

## THE WEEKLY PRINT

*Pocan pokes Israel — but where are his constituents? ; In Jerusalem, an ancient site undergoes renovations with modern technology; Joshua Malina speaks out; Nicaragua slammed for hosting Iranian official wanted in Argentina Jewish center bombing; Biden administration takes Trump admin to task on Iran; In suburban Detroit, Stevens-Levin matchup suggests a test of candidates' Israel policies; and Michigan redistricting sets up close races across the state*

JANUARY 13, 2022

## Pocan pokes Israel — but where are his constituents?

*Pocan's constituents have noticed the Wisconsin congressman has, in recent months, wagered a significant share of his political capital on Middle East issues*

By Matthew Kassel

Last May, as mounting tensions over Israel reached a climax within the Democratic Party, Rep. Mark Pocan (D-WI), the veteran lawmaker who had recently concluded a two-term run co-chairing the Congressional Progressive Caucus, stepped into the fray as an unofficial ringleader among the vocal contingent of high-profile House members who have forcefully criticized the Jewish state.

Diplomats and analysts monitoring the 13-month-long civil war in Ethiopia, a fight between

With competing factions of mainstream and far-left lawmakers poised to address the escalating conflict between Israel and Hamas in a series of unusually acrimonious floor speeches, Pocan took action to ensure his side would not be outdone as he organized an hour-long special session that would amount to an extraordinary rebuke of America's closest ally in the Middle East.

"No one should have to face the reality of missiles shot at them," Pocan said in his introductory comments before yielding

the microphone to 10 House Democrats who took turns castigating Israel's actions. "Hamas is causing great danger to the very people it purports to want to protect in Gaza by doing so, and those missile attacks should be condemned."

Having dispensed with such concessions, he moved on to his central thesis. "But that doesn't make it a both-sides issue," Pocan declared, decrying Israeli government policies that he described — echoing a sentiment voiced by several hard-left colleagues — as reminiscent of apartheid South Africa. "We must acknowledge and condemn the disproportionate discrimination and treatment that Palestinians face versus others in this region."

Back in his home district, which includes the state capital of Madison as well as its surrounding suburbs, Jordan Loeb, a criminal defense attorney and local Jewish community activist who has previously helped raise money for Pocan's campaign, watched with dismay as the congressman delivered his assessment.

"I just remember it was this really passing

reference to the minimum standards that people shouldn't be blowing up pizza parlors and whatnot and an awful lot of acknowledgment of the Palestinian right to self-determination, which I wholeheartedly support, but no sober assessment of what that actually means," Loeb said in an interview with *Jewish Insider* last month. "Then, quick in the condemnation of Israel."

The hour-long floor session was a "wake-up point" for Loeb, who says he has grown wary of Pocan's combative posture toward Israel, even as they are otherwise in agreement on a host of progressive causes. "I always try, when I hear criticisms of Israel, to be disciplined enough that, before I react, I ask myself, is it bothering me because somebody outside of the tribe is saying it and I don't trust that it's coming from the right place, or is the content itself problematic?" he mused. "I've realized that my reaction to Pocan goes along the lines of a little bit of both."

Following Pocan's demonstration this past spring, Loeb found himself grappling with a nagging question that remains unresolved, not least because of what he

described as a “generalized discomfort” with political headwinds that suggest even balanced support for Israel is now largely unwelcome in progressive circles. “I’m like, ‘Alright, Mark, so what’s your policy here,’” Loeb recalled wondering at the time, “or are you just trying out for one of the seats that’s adjacent to the Squad?”

Loeb isn’t alone among Pocan’s constituents in noticing that the congressman has, in recent months, wagered a significant share of his political capital on Middle East issues as he forms alliances with such prominent Israel critics as Reps. Rashida Tlaib (D-MI), Ilhan Omar (D-MN), Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) and others who make up the tight-knit coalition of powerful lawmakers on the left that is informally known as the Squad.

But while his profile has risen on the national stage, Pocan’s investment in the conflict is garnering mixed reactions at the local level as he risks alienating some Jewish community members who have either supported him or sought engagement in the past but now suspect that his political allegiances have led him astray on Israel and the Middle East.

“It is a very fraught subject, I would say, and an important one, because Mark seems to be key to that left progressive group in the Democratic Party,” David Kopstein, a retired rabbi in Madison, said in an interview with JI. Over the past few years, Kopstein has, on occasion, written emails to Pocan’s office regarding such issues, which he says have gone unreturned. He stopped voting for Pocan in 2020, he said, because of the congressman’s association with some House members who, among other things, have called for boycotting the Jewish state.

Richard Landay, a flavor chemist for Kerry Ingredients who lives in the congressman’s district, said he appreciates Pocan’s advocacy on a range of issues, including that the congressman, who is gay, has positioned himself as a strong supporter of LGBT equality. “But I don’t like his approach with Israel,” he said. “I’m surprised that Pocan, as smart as he is and as caring as he is — because I get the sense that he cares about a lot of stuff — doesn’t look back and understand the whole history,” Landay told JI. “I think a lot of people who have his stance don’t understand the whole history.”

Despite such disagreements, others expressed more favorable views that suggest the local Jewish community in deeply progressive Madison is, in some ways, reckoning with its own internal divisions over Pocan’s approach.

Rabbi Jonathan Biatch of Temple Beth El, a Reform synagogue in Madison with a congregation of approximately 600 families, described Pocan’s position as “one of engaging, being involved, looking at the needs of all the parties that are there and actively trying to make the United States into a just and equal broker in this process,” as he summed it up in an interview. “I think the majority of members feel similarly.”

“He has been unafraid to speak his mind on this,” Matthew Rothschild, the executive director of the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign, in Madison, and the former longtime publisher of *The Progressive* magazine, told JI, while praising the congressman as “more courageous than any other Wisconsin elected official” in his lifetime on matters pertaining to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. “He speaks from his conscience.”

In a recent interview, Pocan said he has long felt as if his positions have put him in somewhat rarefied political territory. “I’ll be honest,” the congressman told JI. “I’m in a bit of a weird, lonely place.”

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Whatever the verdict, the range of opinions underscores the manner in which Pocan has established himself as something of a progressive figurehead whose input on a range of issues is shaping broader policy initiatives within the party.

Now in his 10th year in federal office, Pocan, 57, entered the national spotlight last fall while participating in high-level negotiations over President Joe Biden’s sweeping social spending package that is currently stalled in the Senate. The five-term congressman, who took office in 2013, stepped down from his position atop the House Progressive Caucus in January of 2021 but still holds an emeritus role and continues to lead its influential political action committee.

“It has been striking how much Pocan has been developing a kind of national

policy profile that even goes beyond his district,” said Barry Burden, a professor in the department of political science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. “He’s become a player.”

Beyond his public criticism of Israel, Pocan has, since the May flare-up in Gaza, assumed an increasingly central role in high-profile legislative debates over American foreign policy in the region. Days after his floor speech, for instance, he led a joint resolution with Tlaib and Ocasio-Cortez expressing fierce opposition to a \$735 million weapons sale to Israel. The effort was renewed in September as the trio of lawmakers introduced an amendment to the national defense bill that would prohibit the transaction over Israel’s military actions during the conflict.

In early November, Pocan visited Israel and the Palestinian territories on a widely publicized five-day congressional delegation sponsored by J Street, the left-leaning Israel advocacy group. “We will be watching to make sure no violence occurs this weekend or anytime,” Pocan wrote in social media comments after visiting the Palestinian village of Susya in the West Bank. The congressman posted a photo of himself alongside Rep. Jamaal Bowman (D-NY) and the Palestinian activist Nasser Nawajah, with whom they discussed “Israeli settler violence to his village,” as Pocan wrote in his Twitter missive.

The group of Democratic lawmakers also met with several high-ranking Israeli officials, including Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, Foreign Minister Yair Lapid and President Isaac Herzog. “When he got around to me, he said, ‘You’re the guy who criticizes Israel,’” Pocan recalled of his interaction with Herzog in a recent video interview with the journalist Peter Beinart. “I had to tell him, ‘No, no, actually, you know how sometimes when you have a friend you can say things to them differently because they’re your friend? I’m saying things to you as a friend as opposed to someone we may not know.’”

Throughout his time in Congress, Pocan has occasionally broken ranks with hard-left Democrats on Israel issues. He is against the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement targeting Israel, for example, and, in 2019, voted in favor of a resolution

affirming support for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which was rejected by four Squad members.

To the surprise of some observers familiar with his efforts to place conditions on American military assistance to Israel, Pocan was, perhaps most notably, among the vast majority of Democratic House members who voted in favor of \$1 billion in supplemental funding for Israel's Iron Dome missile-defense system, which passed the House by an overwhelming margin, 420-9, this past September — despite vocal opposition from a small handful of Israel critics with whom the congressman is often aligned.

Such gestures have indicated that Pocan is carving out a path for himself that has at times been distinct from his allies on the progressive left as he balances relationships with a diverse cross-section of Jewish groups at the state and national levels that have his ear, including nonprofit organizations in Madison as well as J Street and Jewish Voice for Peace, the far-left advocacy outfit that supports the BDS movement.

While he has taken heat from pro-Israel advocates, Pocan said he has also faced criticism from the far left for some perceived indiscretions, including his Iron Dome vote. “For some folks who are watching this maybe for the first time in their life, who have come on to this in the last year or two,” he said, “a lot of those folks are some of the most vocal against Iron Dome because they’re just tired of how we’ve had our policy.”

“I have this kind of finessed position, because my main goal is to make sure we don’t have to send American men and women over there in order to risk their lives,” Pocan reasoned, without specifying what kind of scenario would necessitate such an outcome. “I also want to make sure that we have humanitarian conditions and we don’t have loss of life there.”

In conversations with JI, local Jewish leaders applauded Pocan’s support for the Iron Dome, which he says he has long regarded as a vital “de-escalation” tool, while commending his advocacy on a range of constituent-oriented issues that are mostly unrelated to foreign policy, such as combating antisemitism and resettling refugees in the district in partnership with Jewish Social Services of Madison.

Still, some Jewish community members have expressed reservations that, at least when it comes to Israel, Pocan’s more supportive votes have not been reflected in his public engagement on the conflict, according to Jeremy Tunis, an executive committee member with the Jewish Federation of Madison who sits on the organization’s board of directors.

During the federation’s most recent meeting with Pocan, hosted at its headquarters last August, Tunis recalled that some in attendance had raised concerns that the congressman has not gone far enough in either distancing himself from or publicly renouncing instances of inflammatory anti-Israel rhetoric espoused by some members of the Progressive Caucus, including from Tlaib and Omar.

“In the privacy of that meeting, he definitely expressed that he had spoken to them,” Tunis said, though he declined to elaborate aside from noting that Pocan had suggested “he tries to be a bridge between such members” and the White House in order to “resolve occasionally rough patches” when they have emerged, including on Israel.

According to a source who was present at the meeting but asked to remain anonymous because of the sensitive nature of the discussion, attendees presented Pocan with specific quotes from some members that they have found problematic, including Omar’s suggestion, in 2019, that support for Israel is “all about the Benjamins,” which was widely viewed as antisemitic.

Pocan made clear that he did not share the sentiment expressed by Omar, for which she has since apologized, and that such rhetoric was unhelpful, but he was unaware of other comments that were brought up during the discussion, according to the attendee. In the meeting, the source told JI, Pocan also suggested that because English was not Omar’s first language — she was born in Somalia — her comments may sometimes come out in ways that she had not intended.

Matthew Handverger, a spokesperson for Pocan, told JI via email that the congressman “doesn’t recall exactly” the details of the discussion. “It’s consistent with what he’s said,” Handverger added. “He was likely saying it as a way to diffuse

unwarranted anger towards Rep. Omar.”

Notwithstanding such tensions, Tunis emphasized his appreciation that Pocan, unlike some left-wing lawmakers who have resisted engagement with organized Jewish community members in their districts, has remained open to constructive feedback throughout his congressional tenure. “I think he wants to do the right thing,” Tunis said, “to balance a lot of competing interests here in the district and nationally.”

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In the interview with JI, Pocan acknowledged that he had spoken with local Jewish community leaders in Madison this summer. “When I met with them most recently, they’re like, ‘We just wish you’d tweet more,’” he said, “and I did a tweet to make them happy.”

Though Pocan said he could not recall the specifics of the request, he dismissed the matter as relatively inconsequential because his conversations with the federation have, he explained, focused more on domestic issues than foreign policy. “I think there’s some individuals who may have some political leanings,” he told JI. “But that’s not necessarily the mission of that group, which is probably why they don’t reach out as a group very often to me on those things.”

The congressman said he is “very comfortable” with his approach, “because that means I’m probably doing my job the best for someone who looks at this as an outsider.”

Throughout his time in Congress, Pocan has remained active on matters pertaining to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, even as he has upped his engagement over the past year or so. In 2017, he was the lone congressional sponsor of a Capitol Hill briefing “on life for Palestinian children under Israeli military occupation,” as an invitation characterized the event. The following year, Pocan signed a joint letter calling on Israel to allow members of Congress into Gaza after his request for entry had previously been denied during a delegation to the West Bank. In 2019, he was among 17 House Democrats who voted against a resolution condemning BDS.

Still, Pocan, who previously served as a member of the Wisconsin State Assembly between 1999 and 2013 — where he earned

a reputation as something of a bipartisan workhorse — had yet to hash out his views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict before he arrived in Washington. “When he first got to Congress, I don’t think he had a strong position one way or another related to Israel and Palestinian issues,” said Jeff Spitzer-Resnick, a progressive attorney who chairs J Street’s Madison chapter and has known Pocan for years. “I think he’s always been, both domestically and internationally, a human rights activist.”

Pocan describes Madison’s activist community as rather engaged on human rights issues, with sister cities in such far-flung locales as East Timor, Cuba and El Salvador, among other places. One organization has, to some controversy within the district, also long proposed that Madison adopt a formal sister city relationship with the Palestinian city of Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip. “I wound up taking on lots of issues that involve human rights in various places around the globe,” Pocan said.

But even as the congressman has devoted his attention to a number of humanitarian issues, including the war in Yemen, he has often demonstrated that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is among his top priorities. Out of just four international delegations that he has traveled with since entering the House, Pocan said that three have been to Israel and the Palestinian territories. (The other was to Japan.) In what has long been something of a rite of passage for freshman House members, Pocan first visited Israel during his inaugural year in Congress, with an AIPAC-affiliated group.

He made his second trip in 2016, when he participated in a congressional delegation to the West Bank that was hosted by the Humpty Dumpty Institute, a nonprofit public policy organization in New York.

Joseph Merante, the executive director of the Humpty Dumpty Institute, described Pocan as “among the hardest-working” elected officials with whom the group has engaged. “I remember him asking for the most briefing papers, and also he was pushing to do as many appointments a day as possible,” said Merante, who noted that under House ethics regulations, lawmakers who participate in international delegations are required to fill their days with at least six

hours of work. “He was actually asking for nine, 10, 11 hours of appointments,” Merante recalled. “He didn’t want to take any breaks.”

Still, Pocan returned from the trip frustrated that his request to visit Gaza had been denied. He has since vowed, so far unsuccessfully, to enter the region one way or another — even if, as he has indicated, that means entering by way of Egypt.

“We have a moral imperative to have a better grasp of what’s going on on the ground,” he said. “I’ve often taken on issues that, if people aren’t paying attention to them, someone needs to, and in this case, I think, for a very long time, especially when I first got into Congress, no one would question anything about human rights,” particularly for the nearly 2.1 million people in Gaza, he said, who live in “some of the worst humanitarian conditions on the planet.”

During his most recent trip to the region, with J Street, Pocan said he made a request with the Israeli government to visit Gaza, which is controlled by Hamas, but was denied once again, an experience he characterized as inexcusable. In the coming months, Pocan said he will be “cranking up the heat on” the issue. “I think it’s absolutely incredulous that they’re telling members of Congress we’re not allowed to go somewhere where we’re funding both in Gaza and in Israel.”

He plans to take direct action through the House Appropriations Committee, where he is a sitting member, by introducing legislation that, he suggested, would provide him with more leverage. “It’s just saying, anywhere on the globe, if we’re giving funds, which we’re happy to do in many areas, you can’t deny a member of Congress access who’s trying to have oversight functions on the funding,” Pocan said. “Otherwise, I’m going to start saying you don’t fund something if you do get denied,” he added, “because that would be the next logical step.”

All in all, he said his recent visit had left him feeling deflated about the prospects for a two-state solution. “I’m probably more pessimistic than I’ve ever been,” Pocan told JI, “looking at the difficulties on the ground to getting toward the peace that, I think, we all want.”

Though he is relieved that former Israeli

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is no longer in power, Pocan said the new coalition government, which he praised for its diversity, will likely face some challenges when it comes to resolving the conflict. “It’s easier probably to pass a budget than it is to deal with the Palestinian-Israeli issue,” he said.

“It was a rough period when you had Benjamin Netanyahu and Donald Trump,” he recalled. “We all know that. It was a period that made it very difficult, and I guess I’m grateful that that time period is done. But seeing the regression that’s happened during that time period also makes me concerned.”

Pocan is also skeptical that the Palestinian Authority (PA) is capable of rising to the occasion. “The PA doesn’t seem to have a grasp over the Palestinian people, clearly,” he said. “Hamas is the elected, I guess, for lack of a better word, leadership in Gaza, but what I really heard was [that] May brought an uprising of young people who really care, but it’s not coordinated by an individual or organization. It’s just kind of an organic uprising. But that doesn’t necessarily tie into Hamas or the PA. That means, without some greater organization, I don’t know what those next steps are.”

“It’s really on both sides of the conflict,” Pocan concluded, “that I think there’s difficulties moving forward.”

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Pocan, who has no immediate plans to return to the region, has found a receptive audience among many of the politically active voters in his district who are dedicated to Palestinian causes.

Last month, Pocan hosted an hour-long virtual question-and-answer session in which he fielded inquiries about his recent trip to Israel from constituents who expressed overwhelmingly positive assessments of his involvement on the issue. The congressman has said he has received more than 1,000 emails supporting his efforts, far outweighing the estimated 165 messages sent to him from those on the other side of the issue.

Even voters who were randomly surveyed by JI, on an afternoon early last month in downtown Madison, expressed



not only an awareness of Pocan's approach but support as well. "He represents us," Glen Reichelderfer, a pastor at First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha, who lives in the district, said in an interview, noting that Pocan is in many ways continuing a longstanding tradition of progressive foreign policy activism that extends back to the late former Rep. Robert Kastenmeier (D-WI), an early opponent of the Vietnam War. "There's a big heritage of that here."

But some Jewish community members, who take issue with Pocan's views but would nevertheless appreciate conversations with the congressman, have suggested that such advocacy seems to have come at the expense of direct outreach.

Rabbi Betsy Forester of Beth Israel, a Conservative synagogue in Madison that caters to some 280 households, said she has felt relatively little engagement from Pocan, despite her "attempts to nurture a relationship, or at least conversation." Shortly after moving to Wisconsin about three years ago, Forester recalled meeting with the congressman to discuss his approach to Israel. "I found him to be concerned for the plight of the Palestinians, as am I," she said. "However, I did not perceive him to be concerned for Israel, which troubled me."

During the May conflict, Forester added, three of her family members wrote to Pocan

individually, "based on his tweets showing only concern for the Palestinians and no support for Israel." The rabbi, for her part, also reached out to request a "response and dialogue," but neither she nor her family members received a response, she said. "I do not hear members of my community talk about Mr. Pocan's views or any relationships they may have with him," Forester told JI, "even during animated conversations about the Israel-Palestinian conflict."

"There's a multitude of opinions," Pocan said of the pushback he has received from some voters. "However, the vast majority, and by vast I mean, like, 80%, falls pretty closely aligned to the way I talk about the issue."

Such support, he argued, is indicative of a broader national trend in which younger, left-leaning members of Congress who are critical of Israel have found acceptance as public opinion "has significantly moved around human rights in the region."

"I think you've seen that with newer members of Congress, even, that aren't the Squad," Pocan said, adding that "more people are paying attention."

With that in mind, Pocan may benefit from a built-in level of wiggle room on such issues, even as his positions have drawn scrutiny from local Jewish community members who, at an estimated population of 5,000 or so, only make up a fraction of the

district.

"Clearly, Pocan feels comfortable and safe politically tilting left," said Mordecai Lee, a professor of urban planning at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee who previously served in the state legislature. "He's following, generally, where the gentile left has been going."

For his part, Jordan Loeb, the attorney in Madison who watched Pocan's recent floor speech with a sense of alarm, said he believes the congressman is, broadly speaking, "a good representative." He plans to vote for him in the upcoming midterms, where Pocan is up for reelection and is expected to secure another term.

But for the moment, at least, he longer views the congressman with as much enthusiasm as he was once capable of summoning.

"I don't think he's saying the right things if he wants to keep the pro-Israel contingent of progressive Jews," Loeb told JI. "He'll get the progressives that are anti-Israel. He's not going to get the conservatives. But we've got a couple of big races going on in the state right now, so I have a limited amount of money that I contribute to politics, and I'd prefer to write checks to charity, frankly. Where it comes down to is, how eager am I to write another check to Mark Pocan?" ♦

JANUARY 7, 2022

## In Jerusalem, an ancient site undergoes renovations with modern technology

*In the past, the building was just a venue for the museum, but the story of the Tower of David is the story of Jerusalem*

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By Ruth Marks Eglash

When renovations began on Jerusalem's Tower of David Museum in March 2020, those behind the project were excited, not only about creating a new and innovative way to tell the intricate 3,000-year-old story of one of the world's most important cities but also because

it offered a chance to rediscover and carefully preserve Jerusalem's history-filled stones for a new generation.

The museum, which sits inside the iconic citadel adjacent to the Jaffa Gate, is traditionally one of the most visited sites in the Old City, attracting more than 500,000 visitors a year pre-pandemic. Its draw is that

it is perhaps the only spot in the city where the handiwork of every previous ruler is still visible, with well-preserved remnants telling Jerusalem's story — layer by layer — and sweeping panoramic views from atop the ancient Phasael Tower making clear why this location was so essential for those in power.

"It's the highest point in the Old City and very strategic," Caroline Shapiro, director of international public relations for the museum, told Jewish Insider during an exclusive tour of the renovations and preservation efforts this week. "Anyone wanting to defend or rule the city had to do so from here."

Extensive archeological excavations and renovations were carried out at the site before the museum opened in the 1980s, but the methods of conservation and preservation popular at the time were rudimentary and often misguided or insensitive to the techniques and skills of the original builders.

Now, thanks to a \$50 million remodeling project — with funding from Dame Vivien Duffield and the Clore Israel Foundation, the Patrick and Lina Drahi Foundation, the Jerusalem Municipality, the Ministry of Jerusalem and Heritage, the Ministry of Tourism, the American Friends of Museums in Israel and Keren Hayesod — archeologists and conservationists are applying new concepts and new technology to better understand Jerusalem's past and better preserve its venerable architecture for the future.

As curators work to reimagine the museum's main exhibition, moving from a chronologically based story to one with deeper insight into how and why Jerusalem became so instrumental for Jews, Christians and Muslims, and construction crews upgrade lighting, climate, acoustics and accessibility in the multiple halls, a team of archeologists, conservationists, architects and engineers are also present to make sure the ancient infrastructure remains sound and secure.

Yotam Carmel, director of conservation at Ken Hator Engineering Ltd., which is spearheading the project, told JI that operating in such a historical space is about balance and preparing for the unknown.

The overall goal, he said, was finding a way to combine the old with the new by "using the same materials and techniques as the original builders but adding in modern solutions" to repair and safeguard the buildings.

Using high-tech machinery to detect natural erosion or seismic activity within the thick stone walls, Carmel has been

forced to decide what should be maintained and what needs to be replaced. "We've had to negotiate over every single stone," he said, recalling a lengthy debate over a single rotting brick in the Phasael Tower's central foyer.

But the key to preservation, he theorized, was making sure the complex remained relevant. "If a building is being used, then it is better maintained and there is also a better budget for restoration," said Carmel. A structure that is not heated or cooled to present-day standards or is not accessible to accepted levels will stop being used, he explained, and then it will fall into disrepair.

"The world has changed for the better and in order to keep up with that, you have to compromise and sometimes make sacrifices on the original architecture," Carmel said, pointing out the newly constructed elevator shaft that now rises through a gloriously vaulted ceiling to allow people with disabilities to reach the upper level of the tower for the first time.

He said the biggest challenge working on a 2,800-year-old structure — where previous builders built their designs on top of previous structures, utilized rubble left by predecessors, or, in more recent history, obscured or ruined the older infrastructure with more modern materials — was all the unknowns.

As with any construction project inside Jerusalem's ancient walls, it is the secrets hidden below the ground, beneath more recent layers, that often present the most unpleasant surprises.

The biggest surprise for archeologists took place at the location of what will soon be a sparkling new entrance pavilion to the museum. Designed by Yotam Cohen-Sagi from Tel Aviv firm Kimmel Eshkolot Architects, Cohen-Sagi will create what he calls a "modest" addition to the Old City, in the form of an unobtrusive glass structure tucked between the outer wall of the citadel and the city's perimeter wall that will take visitors down two floors through a tunnel into the museum.

As machines began removing dirt from the area, which originally served as a Crusader moat, they realized that beneath the massive Jerusalem stones that form the walls of the Old City there were no solid foundations.

"We thought that whoever built these walls must have placed the foundations on the bedrock, but all we found there was dirt and cement," Cohen-Sagi told JI.

While this discovery temporarily halted the construction, with engineers brought in to secure the stone, the break gave archeologists a chance to re-explore 500-year-old Ottoman architecture and building methods.

Amit Re'em, an archeologist with the Israel Antiquities Authority who has been working on the project, said the renovation was a "rare opportunity to explore a symbol of Jerusalem."

Although the site was excavated by British archeologists nearly 100 years ago, Re'em said they relied on classic archeological methods to date the structure. With updated technology, including the use of carbon dating, he said archeologists will be able to create a more accurate timeline for Jerusalem.

"In between the stones, there is cement and chalk and charcoal that we collected and sent to be analyzed at the Weizmann Institute so we can date the stones more precisely," Re'em explained. The results of the analysis will be published soon, Shapiro, the museum's PR director told JI.

"The Tower of David is a special site that represents all the archeological layers of Jerusalem," said the museum's director and chief curator, Eilat Lieber, who is the visionary and driving force behind this ambitious project.

Lieber said that after three decades, the museum needed to be updated not only to include the most recent layer of history but also to incorporate the living history of the actual building. "In the past, the building was just a venue for the museum, but the story of Tower of David is the story of Jerusalem," she said.

The current renovations, said Lieber, are only the first phase of a much bigger project, which will also see an auditorium and classrooms added to the site. Still in the planning and fundraising stages, the second phase will enclose the hollow space that sits under the plaza linking the Mamilla Mall to the Jaffa Gate, and includes remnants of a Byzantine bathhouse and ancient graves.

"I want to make archeology from the past, part of the future," Lieber told JI. "The

Tower of David is the gateway to Jerusalem, and I really hope that we will recover soon from the [COVID-19] crisis, so people from

all over the world will return to this city.” ♦

JANUARY 7, 2022

## Joshua Malina speaks out

*The ‘West Wing’ alum is debuting a new podcast that looks at current events through a Jewish lens*

By Matthew Kassel

The actor Joshua Malina is perhaps best known for his supporting role as Will Bailey, the precocious presidential speechwriter and White House advisor with a vaunted — and decidedly non-Jewish — military pedigree, in NBC’s cult-status political drama “The West Wing.”

In reality, as dedicated fans are likely aware, Malina, 55, has long been involved in Jewish communal life, describing Judaism as “the key element” of his identity. The former yeshiva boy, who grew up in New Rochelle, has visited Israel several times, and has long expressed dismay that Jews in Hollywood often avoid speaking openly about the Jewish state.

Years ago, the online Jewish outlet *Tablet* — in which Malina once extolled gribenes as “the *sine qua non* of Jewish food” — earnestly proposed that he assume the role of White House Jewish liaison. Malina, for his part, welcomed the suggestion, tongue only slightly in cheek.

It was not to be, though Malina has lately been assuming an even more high-profile role as one of Hollywood’s unofficial Jewish ambassadors in what the veteran actor describes as something of a turning point in his long history of public engagement on Jewish issues.

In recent months, for instance, he has joined the board of Americans for Peace Now, the left-leaning nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. All the while, he has forcefully spoken out against antisemitism on his Twitter feed and, most notably, in a combative viral essay for the *The Atlantic*, where he questioned why Mel

Gibson continues to find work in Hollywood despite his status as “a well-known Jew-hater.”

While Malina’s cancelation campaign was well-received, he remains subject to a constant stream of anti-Jewish social media attacks from Gibson’s most impassioned defenders. “Of course, attack an antisemite and, boy, are you going to arouse the antisemites,” Malina said in a recent interview with *Jewish Insider*. “It’s like, thank you all for proving my point.”

Malina’s safe haven, as one might think of it, is a cleverly named new podcast, “Chutzpod!,” that he is co-hosting with Rabbi Shira Stutman, until recently the spiritual leader of Sixth & I, a non-denominational synagogue in Washington, D.C. Distributed by PRX, the weekly podcast, which debuts today, will engage with current events and other more whimsical concerns through a Jewish prism, including regular Torah discussions, that Malina hopes will appeal to Jews and non-Jews alike.

“One of the things about Jewish observance is the beauty of being part of a community and kahal and this idea that we’re better together than alone — and, during the last couple of years of the pandemic and not a lot of shul-going, or maybe none other than through Zoom, I like the idea, even if it’s virtual, of building another Jewish community,” Malina said. “Not solely Jewish, but anyone who’s interested in Judaism enough to listen to the podcast I’m interested in interacting with.”

Malina became friendly with Stutman in 2017, when they traveled through Israel and the Palestinian territories together on a Jewish leadership tour hosted by Encounter, a nonpartisan educational organization. A

couple of months ago, she reached out to ask if he would be interested in co-hosting a Jewish-themed podcast.

While Malina was intrigued, he initially turned down the request because he had recently finished hosting a separate weekly podcast about “The West Wing” and was hesitant to jump into another project so quickly. “I’ve turned down a variety of things,” he said. But after a couple of days mulling over the rabbi’s proposal, he changed his mind.

He even came up with the name, he said. “I will take the credit or the blame.”

For Malina, the podcast is an opportunity to glean insights from Stutman’s interpretations of Jewish liturgy as he positions himself, at points, as a kind of student interlocutor.

“I went to an Orthodox yeshiva for eight years, so I have a certain knowledge base,” he told *JL*. “I still want this to be something where I’m going to learn. But at the same time, we want it to appeal to people who are maybe in an interfaith marriage or relationship and interested in their partner’s Judaism,” said Malina, who is married to a Jewish convert. “We want it to be interesting to people who did not enjoy Hebrew school, but are looking for a way maybe to find a little relevance in their Judaism.”

The first episode centers on an examination of “Parashat Bo,” the weekly Torah portion that, “counterintuitively, is read in January, but is about the Exodus,” Malina told *JL*, “of course nowhere near Passover.”

But one phrase in particular, he said, seemed relevant at a moment of profound disunity in American politics. “There’s a specific mention of the phrase ‘mixed

multitude' — erev rav left Egypt with the Hebrews," he mused. "What is the mixed multitude? Why did some Egyptians leave with the Jews? Were they converts? Were they just non-Jews? Did they add to the experience in the desert?"

"As I was anticipating, you can take two words of the Torah and, under a teacher like Rabbi Shira, who is wise and just absolutely sort of a volcano of creative energy and thought, we have a conversation for an hour pondering what that 'mixed multitude' really means and what it means to be 'other,'" Malina added. "Jews often feel othered as a very, very small part of the world's population — and also, how do Jews approach the other? Do we villainize them? Do we welcome them? We touched on something that I hope we will talk about further."

As a new board member on Americans for Peace Now, Malina is also eager to engage in what he imagines will be some challenging if worthwhile conversations pertaining to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "I deeply care about Israel, I love Israel, and I would like it — as many people would like it — to more fully realize the democratic ideals on which it was founded," he explained. "These are issues that are important to me."

"Anything around Israel and the Middle East and the Palestinians is a very difficult area to discuss, but if you don't discuss it, then everybody just falls back into the sort of black-and-white narrative that they take to or whatever their point of view is," he added. "But if you get into the gray area, and it's really all gray area, then that's maybe sometimes where you come up with something productive and you have uncomfortable conversations that lead to something positive."

On a lighter note, the podcast also gives Malina the chance to flex his connections in the entertainment industry. The debut episode includes an appearance from the actor Josh Charles as well as a brief interlude in which the comedian Michael Ian Black explains a handful of basic Yiddish and Hebrew phrases that may be unfamiliar to some listeners.

In preparation for future episodes, Malina has already invited Jon Hamm, a close personal friend, to discuss Yiddish terms as well — a task he is most likely

prepared for, given a recent appearance on "Curb Your Enthusiasm" in which he is educated on the intricacies of Jewish slang by Larry David.

Before speaking with JI, Malina said he had emailed the Jewish actress and comedian Sarah Silverman, who caused a stir on her own podcast last fall while criticizing what she described as a "pattern in film" and TV in which non-Jewish actors are cast as Jewish characters.

Malina suggested he was interested in addressing that topic on the podcast. "I'm very intrigued by it," said Malina, who experienced the reverse scenario on "The West Wing," though Bradley Whitford, who starred in the series and was raised in a Quaker family, did play a Jewish character. "I think Sarah is very smart and interesting and so I was intrigued to read and to listen to her podcast and hear what she had to say about it."

"My own response, especially as an actor, is it's a tough one, because certainly, I'm moved by issues of inclusion and the stories that get told by Hollywood, and I think things are changing," he said. "The other part of me is like, 'Well, anyone should be able to play anything if they're good,'" he added. "I don't have a knee-jerk response when I see somebody playing a Jewish character that I know isn't Jewish. There are just times where I go, like, 'Ach, I don't buy it.'"

Ultimately, Malina said he "would like to see a lot more Jewish stories being told."

It goes without saying, too, that Malina would prefer if Mel Gibson were banished from the industry because of his well-documented history of anti-Jewish comments. Malina said his recent *Atlantic* tirade came about when the magazine's editor, Jeffrey Goldberg — whom he met, coincidentally, through Stutman — asked him to expand on social media remarks that seemed substantive enough for a full-blown essay.

Malina has no expectation that he will end Gibson's career, particularly amid rumors that Gibson is in talks to direct "Lethal Weapon Five," which motivated the piece. Malina anticipates that the industry will "keep its emphasis on making money" rather than grappling with Gibson's controversial past.

"If he wants to sit down and chat with me, I'm available," Malina, who has never crossed paths with Gibson, chuckled incredulously. "I don't know why he would want to."

Malina has continued to antagonize Gibson since publishing his screed. On Monday, Gibson turned 66 — an occasion Malina recognized with a donation to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum "in honor of Mel Gibson should go fuck himself," as a confirmation email from the museum that Malina posted to Twitter read.

Amid rising incidents of antisemitism in the United States and abroad, Malina said he now feels something of an added sense of urgency to raise his voice. "I will say that these are scary times," he told JI. "I was raised, as many Jews of my generation were, with 'never again' and 'do not forget,' and so it surprises me at times that you kind of have to remind people, like, antisemitism, you know, it's real, and it's ugly."

Malina has personally experienced that dynamic on Twitter, where he feistily seeks to expose the antisemitic rhetoric that is directed at him and that seems to have intensified since the Gibson essay. "When you talk about antisemitism and then when someone says, 'Oh, you're a Zionist,' it's like, 'OK, so you're equating all Jews with Israel, that's antisemitism,'" he said. "Rather than ignoring it, which some people would have advised me to do, I'd rather amplify it and say, 'See, this is antisemitism.'"

Aside from the podcast, Malina — who has also appeared in "Sports Night," "Scandal" and "The Big Bang Theory" — is in the process of pitching a new TV series based on what he characterized as a "comic spy thriller" he has optioned. "That's the big iron in the fire that I'm hoping I can make happen," Malina told JI, though he declined to provide further detail beyond noting that he would produce and star in the series.

For the moment, he seems enlivened by the range of Jewish issues to which he is now dedicating his time, even as such involvement has created some tensions that he might otherwise prefer to avoid.

"It's not fun to be attacked by anyone or have people saying negative things," he said. "But it always makes me think, if you're getting it from both sides, then you must be existing and functioning in that



uncomfortable area of compromise, and to me, that's the interesting, potentially productive side of things — and that's the sort of area to explore.” ♦

JANUARY 13, 2022

## Nicaragua slammed for hosting Iranian official wanted in Argentina Jewish center bombing

*Iranian VP Mohsen Rezaei, who is wanted by Interpol for his role in the 1994 AMIA bombing, traveled to Managua for the swearing-in of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega*

By Gabby Deutch

The Organization of American States' antisemitism envoy called for Nicaragua to abide by its duties as a member of Interpol after a senior Iranian politician wanted for his role in the 1994 AMIA Jewish center bombing in Buenos Aires appeared at the swearing-in of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega this week.

"I repudiate the presence of the vice president of Iran at the inauguration of Daniel Ortega in Managua," Fernando Lottenberg, a Brazilian attorney who has since October served as the OAS commissioner to monitor and combat antisemitism, told *Jewish Insider*. "Mohsen Rezaei is under a red alert from Interpol. Nicaragua, as a member of Interpol, should soon comply with it."

Mohsen Rezaei was the leader of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps at the time of the AMIA bombing and is believed to be the alleged mastermind of the attack that killed 85 people and injured hundreds.

Rezaei, Iran's vice president for economic affairs, has been wanted by Interpol since 2007. But Nicaragua, which is a member of Interpol, appeared to ignore the red notice on the Iranian official.

"It's a sign of the level of confidence Iranian leadership has in its ability to thumb its nose in the face of international law, and Interpol in particular, without consequence," said Matthew Levitt, a former FBI investigator and deputy assistant secretary for intelligence and analysis at

the Treasury Department who is now the Fromer-Wexler Fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Argentina has its own arrest warrant out for Rezaei, and the country's Foreign Ministry said in a statement that "his presence in Managua constitutes an affront to Argentine justice and to the victims of the brutal terrorist attack against the AMIA."

Rezaei traveled to Managua earlier this week to see Ortega sworn in for a fourth consecutive term following an election that was widely viewed as rigged by international democracy observers.

Rezaei's trip to Managua could be viewed as a test of Western democracies, said Toby Dershowitz, senior vice president for government relations and strategy at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. "It's a test we shouldn't fail," Dershowitz continued. "Should the world look the other way, not only will justice not be served but it will, in effect, give license to Iran's leaders to continue to engage in its nefarious, often deadly acts of terrorism."

The State Department did not respond to a request for comment from JI. Marc Stanley, the newly appointed U.S. ambassador to Argentina who has not yet arrived in Buenos Aires, declined to comment. Stanley vowed to press the Argentine government for accountability on the AMIA bombing in his Senate confirmation hearing in October.

During Rezaei's visit to Managua, he also met with Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez, who wrote on Twitter

that the two leaders discussed the "positive state of political relations" between Iran and Cuba.

Hours before Ortega's inauguration, the U.S. and the European Union put new sanctions on several Nicaraguan officials, including the defense minister, for alleged human rights violations.

"The governments of Cuba and Nicaragua are eager to deepen ties to countries that present opportunities for them in light of U.S. sanctions, and Iran likewise will welcome warm ties to other governments targeted by the U.S.," said Eric Herschberg, director of the Center for Latin American and Latino Studies at American University. "It does not seem out of the ordinary that an Iranian VP would attend Ortega's inauguration, or that Cuban officials in attendance would take advantage of the occasion to hold a meeting with their Iranian counterpart."

Interpol did not respond to a request for comment from JI.

Rezaei's travel to Nicaragua is not his first time traveling to an Interpol member country since he was subject to a red notice in 2007. According to data compiled by FDD, the Wilson Center and the Argentina Project, the eight Iranian suspects in the AMIA bombing have traveled to at least 20 Interpol member countries, including Brazil, Bolivia, South Africa, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. ♦

JANUARY 13, 2022

# Biden administration takes Trump admin to task on Iran

*Amid struggling talks, the administration is ramping up its rhetoric critical of former President Donald Trump's withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear agreement*

By Marc Rod

With Iran nuclear talks nearing a critical juncture and expectations low for what they might achieve, the Biden administration is turning fire toward the Trump administration and its decision to pull out of the 2015 nuclear deal.

At Wednesday's White House press conference, in response to a question about the status of the talks, Press Secretary Jen Psaki said, "None of the things we're looking at now... would be happening if the former president had not recklessly pulled out of the nuclear deal, with no thoughts about what might come next."

Her comments follow remarks by State Department Spokesman Ned Price on Tuesday that "it is deeply unfortunate that because of an ill-considered or perhaps unconsidered decision by the previous administration that this administration came into office without these stringent verification and monitoring protocols that were in place."

According to an Axios report, the

remarks were part of a concerted messaging push by the administration to assign blame for the current state of Iran's nuclear and non-nuclear provocations to the Trump administration.

Experts on the region say that such a strategy is likely designed to deflect criticism away from the Biden administration and lay the groundwork for the end of nuclear talks — the window for which is "potentially weeks, not months [away]," Price said on Wednesday — and signals pessimism within the administration about the direction talks, now in their eighth round, are headed.

"If in fact there is no agreement and the Iranians walk and you end up with a pressure campaign, it's a useful explanation as to why," Aaron David Miller, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said. "And if in fact an agreement is reached... it would be the same useful argument: 'You don't like the agreement? [It is], in essence, a consequence of what we were up against [after the Trump pullout].'"

"There's not going to be a whole lot of

happy campers on either side of the aisle regardless of what is produced in Vienna," Miller continued. "If that is, in fact, the primary rationale, it seems to suggest that the administration has a pretty low view of where these talks are headed."

Former Ambassador Dennis Ross, a fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy who has served in high-level roles in Democratic and Republican administrations, offered a similar view.

The administration's invoking of the Trump administration "has more to do with trying to explain, 'We were given a hand that limited the choices we have, increasingly to a kind of binary set of choices of either trying to reach a diplomatic understanding, which is what we prefer, or then being forced to go in a different direction,'" Ross said.

"I think that's designed to lay the basis for either less than what they wanted — because they were left with no good choices — or explaining why they were reverting to a non-diplomatic process," Ross continued. "Although I think it's probably more the former than the latter." ♦

JANUARY 14, 2022

# In suburban Detroit, Stevens-Levin matchup suggests a test of candidates' Israel policies

*Interviews with local Jews reveal divide in the district's Jewish community ahead of May primary*

By Marc Rod

The debate within the Democratic Party over the future of its support of the U.S.-Israel

relationship and what it means to be pro-Israel is set to play out in stark fashion in Michigan's 11th Congressional

District this year, with current Reps. Haley Stevens (D-MI) and Andy Levin (D-MI) facing off in a primary in the

newly drawn district, where Jewish voters are poised to have significant influence.

*Jewish Insider's* conversations with nearly a dozen local leaders and members of the area's 70,000-strong Jewish community this week revealed a split between moderate and progressive Jews in the district, with moderates coalescing around Stevens and progressives siding with Levin. It's a divide that has played out in Democratic primaries across the country in recent elections, as the mainstream Jewish community coalesces around centrist and center-left candidates, while many far-left candidates engage with Jewish groups critical of — or in some cases opposed to the existence of — Israel.

The two candidates' differing views on Israel and Levin's close relationships with Reps. Rashida Tlaib (D-MI) and Ilhan Omar (D-MN) are key wedge issues among Jewish voters — although supporters on both sides emphasized that they were also attracted to the candidates' broader platforms.

Stevens supporters told *JI* she's been a consistent champion of and eager to learn about the U.S.-Israel relationship, both through conversations with the community and in participating on a trip to Israel during her first term in Congress.

David Kramer, a member of Stevens's finance committee, told *JI* he spoke to Stevens privately following the trip, and said it had had "a very profound impact on her."

"I think it gave her an even greater appreciation for the importance of Israel being able to defend itself," he said. "It reinforced a lot of what the pro-Israel community had talked to her about and what I think she had thought before."

Other Jewish supporters who spoke to *JI* felt similarly.

"Haley makes many of us... feel that she genuinely cares, and that she is moderate enough to listen," said Kramer's mother, Zina, who has organized fundraisers at her home for Stevens. "Nobody has ever left my home wanting either more information because they feel that she didn't answer the question, or unhappy because she said something that would not be in the best interest of the Jewish community."

Stevens's supporters said she is no stranger to the area's Jewish community.

"She grew up in an area and a community

and went to school where she was surrounded by a lot of Jews, and a lot of her friends growing up were Jewish. So I think she always kind of understood the Jewish community a little bit and felt comfortable around the Jewish community," David Kramer said. "She, from the beginning, was very embracing of meeting with the Jewish community and understanding our issues."

Her views on Israel are, according to supporters, in agreement with the prevailing opinion among Jews in the district.

Marcie Orley, the president of the women's department at the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit, told *JI*, "She I think reflects, in her positions, the values of the community that she represents, because Detroit and the Detroit Metropolitan Area is a community that has very strong ties to Israel."

Several of the Stevens supporters who spoke to *JI* said they had supported Levin, his father — former Rep. Sander Levin (D-MI) — and his uncle — former Sen. Carl Levin (D-MI) and had good relationships with Levin personally, but that Stevens was their choice in a head-to-head race.

Richard Lenter, who collected donations to run ads for Stevens in the local Jewish press during her first campaign in 2018, told *JI* about a recent Zoom conversation with prominent members of the local Jewish community.

"Every one of them strongly supported Haley and every one of them strongly were opposed to Levin" — because of Levin's Israel policies, Lenter recounted.

Hannan Lis, a former leader in the local federation, Jewish Community Centers of Metropolitan Detroit and other local Jewish and pro-Israel organizations, called Levin's public statements on Israel following last year's conflict with Gaza "harsh," and accused him of "agree[ing] with the position of Hamas and its justification to fire rockets into Israel."

"[Stevens is] much more grounded in fact, and she's much more connected to the situation as it is today, versus what I think Andy's issues are," Lis continued.

Many of Levin's critics said they've participated in events where he has discussed Israel, and felt that he was not receptive to their concerns. Stevens supporter Michael Horowitz called him

"dismissive."

"I have been in small group conversations with him, and he does not acknowledge any of the culpabilities from the the Palestinian side of the issues," Horowitz said. "He comes from a perspective that — while he professes to be pro-Israel — his rhetoric is always one of blaming Israel without similar culpability on the other side."

Levin's Jewish supporters defended his pro-Israel credentials.

"Congressman Levin has a deep love for Israel in his trips there and his upbringing," Alicia Chandler, the former interim executive director of Detroit's combined Jewish Community Relations Council/American Jewish Committee organization, told *JI*. "He, I think, feels his Zionism in his kishkes. His Zionism is a nuanced one... Congressman Levin has continually pushed forward that idea of a two-state solution and wants the conversation of how we accomplish that in our lifetimes."

Chandler dismissed the idea that Levin is unwilling to engage in conversations on the issue.

"He doesn't back off of having difficult conversations and he's very open to hearing from all members of the community, whether folks who agree with him as well as folks who don't always agree with him," she said.

Haley Sakawa, a member of IfNotNow and Detroit Jews for Justice, a Jewish social activist group founded by Levin, also pushed back.

"He is one of the only Jewish leaders in Congress who I actually see fairly assessing this issue and putting forth legislation and placing pressure on all parties involved to make sure that we're actually securing safety and dignity for everybody," she said.

Sakawa pointed to sections of Two-State Solution Act — a bill introduced by Levin last year that condemns Israeli settlements and places restrictions on military aid to Israel — that are critical of Hamas and the Palestinian Authority.

"He introduced the Two-State Solution Act to help the United States take meaningful steps towards achieving peace in Israel and Palestine, which he believes in strongly," said Roslyn Schindler, a former professor of Holocaust studies who met Levin through their synagogue. "He believes that the

surest way to ensure a secure democratic homeland for the Jewish people is to at last recognize the human and political rights of the Palestinian people and end the military occupation.”

Stevens supporters also highlighted Levin’s close relationships with progressive members of Congress — particularly Omar and Tlaib — who have made statements that some see as antisemitic, as a cause for concern.

“I’m very concerned about his friendship with people like Rashida and Omar; he’s not willing to stand up and really address Rashida’s words and actions,” Lis said.

Horowitz went further, saying, “[Levin] has gone on record supporting many individuals in Congress who have done things that have antisemitic overtones. He has not been an advocate of addressing the issues of antisemitism in this country.”

Levin’s supporters largely see his relationships with such members as an asset.

“I think that you can get further with them tempering their views and their votes by working with them, rather than out of hand, just saying, ‘I despise you, and I’m not going to work with you,’” Lori Goldman, the founder of Fems For Dems, a Michigan activist group, said. “And I know a lot of Jewish people that do that. And you know what? It gets you nowhere.”

Chandler called Levin “a really, really important bridge to some of the more progressive spaces,” who allows “a conversation to continue.”

Goldman also described Levin as an effective crusader against antisemitism beyond the halls of Congress.

“He addresses it frequently,” Goldman said. “He is a very outspoken man who’s not afraid to speak his mind. He doesn’t speak in platitudes. And he doesn’t fail to respond to what’s going on at the moment. And that has to do with antisemitism too.”

Levin’s supporters also highlighted his leading role in helping to free Danny Fenster, the American Jewish journalist jailed in Myanmar last year, who lives in the Detroit area.

“He worked tirelessly day in and day out to bring Danny Fenster home,” Schindler said. “It shows how devoted Andy Levin is to the constituents in his district,

his accessibility, his advocacy, and his steadfastness.”

The Fenster family likewise credited Levin’s work in the case, writing in a Facebook post, “Congressman Levin’s commitment to our family was evident from Day 1... His advocacy on Danny’s behalf publicly and privately — in Washington and home in Michigan — pulled together not only every level of government, but helped galvanize a community of supporters that amplified Danny’s story for the world to witness.”

The race for the Jewish vote in the 11th District could turn negative. Lenter predicted that some Jewish Stevens supporters, through outside PACs, may go on the offensive against Levin.

“If there are a number of leaders in the Jewish community who have animus towards Congressman Levin, then they’re going to express it,” he said. “I don’t think Haley Stevens is going to do that... But on the other hand, if they’re independent PACs, of which she has no control, who knows what the PACs will do.”

The split has already gone national: bipartisan Pro-Israel America endorsed Stevens in mid-2021, long before the state’s congressional map had been redrawn, and left-leaning J Street endorsed Levin in early January after they both declared their candidacy in the 11th.

“We’ve seen in [Stevens] someone who is a strong and consistent supporter of the U.S.-Israel relationship,” PIA Executive Director Jeff Mendelsohn told JI. “She made her support clear early on in her tenure in Congress and she’s lived up to that with her actions.”

Mendelsohn pointed to the Two-State Solution Act as a primary example of why PIA is supporting Stevens over Levin, arguing that the content of the legislation is “lopsided” and includes provisions “unhelpful to the U.S.’s relationship to Israel and the peace process itself.”

J Street is a key backer of the Two-State Solution Act.

“Time and again, Rep. Levin has proven himself to be a passionate, thoughtful and dedicated champion for the policies and beliefs that truly matter to J Street and our supporters,” J Street spokesperson Logan Bayroff told JI. “He embodies what it looks

like to combine love for Israel with concern for its future and a commitment to core Jewish values of peace, justice and equality. There’s simply no question that Rep. Levin deserves the endorsement and support of the pro-Israel, pro-peace movement.” ♦



# Michigan redistricting sets up close races across the state

*Reps. Elissa Slotkin, Peter Meijer, Fred Upton, Bill Huizenga and Dan Kildee could face tough battles this year*

By Marc Rod

Michigan's loss of a congressional seat in this year's redistricting process has scrambled district lines across the state, promising hotly contested primary races among Democrats in the Detroit area and a range of other close races across the state.

Reps. Elissa Slotkin (D-MI) and Peter Meijer (R-MI), who each won swing districts in 2020, are set for another round of tight races in their new districts. In the southwest corner of the state, Michiganders are waiting to find out if they'll see a member-on-member primary between Reps. Fred Upton (R-MI) and Bill Huizenga (R-MI). And elsewhere in the state, Rep. Dan Kildee (D-MI) faces strong Republican headwinds.

Slotkin's new district, the 7th, shifts further west away from Detroit and includes more rural areas than her previous one, but includes more of the Lansing area, which leans towards the Democrats. Strategists who spoke to *JI* said she's still favored to win, despite unfavorable electoral conditions for Democrats in the midterms. The nonpartisan *Cook Political Report* rates the race as a toss-up.

"[Slotkin] was made for that district," longtime Michigan strategist Ed Sarpolus told *JI*, citing her previous victories in a conservative-leaning district and her background as a Defense Department and CIA official. "She understands things a lot differently than the average candidate does... Slotkin is somebody I would say was prepared to take on that challenge."

Political strategist Adrian Hemond noted that state Sen. Tom Barrett, a Republican who is running in Slotkin's new district and is a former client of Hemond's firm, will have to "consolidate support from all of those rural areas and to be able to capture

enough independents," given that Slotkin is likely to dominate in Lansing and the more suburban parts of the district.

Corwin Smidt, who chairs the political science department at Michigan State University, was more skeptical of Republicans' chances to unseat Slotkin, arguing that they have yet to consolidate around one challenger.

Slotkin, who is Jewish, took to Twitter last year to lambast colleagues' objections to supplemental funding for Israel's Iron Dome missile-defense system as "devoid of substance and irresponsible" and driven by a "desire to attack something — anything — related to the State of Israel"; she was part of a group that pushed House leadership for a quick stand-alone vote on the funding.

She was endorsed by both J Street and the Jewish Democratic Council of America in 2020.

Slotkin has also established herself as a crusader against domestic terrorism in her new role as the chair of the Homeland Security Committee's Intelligence and Counterterrorism Subcommittee during her second term in Congress.

Further west, Meijer's district, Michigan's 3rd, is more compact than his previous one, centering around Grand Rapids and pulling in more of the city's outskirts. While the new district leans slightly to the left — unlike his previous district, which had a GOP advantage — Meijer, who voted to impeach former President Donald Trump last year, is also seen as the current favorite, if he can survive the GOP primary. Trump endorsed his primary opponent John Gibbs in November. *Cook* rates Meijer's general election race as a toss-up.

In the general election, Sarpolus described the new district as "the best" possible outcome for Meijer.

"He can win a Democratic district because of who he is," Sarpolus said. "Because the district becomes more moderate — and the other thing is it could be easier because there will be fewer Republicans, fewer conservatives in this district, Meijer can play to his moderate base."

Meijer, the scion of an eponymous grocery store chain, also has strong name recognition in the region because of his family's business, Hemond noted. Democrats, according to Smidt, are likely to rely heavily on mobilizing minority voters in Grand Rapids and Muskegon to have a shot at unseating Meijer if he survives his primary.

Hemond, who was less bullish about Meijer's chances in both the primary and general elections, said that if Democrats "get the right candidate, they could back-foot him," but that "the fact that it's a midterm election and that he does cut a pretty moderate profile probably squeaks him through."

Pro-Israel America endorsed Meijer last summer.

Rabbi Asher Lopatin, who leads the joint Detroit-area Jewish Community Relations Council/American Jewish Committee organization, said that the Jewish community has a "very good relationship" with Meijer and that "he's been very responsive," including joining Zoom calls and programs with the Jewish community.

He noted, however, that the Western Michigan Jewish community "is not monolithic" and that Jewish Republicans in the area "might be divided between different Republican candidates." Overall, he said, the area's Jewish community is more evenly divided among conservatives and liberals than the predominantly liberal Detroit-area Jewish community.

In the southwest corner of the Wolverine State, Reps. Fred Upton (R-MI) and Bill Huizenga (R-MI) may face off in the new 4th District, which is largely made up of territory currently represented by Upton, who has not yet announced if he will seek reelection.

Upton, who has been in Congress since 1987 and chaired the House Energy and Commerce Committee when House Republicans last held the majority, has been ostracized by some in the party for his vote to impeach Trump.

Upton's decision will likely come down to his estimation of his current place within the party. "If he does stay and run, if he wins, will he have a committee chairmanship or a position in leadership? Or because he's so far more moderate, [will he] basically be a backbencher? And he may not like that," Sarpolus said.

Michael Traugott, a political scientist at the University of Michigan's Center for Political Studies, said that the "increasingly hostile environment" in Congress to bipartisanship and compromise, which Upton has prioritized during his career, is also likely playing into his decision-making.

Given that Upton currently represents most of the new district, has served in Congress for decades longer than Huizenga and has traditionally been a strong fundraiser, Hemond sees him as having an advantage if he throws his hat into the race.

Pro-Israel America endorsed Upton last summer.

In the eastern part of the state, Kildee's new district centers around Flint, as his previous one did, and retains its close balance of Democrats and Republicans. Cook rates the race as a toss-up.

"This district is trending the wrong way for Democrats," Hemond said, noting that Trump "performed quite well here" in both 2016 and 2020, and Republicans have picked up state legislative seats in the area.

"A quality Republican candidate could be [a threat]" to Kildee," he continued.

In Kildee's favor, Hemond noted that Kildee's uncle, Dale Kildee, was a popular congressman from the area for 36 years, and Kildee carries an advantage as the incumbent.

Kildee has been endorsed by J Street in previous races and was one of the few Democrats who defended Minnesota Rep.

Ilhan Omar (D-MN) from accusations of antisemitism stemming from February 2019 comments that support for Israel is "all about the Benjamins," saying in an interview at the time, "I wouldn't take it as antisemitism."

"We ought to be careful not to construe that in anything other than a concern about the fact that money has undue influence on political decision-making," he added.

His area does not have a sizable Jewish community and he does not have as close a relationship with the statewide Jewish community as other members of the delegation, Lopatin said.

The final uncertainty on the map will be the new, Republican-leaning 10th District, north of Detroit, which Cook rates as "Likely Republican." No incumbent member is running in that district. Eric Esshaki, who lost to Rep. Haley Stevens (D-MI) in the area by 2.4 percentage points in 2020, has announced his candidacy, but Republicans are also attempting to recruit two-time failed Senate candidate John James to run for the seat. James is reported to be "seriously considering" a bid. ♦