is now the associate dean for outreach at the Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership in Chicago. "He also understands that there's a lot he doesn't know, so he's always been receptive to learning."

Kahn acknowledges that pro-Israel advocates may take issue with Barnes's criticisms, but she believes that they would be making a strategic error by avoiding engagement. "If the Jewish community has a 'you're with us or against us' stance, then we will lose the support of people who otherwise might be able to understand issues with complexity," she argued. "And it is complicated and it is complex."

While most experts agree that Barnes is heavily favored in the primary, there is still much that could change between now and August, according to Barry Burden, a professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "There is a liability to being the frontrunner because it attracts attention and fire from the other candidates," he told JI. "His liabilities are not being fully vetted as a candidate. There may be things that come out that may be hurdles for him."

The GOP, for its part, already appears to be sharpening its knives. "Wisconsin Democrats are tripping over themselves to prove who's more liberal, and Mandela Barnes is no exception," Lizzie Litzow, a spokesperson for the National Republican Senatorial Committee, charged in a feisty email to JI. "He is more worried

about ramming through the Washington Democrats' radical agenda than representing hardworking Wisconsin families. And the company he keeps is just as out of touch. The Barnes Brigade is full of defund-the-police-supporting, Israel-hating, socialism-loving radicals. If Barnes and the Wisconsin Democrat candidates for U.S. Senate continue to cave to Washington liberals and pander to radical liberals, Republicans will be very happy next November."

Anna Kelly, a spokesperson for the Republican Party of Wisconsin, declined to confirm whether Johnson will run again, arguing instead that Barnes "lacks the seriousness or substance to be a U.S. Senator," as she wrote in an email to JI earlier this week. "Voters will reject his far-left agenda, and grassroots Republicans will support Senator Johnson in whatever choice he makes."

At the birthday celebration in Madison last month, Barnes said that he is anticipating such attacks. "Republicans are going to throw whatever they can at us, they are going to say whatever," he told the crowd. "People always ask, 'What are Republicans going to say about you?' *Anything*. When I ran for lieutenant governor, I got accused of kneeling at a public event during the national anthem, which couldn't have been even further from the truth. But it just goes to show what levels they'll stoop to."

"The way we respond back is not by just saying, 'Oh, no,' and 'They're wrong,'" Barnes went on. "We respond by sticking to our message, our positive message, our values, our vision about improving the quality of life for people across the state and across this country."

Those in attendance offered varying reasons for supporting Barnes. "I don't feel represented by our current senator in this seat, and I feel like Mandela is going to represent the average working-class person instead of other millionaires," said Brian Lavendel, 57, a rental property manager in Madison who helped organize the event. "He knows what it's like to live a working-class life and be raised by working-class parents, and unfortunately, I think politicians often forget that."

Michael Traktman, 55, an emergency-room doctor in Madison, said that Barnes "represents the ideals of all the things

that I think are important to people of this community," including environmental advocacy, gun control and healthcare access. "He's doing it for the right reasons," Traktman told JI. "It's obvious. You can't hide that. It's not like there's some sort of financial reason that he's doing it."

But one person wasn't all in — at least not yet. Richard Landay, a flavor chemist for Kerry Ingredients in Beloit, described himself as a Reagan Republican who has been disenchanted with the GOP's right-wing turn under Trump. He had shown up at the event because he was curious if Barnes's campaign would appeal to him.

After the speech, Landay said he had approached Barnes with a straightforward question. "I asked him, with the divisiveness of government right now," Landay recounted, "how would you reach across the aisle and create cooperative government like Reagan had with Tip O'Neill back in the day?"

Barnes's answer, Landay told JI, had been disappointing. "He turned around and said, 'Well, we would get rid of this person, this person, this person, and we would be fine.' It's like, well, that's just a my-way-or-the-highway type of attitude, and that's not what I'm looking for."

Still, while Landay suggested that he was unlikely to vote for Barnes in the primary, his calculus, he said, was different for the general election. "If he gets the nomination," Landay said of Barnes, "I'd definitely vote for him over Ron Johnson at this point." ♦

Tom Friedman contrasts Middle East approaches: ‘Trump did crazy well, Biden doesn’t do crazy’

“‘Crazy’ is a very important strategic verb in that part of the world,” the NY-Times columnist explained on JI’s ‘Limited Liability Podcast’

By Sam Zieve Cohen

New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman warned that President Joe Biden’s perceived inability to “do crazy” could cost him strategically in the Middle East, during an appearance on *Jewish Insider’s* “Limited Liability Podcast.”

“‘Crazy’ is a very important strategic verb in that part of the world,” Friedman explained to co-hosts Richard Goldberg and Jarrod Bernstein. “The Iranians always think that they can out-crazy you. One thing they know: They can’t out-crazy the Israelis. Hezbollah learned that in 2006 and so did Hamas. Basically, they cannot play the Israelis.”

Friedman contrasted Biden’s approach with that of former President Donald Trump: “Trump’s greatest advantage as a president was he’s the first president we’ve had in a long time who did crazy really well,” he noted, adding “Biden just doesn’t do crazy really well. He just doesn’t do crazy.”

Friedman’s appearance on the show followed his recent column calling the Trump administration’s decision to leave the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran, “one of the dumbest, most poorly thought out and counterproductive U.S. national security decisions of the post-Cold War era.”

“I thought it was just a giant strategic error that [Israeli Prime Minister] Bibi Netanyahu co-authored,” Friedman said of the decision to leave the JCPOA. “Everyone knows now that the Israeli military was not comfortable with this, but all of them were really afraid to speak up while Bibi was there. And now, after he’s gone, you see everybody’s coming out of the woodwork — Bogie [Ya’alon], the [former] chief of staff — and all saying ‘we knew this was stupid.’”

At the time of the withdrawal from the

JCPOA, Friedman admitted, he offered a more sanguine assessment. “If you read my reporting on Trump, anytime he’s done something I thought was right I supported it — UAE deal most notably, and I would support him on things on China. So I was just watching to see what they would do. I said, ‘I wouldn’t have done that. But maybe they’ve got a strategy.’ It turned out he had no strategy at all.”

Offering what he would have done instead, Friedman argued, “The right strategy, and I argued this at the time, would have been to go to the Iranians, it seems to me, and say, ‘I will lift the sanctions, may even throw some sweeteners in, but we want to extend the deal to 25 years.’”

Earlier in the conversation, Friedman, who won three Pulitzer Prizes early in his career for his reporting from Beirut for UPI and Jerusalem for the Times, considered his trajectory as a Minnesota Jew to the epicenters of Middle East and foreign policy reporting. “This was 1979. That’d be very important. They’re vintage years in history, just like there are vintage wines, where the first two stories I cover are the Iranian revolution, and the takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in Saudi Arabia,” Friedman said of his first assignment in Beirut, for UPI. “Little do I know [at the time] that those two stories will shape the region and really my whole career for the next 40 years.”

By the time he moved to the Times two years later, Friedman had established himself as a Middle East correspondent. But that did not fully qualify him in the eyes of his new editors.

“It was not easy because at that time *The New York Times* wouldn’t send a Jew to Israel, let alone a Jew to the Arab world,” Friedman recalled, citing a longstanding taboo in the newsroom that considered

it difficult for a Jewish reporter to remain objective covering the Middle East.

“I had to persuade Abe Rosenthal, who was an executive editor, who literally said to me, ‘How do I send a Jew to Beirut?’ I said, ‘Well, the good news is, I’ve already done it, because UPI had done that,’” Friedman remembered.

Jarrod: Let’s start with St. Louis Park Minnesota. Prominent Minnesotans appear to be having a moment in American foreign policy. Tom Nides is the new ambassador to Israel. Jake Sullivan is the national Security Advisor. Denis McDonough is the secretary of Veterans Affairs. Of course you are the chronicler of the Middle East among other pressing foreign policy matters. The question we all had, what’s with the water in Minnesota that you and all these individuals are growing up?

Tom: Yes. I told this story in my last book. Thank you for being late. Basically, in Minneapolis, the Jews, after immigration, firstly, all in the north side of the city with the Black community. In fact, it was Jewish Black ghetto, the north side. I was born probably three miles from where George Floyd was killed. After World War II, the Jews were able to escape. The Blacks couldn’t. There are too many housing restrictions. The Jews wasn’t so easy to escape because there are a lot of housing restrictions against Hebrews in some of the surrounding suburbs. There was one suburb called St. Louis Park that had enough housing and didn’t have housing covenants.

Basically, in a period of about three or four years, an entire Jewish community moved from the north side of the city to

one suburb called St. Louis Park, a suburb that had been 100% Swedish, 99% German, Scandinavian and Catholic became overnight basically, 20% Jewish and 80% Scandinavian, and German, and Protestant Catholic. If Sweden and Israel had a baby, it would've been St. Louis Park.

[chuckles]

Rich: That's probably a very tasty meatball.

Tom: Exactly. Out of that mix emerged an incredible creative explosion. I went to Hebrew school, a high school or lived in the same basic neighborhood with Al Franken, Norm Ornstein, Michael Sandel from Harvard, Peggy Orenstein, the writer, [unintelligible 00:04:05] the guitarist, the Coen Brothers. The Coen Brothers' movie, *A Serious Man* was about St. Louis Park. The Coen Brothers compared it that town in Transylvania, where all the Draculas came

from. It was just postwar, it's like the Jews were shot out of a cannon and unleashed. We were fortunate to live in this really pluralistic environment with all these suites, and we really appreciate that pluralism. They appreciate our neurotic obsession with education. Out of it came a really interesting synthesis.

Rich: We actually found this incredible 1986 profile of you in the *LA Times* of then 32 year-old time Tom Friedman. You grew up, you talked about this Jewish household, this Jewish neighborhood, you went on family trips to Israel, lived on a kibbutz, speaking fluent Hebrew. Talk to us about the role Judaism, Israel played during your childhood.

Tom: Can't speak fluent Hebrew. In Minneapolis, we all grew up, all of us went to the St. Louis Park Talmud Torah. This will be hard to for your kids to believe. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, you walked

out of elementary school to the Hebrew bus that was waiting and took you to Hebrew school four nights a week, count them, one, two, three, four nights a week and Sunday morning for five years till your Bar Mitzvah.

I grew up in that conservative Jewish environment. What really had the biggest impact on me, there's a very vibrant summer Jewish camp in the Minnesota, Wisconsin area called Herzl Camp in Webster, Wisconsin where Bob Dylan also went. It was a Zionist summer camp. We enacted the Dreyfus trial every summer. I got to be the French officer once ripped off Dreyfus' epaulettes and broke his sword. It really instilled a strong affection and identity with Israel in me before I ever went there. It really started there because I basically went to Herzl Camp for five years, took a year off, and then lived in kibbutz for three years. There was a continuum there that was very much part of my education. ♦

DECEMBER 16, 2021

From start-up nation to foodtech destination

How Israel is positioning itself as a world leader in the production of alternative and novel food technology

By Ruth Marks Eglash

In a small laboratory on the 10th floor of a glassy office building overlooking the Israeli city of Ra'anana, food technician Maia Schick is busy cooking up new recipes using proteins developed from plants. A few miles away, in Petah Tikva, biochemist Yaron Aviv spends his days testing and tasting water extracted from humidity.

Both scientists are part of a quiet but tasty revolution taking place in Israel.

Aimed at addressing the wider global climate crisis and reducing humanity's carbon footprint, the once-fledgling fields of food science technology (foodtech) and agricultural technology (agritech) are booming in Israel and, experts say, set to grow exponentially in the coming years as the Jewish state tries to position itself

as a leader in the space where food and technology meet.

Food has always been a fundamental part of Israeli culture. Whether in battles over fare brought by various immigrant groups to the country or the centrality of food in Jewish festivals and celebrations or even disputes with regional neighbors over national dishes, eating is what Israelis do.

Water has always been of prime concern too. With little natural resources and a severe shortage, some believe it is this dearth that has propelled Israelis to seek creative alternatives and innovative solutions that will help sustain them.

In the lab in Ra'anana, Schick, a recent food science graduate, is a food technologist for Innovopro. She is exploring ways to use chickpea protein in various recipes.

The ingredient, CP-Pro-70, is produced by Innovopro, a company already considered a veteran in the field of plant-based alternative proteins and one that has raised at least \$23 million in investments.

"We have the magic chip that allows food companies to create diverse products such as yogurts, mayonnaise, chocolate, eggs and meat," the company's CEO, Taly Nechushtan, told Jewish Insider in a recent interview. Experiments are also underway, she said, to use what she calls "the secret sauce" to create ice cream and even cheddar cheese.

Founded in 2015, Innovopro, said Nechushtan, wants to inspire people to live healthier by providing tasty alternatives to standard food staples, which drain the environment and which scientists and

politicians warn could soon be in short supply globally.

One of 50 winners of this year's United Nations "Good Food For all Competition," Innovopro is among more than 100 Israeli companies active in the alternative-protein industry, according to figures from the Good Food Institute Israel (GFI), a nonprofit aiming "to develop a roadmap for a sustainable, secure and just supply of proteins." (There are another 150 companies involved in other aspects of food and agricultural technology.)

Alla Voldman, director of strategic alliances for GFI, told JI that Israeli researchers currently draw at least a quarter of global investments seeking to develop the foodtech industry – an incredible achievement, she said, for such a small country.

"Israel is a global innovation leader in alternative proteins," stated Voldman, adding that it has been particularly prominent in the development of cultivated meat – or meat grown using a biopsy from a live animal.

She said that scientific research in these fields has been going on for many years in Israel and now is being directly translated into the food industry. With increasing interest and support from the government, Voldman said, Israel's local foodtech industry is one that competes with the United States, Singapore and the Netherlands, and is drawing interest and investments from well-known food manufacturers around the world.

Israel's Innovation Authority is the public agency responsible for fostering the development of industrial R&D in the country. It has been involved in growing the foodtech sector since the start, Anya Eldan, vice president of the agency's Startup Division, told JI.

"Foodtech is based on technology and many of those working in research never even thought to apply their skills and knowledge to food," said Eldan, explaining how seven years ago the agency set up an incubator program that brought together scientists working in biotechnology and food companies.

"Israel is a small country and there is deep government support for the local food industry," she continued, adding that since

then, there has been a sharp growth in the number of companies established in this field and a dramatic increase in investors looking to partner with the government and invest.

One enthusiastic investor is Erel Margalit, a former Knesset member and the founder and executive chairman of Jerusalem Venture Partners. Earlier this year, he opened Margalit Startup City Galil in the northern Israeli city of Kiryat Shmona – a first-of-its-kind center dedicated to bolstering the country's foodtech sector by drawing on the area's agriculture and educational institutions."

"If cyber is a big revolution for the technology people or the banks, foodtech is a big revolution for the people," Margalit said in an interview. "It will change the way people eat, and people's culture is really connected to their food."

Margalit said that for the revolution to be successful, it needs to pull together a range of different elements from alternative food development and production to smarter packaging and sustainable agriculture adapted for different settings and technology.

"In order to do it right, there needs to be cooperation, a public-private partnership," he observed, adding that world leaders were beginning to understand that "food and agriculture are probably the next big things that will make a difference [to the environment]."

In Petach Tikva, the state-of-the-art lab where Yaron Aviv tests water from humidity belongs to Watergen, a company made famous by former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who liked to boast that Israelis had learned to make water from air.

The company's patented technology is certainly impressive and is already providing clean drinking water to communities in more than 80 countries and territories worldwide, including in the Gaza Strip. The water is produced and contained in several different devices for use at home, in offices or for entire rural communities. Its latest innovation is a mobile unit that fits neatly atop a car and provides up to 50 liters of water by sucking in the air while in transit.

"We are convinced that in Israel we possess a unique human potential," Watergen's president and co-CEO, Dr.

Michael Mirilashvili, told JI. "Despite its small size, the young state of Israel has become home to numerous innovative projects that have changed the world."

The company's co-CEO, Michael Rutman, added, "We don't have water resources in Israel and water is one of the essentials; that is what drives all Israelis to think creatively about water solutions."

Rutman said that old water-producing solutions such as desalination are no longer viable in the face of climate change, while Watergen's system causes no known damage to the environment. The next step, he said, is to find a way to mass-produce this water for commercial use.

"There's still a lot of research that needs to be done," GFI's Voldman said.

"The challenge we will face soon is how much of this industry will remain in Israel," admitted Eldan. "History has shown us that every time a new sector starts here, the ideas are eventually taken to the U.S., where they can become multimillion-dollar businesses."

She said Israel was working on ways to ease regulations and create an infrastructure so companies can remain researching, developing and producing here.

In the meantime, Ido Yosovzon, who heads the AgriFood-Tech sector at Start-Up Nation Central, a nonprofit that helps to showcase Israeli innovation, said the sector was still growing fast in Israel, with some 250 companies working on various aspects of innovation, and that the future of alternative and novel foods was bright in Israel and worldwide.

"There is a big ecosystem that will benefit from these changes," he said. "Foodtech is here to stay, and it is just a matter of time before it becomes something we all get used to seeing on our supermarket shelves." ♦

Spoon U founder Sarah Adler Hartman brings innovation to the Times

The entrepreneur in residence at the NYT launched her career as an undergraduate at Northwestern University

By Gabby Deutch

As the entrepreneur in residence at the paper of record, Sarah Adler Hartman has a broad mandate: get kids hooked on *The New York Times*.

The Times has been doing that with grown-ups for years. Following an ambitious announcement in 2016 that the paper would grow from 1.6 million subscriptions to 10 million subscriptions by 2025, it announced in August that it had notched eight million print and digital subscriptions for the first time.

Since 2017, the children of some of the paper's most fervent readers — subscribers to its hefty Sunday print edition — have had access to a once-monthly insert in the Sunday *Times* called *The New York Times for Kids*.

The kids' section has won design awards for its eye-popping page layouts. One cover from August 2019 proclaims, "How to Survive Going Back to School" above a large graphic of a school building, full of the chaos and excitement of the first day of school, depicted in cartoons in muted pastels. "This section should not be read by grown-ups," an editor's note warns.

Hartman was hired to build on the kids' print edition and hook kids on journalism with entrepreneurial digital products. She understands that "entrepreneur in residence" is a cool, if unusual, title to hold at a newspaper. "Every time I introduce myself, I have to, like, stop myself from using air quotes in my title," she joked to *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview.

The Times brought her onboard just weeks after she sold her own digital news brand that she had built, which started as a college publication and later became a successful venture-backed startup.

She created Spoon University, a digital

food publication for college students, as an undergraduate at Northwestern University. The publication began as a print magazine, eventually pivoting to digital.

"It covered everything from recipes that kids could make in their dorm rooms or their first apartment, to restaurant reviews in their college towns, to thoughtful pieces on how food fit into their lives," she said. By the time she left the publication in 2019, it had chapters at more than 200 colleges.

Hartman grew up in Austin, Texas, a city with a reputation for innovation, entrepreneurship and creativity. But her childhood felt far away from the excitement of the city's hundreds of music venues, barbecue joints and art studios.

"I definitely didn't go to South By [Southwest] as a kid," Hartman said. "I wasn't really exposed to startup stuff until I got to college."

At Northwestern, Hartman started Spoon University with her friend Mackenzie Barth, at what feels like an entirely different age in journalism. "It was supposed to be just a magazine, because we loved making a print thing and feeling that in our hands," explained Hartman, who served as Spoon's chief technology officer, "but we moved it online because we had such a big team and so much content was being produced that we needed more places to put it."

Their initial goal was not the nationwide expansion that followed, or any kind of monetization. Spoon University was a publication by and for Northwestern students, one of the countless student-run publications where aspiring reporters, editors and designers could try their hand at real journalism at a university known for its award-winning journalism school.

But when the publication went online, friends — and then strangers — from other

universities across the country began to notice it.

"We helped a couple of them start chapters," Hartman recalled. "Then we had an interesting thought that there might actually be something there. And so we spent the summer after we graduated trying to spend some time just seeing if we could potentially build a business."

The value for students was twofold, Hartman argued. "It was just a really good opportunity for kids to teach each other the really valuable skills that you don't actually learn about how to grow up" — things like cooking and picking a restaurant on a budget. There was also a leadership component. "It helped these kids start something bigger than themselves and learn what it was like to organize meetings and organize a content calendar with their peers, and try to be a leader, like earn respect and authority," she said.

In the span of just a couple of years, Hartman and Barth had gone from sorority sisters to best friends and Birthright Israel participants to New York City roommates and business partners. After graduating from Northwestern in 2013, they had to pitch investors who were, at first, skeptical.

"It was before the whole Instagram foodie movement was happening," said Hartman. "People weren't taking photos of their food and posting them online yet. We were telling people that that was starting to happen, and trying to show them stats from Instagram and hashtags to prove that that was a thing."

Two years after graduating, they secured \$2.5 million in funding, and in 2017, Scripps Networks acquired the brand, valued then at \$10 million. But not long after, Discovery acquired Scripps, changing the landscape for Spoon University.

“They were so distracted handling the Discovery acquisition that happened months after our acquisition that there was probably almost a year there where, like, they lost track of us and didn’t even know where we were,” Hartman noted.

She ended up as the vice president for product in charge of food, a role that also covered the Food Network. But after Discovery sold Spoon University to Her Campus, a women’s media brand for college students, she left the publication she had created.

There is an “existential angst that you feel when your identity is so wrapped up in this thing that you’re building, that you don’t even know where it ends and you begin at the end of the day,” Hartman said. “I think that there are a lot of benefits to having a job that’s a little bit less tied to your identity than that, even if that also means that you have a little bit less ownership.”

Hartman began getting interested in childrens’ content while at the Food

Network — she wasn’t feeling creatively fulfilled, so she began taking a class on how to make toys.

“I was trying to figure out, aside from having this thing be entirely mine, what can help me feel motivated and creative and feel a sense of wonder every day?” she explained. “I just totally fell in love with the category and believe that it was really underserved [in the news space]. There’s a lot of low-quality stuff made for kids that’s condescending, or kind of just not high-quality.”

The New York Times agrees with her. The paper also sees children as a vast untapped market.

“The goal was to create more standalone subscription offerings for *The New York Times*. They have the Cooking app and the Games app,” Hartman explained. “They were looking to create more apps like that, that could be in new categories as potential subscription products.”

David Perpich, head of standalone products at *The Times*, told *Axios* in

February that there are 33 million families with children in the United States. “That’s a large number of people we can create something of value for,” he said.

The Times “wanted me to figure out what digital product we could build to capitalize on what’s beloved about that print section [for kids]. So it was a really broad mandate,” Hartman explained. “We now are working on a beta version of an iPad app with a concept called ‘NYT How To.’ So it’s how to do almost anything: how to bake a cookie pizza, or the best paper airplane according to NASA. Super wide range of content, from stuff that’s happening in the world to crafts.”

Hartman is someone who could probably benefit from the basic, kid-friendly recipes on the app, despite her years helping run a food website.

“I never cooked. The joke at Spoon was that I had a freezer full of Lean Cuisines,” Hartman recalled. “I actually didn’t start cooking until the pandemic, but now I cook all the time.” ♦

DECEMBER 16, 2021

Still pressing the fight for press freedom

As he steps down after 25 years at the Committee to Protect Journalists, Joel Simon is taking his advocacy work to academia

By Matthew Kassel

When Joel Simon took a job with the Committee to Protect Journalists as a program coordinator in 1997, there was a widespread sense that the depredations of the 20th century were finally coming to an end. “Liberal democracy had triumphed, and there was this new technology emerging called the internet that was going to make censorship obsolete,” he recalled in an interview with *Jewish Insider*. “There was a lot of optimism in the air.”

Within just a year, Simon’s outlook had worsened, particularly amid an upsurge in violence in Latin America — where he had previously worked as a freelance journalist — including attacks on friends and peers that had lent a painful personal dimension

to an increasingly challenging role.

Simon took over as CPJ’s executive director in 2006, and as he prepares to step down at the end of the month after 25 years with the world’s leading press freedom advocacy organization, founded in 1981, he is dismayed to report that the situation has in many ways never been worse.

“We’re not where we expected to be a quarter-century later,” Simon told *Ji*. “There are more journalists in prison around the world than at any time since CPJ has been documenting that phenomenon. Every indicator suggests that press freedom is in decline.”

More broadly, he said, democracy is waning across the globe, and while technology has “certainly liberated information,” it has largely failed to deliver

on its initial promise and instead has empowered authoritarian governments and other “enemies of press freedom and free expression.”

Simon, who is in his mid-50s, announced that he would be stepping down from his post last June. His decision, he said, was motivated by a number of considerations, one being that he feared burning out in a position that has become more demanding than ever in recent years.

“We’re not making the kind of progress we need to make,” he said, “and I think the horizon you need to really think creatively about how to change the situation is a longer horizon than I was prepared to give to CPJ at this stage of my life.”

After nearly three decades in the trenches, Simon was also yearning to take

on some of the long-term challenges that he has been incapable of addressing while dealing with “one crisis after the next” in his current role.

Next year, with support from the Ford Foundation, he will finally get that chance. Simon is joining the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University as a fellow, where he will conduct research with the ultimate aim of creating a global press freedom center at an academic institution in the United States.

“I feel that movements are really strong when they have strong institutions,” he said of the reason for his upcoming project. “There are some deficiencies in that realm.”

In another role at Columbia, Simon will also be a senior visiting fellow at the Knight First Amendment Institute.

In April, Simon will release a new book, *The Infodemic: How Censorship and Lies Made the World Sicker and Less Free*, co-written with Robert Mahoney.

“The pandemic accelerated all of these negative trends in the sense that it created an opportunity for governments around the world to simultaneously crack down on a narrative that governments wanted to suppress,” Simon told JI. “That COVID was a grave threat to public health and that the governments in most instances were inadequate.”

Simon told JI that he has not been directly involved in the transition process at CPJ but has provided input when needed. “My understanding is that things are going well,” he said, “and I think an announcement will be made soon.”

As he looks out on the press freedom landscape, Simon describes a “diminished U.S. influence and leverage” that is in some ways “a legacy of” former President Donald Trump, whose attacks on the media were unrelenting throughout his four years in office. But there are many other reasons, Simon told JI. “Trump was definitely a symptom of the disease rather than the cause.”

“China’s power is rising and illiberal forces in the world are in ascent,” he said. “Democracy is not as robust and not as appealing as it once was.”

His comments were echoed by the two journalists, Maria Ressa and Dmitri A. Muratov, who received the Nobel Peace

Prize last week, warning in their acceptance speeches that democracy is under threat.

In Simon’s view, President Joe Biden has had something of a mixed record on press issues during his first year in office. The outgoing CPJ executive gave credit to the Justice Department for what he characterized as a “big and important commitment” to refrain from subpoenaing journalists in leak investigations.

On the other hand, Simon was alarmed by the Biden administration’s response to a U.S. intelligence report, released in February, that implicated Saudi Prince Mohammed Bin Salman in the 2018 assassination of *Washington Post* journalist Jamal Khashoggi. “I call Trump an accessory after the fact to that murder, because I think he assisted in the cover-up, and we really thought that Biden might hold the Saudis accountable,” Simon told JI. “That did not happen.”

The disorderly withdrawal from Afghanistan last summer, Simon argued, was another mark against the current president’s press freedom credentials. “We certainly thought that there should be a concerted effort made to protect Afghans whose lives were at risk because they supported democracy in Afghanistan, including journalists, and we saw none of that,” he said. “That was very disappointing.”

Even before the military evacuation, Simon had been loudly advocating for protecting the lives of vulnerable Afghan journalists as the country was poised to be overtaken by the Taliban.

Simon has known many journalists who have been killed for doing their jobs. “I’ve had this happen on a number of occasions: you meet these courageous journalists, and they’re going out there and doing this amazing, courageous work, and they will not be deterred, and the only way to stop them is to kill them,” he said. “And that just happens. You lose friends, you lose people you admire for their courage.”

In spite of what looks like a grim forecast for journalists, Simon argued that there is still reason to remain hopeful. “If you have a long enough view and you recognize precisely what’s at stake, then you can totally imagine a scenario in which things are different and things are better,” he said. “That’s certainly how I feel.”

But even if that weren’t the case, Simon suggested that the work is enough to keep him going.

“The optimism attached to this is why we fight for this, because it’s so important, and it matters so much, and it matters so deeply,” he told JI. “It’s not really attached to ‘the situation is wonderful’ or ‘it’s going to improve.’ It’s more a recognition of what’s at stake and why the fight is worth it — and frankly, I want to engage with the struggle in a different way. But I want to stay in it.” ♦

'No timelines' on adding Israel to Visa Waiver Program, senior DHS official says

Israeli Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked claimed the country would be added by 2023

By Gabby Deutch

There are “no timelines announced” on when Israel will be added to the U.S. Visa Waiver Program, Department of Homeland Security Under Secretary for Policy Rob Silvers told *Jewish Insider* on Friday, adding that including Israel in the program is a “high priority” for the department.

“We strongly support Israel’s efforts to join the Visa Waiver Program. We can’t think of a more exciting result than welcoming Israel into the program,” Silvers noted. “To do that, it will have to meet all the requirements for program participation.”

Silvers’s comments follow those made by Israeli Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked, who said in November that she expects Israel to be added to the program by 2023. Shaked discussed the issue with Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas and Silvers in Washington last month.

Senior officials from DHS and Israel’s Interior Ministry have been in negotiations about how Israel can comply with the legal requirements to join the program, which would allow Israelis to travel to the U.S. without a visa.

One key issue is reciprocity, which requires Israel to allow all American citizens to enter Israel — including those of Palestinian descent, who have sometimes experienced difficulty entering and leaving the country.

“We will continue to work with Israel towards fulfilling the reciprocity requirements for Americans seeking to enter or transit to Israel,” Silvers explained, adding that the provision requires “equal treatment of all Americans.”

“At this point, the Israelis, we think, understand what the program rules are, and we’re going to work with them to evaluate

their proposals for how to get there.”

“It’s a really high priority for us to make it happen as soon as possible,” said Silvers. “I expect you’ll see a continued very high-level diplomatic engagement between our department and the government of Israel to continue working on this in the coming months.”

The percentage of rejected Israeli visa applicants also remains too high, presenting another challenge. Federal law states that countries can only be added to the Visa Waiver Program when the U.S. rejects 3% or less of visa applications, and figures from the State Department show that the most recent visa refusal rates for Israel were 6.52% in 2020 and 5.33% in 2019.

“We’ve been working actually very closely and productively with both our embassy and in Jerusalem, and also with our Israeli government counterparts to understand what might be driving their visa refusal numbers, and if there are ways that together, we can drive those numbers down in an appropriate way,” said Silvers, who also held roles at DHS during the Obama administration.

Prior to joining the Biden administration, Silvers served on a National Security Advisory Council convened by the Secure Community Network, a nonprofit dedicated to the safety and security of Jewish organizations.

Major American Jewish organizations have lobbied to increase funding for the federal Nonprofit Security Grant Program, which gives nonprofits funds to use for security needs, from the current \$180 million to \$360 million. The Federal Emergency Management Agency, which oversees the program, approved less than half of grant applications this year. (If passed, the Build Back Better bill will add \$100 million to the

program.)

During his Senate confirmation hearing in May, Silvers expressed a commitment to strengthening the program. “I absolutely commit to you that if I am confirmed, I will work to strengthen the Nonprofit Security Grant Program in any way I can, and even further,” he said in response to a question from Sen. Jacky Rosen (D-NV).

DHS did not request a specific funding amount for the program in this year’s budget. “The program has grown and that we’ve expressed a support for it to continue to grow,” Silvers said.

“I think when I left the department, it was like \$25 million or something like that. So it’s really grown, and we’re constantly evaluating whether we should advise further growth,” Silvers noted.

Silvers served as Assistant Secretary of Homeland Security for cyber policy from 2016 to 2017, capping off six years and several different roles at DHS under Obama. He will be a keynote speaker at Cybertech Global’s Tel Aviv conference in January.

“The Israeli cyber ecosystem is unique and incredible,” Silvers said. “They’ve been great partners of ours in cybersecurity, and while there, [I’m] looking forward to engaging with Israeli government counterparts and industry as well.” ♦

In a first, AIPAC to enter campaign politics

The pro-Israel lobbying group is launching a PAC and Super PAC, it announced Thursday

By Marc Rod

AIPAC, the Washington-based pro-Israel lobbying group, will wade directly into campaign politics for the first time in its nearly 60-year history with the launch of a new political action committee (PAC) and Super PAC, the organization announced Thursday morning.

“The creation of a PAC and a Super PAC is an opportunity to significantly deepen and strengthen the involvement of the pro-Israel community in politics,” AIPAC spokesperson Marshall Wittmann told *Jewish Insider*. “The PACs will work in a bipartisan way.”

AIPAC President Betsy Berns Korn said in a statement that the move was

prompted by “profound change” in “the D.C. political environment,” including “hyper-partisanship, high congressional turnover, and the exponential growth in cost of campaigns.” The group is set to support both incumbent members and candidates.

An AIPAC official told JI that the group’s national director for progressive engagement, Marilyn Rosenthal, will lead the new PAC and its political director, Rob Bassin, will lead the Super PAC.

The official added that AIPAC’s membership has “significantly increased” to 1.5 million amid a recent push into the digital space.

The PAC will be called AIPAC PAC (the PAC in AIPAC stands for Public Affairs

Committee), and the Super PAC’s name has not yet been announced.

PACs and Super PACs are both able to raise and spend money on elections; PACs can directly donate up to \$5,000 to candidates they support, while Super PACs cannot directly coordinate with candidates or parties but can raise and spend unlimited amounts of money in support of or opposition to particular candidates.

AIPAC’s foray into campaigning comes as other pro-Israel campaign organizations have taken outsized roles in hotly contested elections in recent years in attempts to support pro-Israel candidates, ward off challengers and unseat incumbents critical of Israel. ♦