

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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JANUARY 18, 2022

A dispatch from Colleyville following the Beth Israel hostage crisis

'I don't want to say I can't believe it happened here because, honestly, we've all been on edge,' a Beth Israel congregant told JI

By Matthew Kassel

COLLEYVILLE, Tex. — With the exception of a few police cars and a smattering of local and national news reporters, the scene was almost eerily tranquil on Sunday afternoon outside Congregation Beth Israel, the small Reform synagogue where Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker and three of his congregants had the night prior been held hostage by an armed assailant for 11 hours.

Across the street, a local Little League team was holding a casual baseball practice, and locals strolled down the idyllically named Pleasant Run Road — which, as a sign up the street revealed, had been “adopted” by the synagogue — in this affluent suburban enclave about 15 miles northeast of Fort Worth.

But even after the hostages had escaped safely, the synagogue remained an active federal crime scene as law enforcement officials processed the site where the suspected gunman, identified as Malik Faisal Akram, a 44-year-old British national, had been shot to death while perpetrating what the Biden administration labeled an “act of terror.”

“The congregation is going to have to face difficult days because someone was killed inside their synagogue,” Steven Hays, a retired public school teacher in Fort Worth who grew up in Colleyville and attends two synagogues in the area but is not a member of Beth Israel, told Jewish Insider in an interview outside the shul.

Stacey Silverman, a congregant at Beth Israel who lives near the temple, said the community had been on high alert since the deadly synagogue shootings in Pittsburgh and Poway in 2018 and 2019, respectively. “I don’t want to say I can’t believe it happened here because, honestly, we’ve all been on edge,” she told JI.

But nothing could have prepared her for what unfolded on Saturday as she tuned into the synagogue’s livestream to watch Shabbat services.

“It was absolutely horrific, terrifying, horrible,” she recalled. “It was one of the scariest days of my life because I was on the live feed and I heard that lunatic ranting for a few hours,” she said of Akram, whom authorities said had demanded the release of Afia Siddiqui, a Pakistani woman who is currently serving an 86-year sentence

at a federal prison in Fort Worth for the attempted murder of U.S. officers in Afghanistan.

Silverman, 53, said she was frustrated by initial suggestions that the attack had not been motivated by anti-Jewish hatred. On Sunday, FBI Special Agent in Charge Matt DeSarno had said that Akram “was singularly focused on one issue, and it was not specifically related to the Jewish community.”

“This was not a random event, this is the Bible Belt and there’s a church on every corner. This was completely premeditated,” Silverman said. “The guy was ranting that he chose it. He was ranting about Jews and Israel. He clearly hated Jews, he spent hours ranting against us.”

Because of the Omicron variant, which is now surging in the Dallas-Fort Worth area of northeast Texas, most of the congregants were at home rather than participating in person at the synagogue. “Thank God for that,” she said.

In a statement on Sunday, Cytron-Walker said “the gunman became increasingly belligerent and threatening” in the “last hour” of the crisis.

“Over the years, my congregation and I have participated in multiple security courses from the Colleyville Police Department, the FBI, the Anti-Defamation League and Secure Community Network,” Cytron-Walker said. “We are alive today because of that education. I encourage all Jewish congregations, religious groups, schools and others to participate in active-shooter and security courses.”

“Without the instruction we received, we would not have been prepared to act and flee when the situation presented itself,” Cytron-Walker said.

The rabbi revealed more details of his harrowing encounter in a Monday morning interview on “CBS Mornings.”

“When I saw an opportunity where he wasn’t in a good position, I made sure that the two gentlemen who were still with me, that they were ready to go,” he recalled. “I told them to go. I threw a chair at the gunman and I headed for the door, and all three of us were able to get out.”

Earlier on Saturday, local Jewish leaders reacted with varying levels of disbelief when they heard of the hostage crisis.

Rabbi Brian Zimmerman of Beth-El Congregation, a Reform synagogue in Fort Worth, said he was in the middle of conducting a Saturday morning bat mitzvah service when the attack started. “Our head of security ran up and whispered to the president and me, and I kind of froze,” he

remembered. “‘There’s a hostage situation in Colleyville,’ he said.”

Zimmerman, who has known Cytron-Walker for years, went on with the service but described an “out-of-body experience” as he tried to process the event. “My brain didn’t really wander to what did that mean for here, for our place.”

“I would say I’m still processing it,” he told JI. When it ended, “I sort of got this feeling that I’ve never gotten before,” he said. “Thank God it’s OK, but it felt very unresolved.”

Barry Abels, the executive of the Jewish Federation of Fort Worth and Tarrant County, agreed. “You spend so many hours on edge and it takes a while to come to grips with what’s happened and what is the aftermath,” he said in an interview with JI. “The thing that I think everybody’s going to be waiting to hear about is what’s going to be the outcome of the federal investigation into this matter.”

“Obviously, that’s going to take some time,” he said.

Those who know Cytron-Walker, however, all agreed that the rabbi had operated with unusual poise under pressure.

Cytron-Walker took over at Beth Israel in 2006 as the synagogue’s first full-time rabbi, and in the ensuing 16 years he has earned a reputation as an interfaith community-builder who is closely connected with local Muslim and Christian leaders in the area.

“I remember when he was ordained, we all knew that he had elected to accept his pulpit in Texas,” said Rabbi Gary P. Zola, a professor at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati who once counted Cytron-Walker as a student. “Not all of our students are interested in taking a very small congregation right out of school,” Zola told JI. You have to be the chief cook and bottle-washer, and I think that was what he wanted to do.”

“Charlie was just somebody who was able to reach everybody and to say a good word about everyone and to be liked by everyone,” Zola added.

On Monday evening, Cytron-Walker spoke of his experience being held hostage in his first public remarks to community members at a healing service hosted by White’s Chapel United Methodist Church in nearby Southlake, which was live-streamed on Facebook.

“The healing will begin tonight but the healing will not end tonight,” Zimmerman said of the event. “This is going to take a long time.”

Cytron-Walker, for his part, acknowledged that process but mostly just seemed grateful to be alive. “While very few of us are doing OK right now, we’ll get through this,” the rabbi told the audience.

“Thank God, thank God,” he said. “It could have been so much worse.” ♦

JANUARY 19, 2022

Colleyville attacker ‘bought into those antisemitic tropes,’ hostage survivor remarks

Jeffrey Cohen was one of four hostages held for 11 hours inside a Texas synagogue

By Matthew Kassel

Jeffrey Cohen, one of four hostages held at gunpoint for 11 hours at Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas, over the weekend, told *Jewish Insider* on Tuesday that Americans need to challenge instances of antisemitic rhetoric wherever they occur as part of an effort to forestall attacks against Jews that have occurred with increasing regularity in recent

years.

“You have both the left and the right using the same stereotypes and using the same words, and it becomes something that becomes more acceptable,” Cohen said in an interview from his home in Keller, about 15 miles northeast of Fort Worth. “As it gets more acceptable, things like this will happen.”

Cohen, 57, said the gunman, identified

as Malik Faisal Akram, a 44-year-old British national, spouted a litany of antisemitic conspiracy theories as he demanded the release of Afia Siddiqui, a Pakistani woman who is currently serving an 86-year sentence at a federal prison in Fort Worth for the attempted murder of U.S. officers in Afghanistan.

“These antisemitic tropes of ‘Jews control the world,’ ‘Jews control the media,’

'Jews control the banks,' 'Jews control the government' — he had bought into those," Cohen told JI. "He was firmly convinced that he could come in here, hold a bunch of Jews hostage, and we — the greater we, the U.S. — would trade we Jews for this one prisoner, this one woman, because we have that much power and influence."

Cohen, a staff engineer at Lockheed Martin who serves as vice president of the board of trustees at Beth Israel, a small Reform synagogue founded in 2006, said the attacker did not indicate where he had learned about such conspiracy theories.

"He rambled for most of the 11 hours," Cohen recalled. "We had some discussions. He would say, 'I'm a reasonable man aren't I, Jeff?' He knew our names. We told him."

"As the day went on, we began to understand how mentally ill he was and how much he had bought into the tropes," Cohen added. "He started spewing against the U.S., against Israel, against the Zionists."

But his hatred wasn't limited to Jews alone, according to Cohen. "He said, 'I spent time with the Blacks and they're so lazy, they don't rise up, they don't try to take power.'"

"He talked about Muslims in the U.K. and this country," Cohen said. "[He said,] 'They're not good Muslims. They're not real Muslims. They're too much too involved in the world and they don't even worship *Allah*,'" the Arabic word for God. "Who have I missed? I mean he hit just about everybody in his racial taunts: 'If they let me go, I'm going to go fight the Chinese because they're our real enemy.'"

"This was craziness that's coming out of his mind," Cohen said. "But it all comes from this place of hate."

Cohen said Akram, who was killed by FBI agents on Saturday as they stormed the building, was "different" from other white supremacist shooters who have attacked synagogues over the past few years in Pittsburgh and Poway, Calif. "He had a political agenda as well."

But Cohen warned that the United States will likely see more domestic terrorists who are motivated by anti-Jewish hatred if Americans remain largely passive in the face of rising antisemitism.

"We're going to have homegrown ones, too, that were not born in, you know, pick your country," he said. "They've been here

for years, and they will allow themselves to express these thoughts or these words because nobody challenges them, because nobody says, *nuh-uh*, because hate's OK right now."

"Hating the other is how our politicians get elected," said Cohen, who described himself as a "centrist."

At the interpersonal level, Cohen argued that "people need to start thinking about" the antisemitic stereotypes that may once have seemed acceptable but now must be actively countered.

"These little throwaway lines, you know, '*Ach*, damn Jew bankers,'" he told JI. "Those lines, which people just put off as being, alright, that's my crazy neighbor or whatever, they're not acceptable. They're not acceptable not just because it's not... things people say in polite company — they're not acceptable because these words have consequences, and the consequences that they have is they allow people to dehumanize other people and to buy into a stereotype that is not just this person hurt me — it is, his *whole community* hurt me."

"We've got to start challenging hate speech even when it's 'minor,' with quotes around that word," Cohen said.

From a more practical standpoint, Cohen said that "every Jewish organization that has a building in the country needs to do active-shooter courses and needs to do it regularly."

Cohen credited such training with helping him — along with a fellow congregant, who hasn't publicly identified himself, and Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker — escape on Saturday evening. A fourth hostage had been released earlier on Saturday.

"This is not hyperbole," he said. "I mean, I knew where the exits were. But until somebody says, 'Hey, in a situation like this, your number one priorities are run, hide, fight, in that order.' Well, you know, it's not like we could hide. We were all exposed."

"Option number one, run, meant we had to do what we needed to do to be where we needed to be," said Cohen, who recalled strategically positioning himself so he would have a straight and unobstructed line for the exit if the opportunity arose, as it did later in the evening.

Cohen recalled that at one point during

the standoff, as hunger kicked in, Akram had mentioned that he would let the hostages go one at a time as long as they promised to come back after 30 minutes.

"He said, 'Jeff, does that sound like a good deal to you? Would you come back?' I said, 'Honestly, no, it doesn't. Because it takes me 15 minutes to get home. It takes me 15 minutes to get back. That's 30 minutes right there. If I'm going to eat anything, I need another 20 minutes to prepare it and then to eat it. And then, I honestly don't know, would I be able to come back? Would the police stop me?'"

"He kind of laughed at that, and I laughed a little bit too, because I had turned it into a little bit of a joke because it was silly," Cohen said. "He laughed and he said, 'Oh yeah, you're right. So who would you let out?' And I pointed to the guy who had been feeling quite ill."

The man who would soon be released, according to Cohen, had been having heart palpitations, and his blood sugar was "bad." Initially, he was resistant, arguing that another of the hostages, whom Cohen estimated to be in his 70s, should be released instead, but eventually the ailing man agreed to be released.

"Our attacker didn't believe the — I'm gonna use the word generosity, because I don't have a better word — but he couldn't believe the altruistic generosity that we said, 'No, let the other guy go, let the other guy go,'" Cohen said.

Cohen suggested that such negotiations were also a direct result of the active-shooter courses he had taken. "If you're in a hostage situation, by being a person and identifying on a human level, it often is disarming to the person, to the attacker, because up to this point, you're a concept," he said. "The hostage is a concept, and frankly, the fact that we were talking with him helped keep him calm, and keeping him calm was what we were trying to do."

"It's important for people to understand that there's real people behind these stories, and even the attacker, you know, he was a real person, too," Cohen told JI. "But what's important is that we can do things to make ourselves safer."

"Bad things do happen in the world," he said, "and we need to do what we can." ♦

In the aftermath of Colleyville attack, Imam Abdullah Antepli has a message for fellow Muslims

Antepli joined Jewish Insider's podcast and declared that groups like CAIR and AMP 'don't represent the Muslim community,' but added he is more frustrated with the silent majority

By JI Staff

Following the hostage crisis in Colleyville, Texas, on Saturday, Imam Abdullah Antepli issued a blunt wake-up call to his own community. In a tweet thread on Sunday afternoon, Antepli, an associate professor at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy, urged the North American Muslim community to "have the morally required tough conversations about those '...polite Zionists are our enemies...'" rhetoric espoused by some Muslim thought leaders in recent months.

On Monday, Antepli joined *Jewish Insider's* "Limited Liability Podcast" to elaborate on his comments and to send a message of solidarity to the Jewish community. "Well, first of all, my deepest condolences and love and sympathy and prayers of strength and resilience to Jewish communities, not only in the Dallas area, but globally," Antepli remarked. "I can only imagine the shock waves of fear and terror and anxiety [that] has enveloped hearts and minds of many of my Jewish brothers and sisters."

Explaining his Twitter post, Antepli noted, "I love my community" before adding, "But this community is increasingly becoming vulnerable towards various forms of subtle and unsubtle antisemitism in the name of pro-Palestinian activism." Antepli said that he himself identifies as pro-Palestinian — it's "one of the very few labels I feel comfortable putting on myself." Antepli faulted what he described as "many bad faith actors" who "are taking and desecrating Palestinian suffering, solidarity with the Palestinians, and in the name of their suffering, are promoting irresponsibly, antisemitism, anti-Jewish hatred, and they

are trafficking in the good old antisemitism that the Jewish community and others have suffered for the last two millennia."

In his tweets on Sunday, Antepli referenced recent comments by Zahra Billoo, the executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations' (CAIR) San Francisco chapter in which she called "Zionist synagogues," Hillels and the Anti-Defamation League "enemies." Shortly after her comments became public, Billoo announced she was going on sabbatical.

"If this is not antisemitic and if this is not flaming the fans of antisemitism, what is? And here, a few weeks later, we are having these kinds of incidents," Antepli told podcast hosts Jarrod Bernstein and Rich Goldberg. "It is a moral call. The Muslim community has all they need to activate the Golden Rule and empathy, because we are facing a similar kind of hatred. We shouldn't do unto others, what others are doing unto us. I cannot express my frustration and anger enough, how sad I am that a vulnerable, marginalized community like mine, we are doing exactly [the same thing] to the Jewish community."

Antepli, who cofounded the Muslim Leadership Initiative, explained that the Muslim community is different from other faith-based communities in the United States. "There is no denominational breakdown. It is incredibly decentral. It is one of the most — ethnically, racially, sectarian-wise — diverse communities." Antepli added that groups such as CAIR and American Muslims for Palestine "don't represent the Muslim community. They represent 10% of the Muslim community." The challenge, Antepli argues, is "they are the only products in the market; they are the only public voices and faces in the American

discourse." Antepli expressed his frustration with the silent majority. "As angry as I am at CAIR or these irresponsible, hateful people, I am more angry with the 90% of the sleeping, inactive American Muslim majority. Enough is enough."

Antepli referred to himself as a "recovering antisemite," describing his "first-hand experience of antisemitism" growing up in a secular household in eastern Turkey. According to Antepli, at age 12, he read Henry Ford's pamphlet *The International Jew* and a children's version of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. By 15, he had read *Mein Kampf*. "Look at this: Russian and German antisemitic literature translated into 'beautiful' Turkish and given to me as part of my education," Antepli said. "What saved me is my religion. When I became religious I attended religious schools, with the moral framework that religion tried to build in you; I couldn't reconcile the fact that I was feeling convinced that Jews as [a] people, Judaism as a religion, are irredeemably evil."

"I will keep the 'recovering antisemite' label, which morally rings in my heart that I have to work hard. Look, one of the largest existing civil rights organizations in the United States, in the name of my community, in the name of my religion, [is] spewing antisemitism at a time that antisemitism is at an all-time high, at a time when 60% of the religiously affiliated or religiously inspired violence is against Jews and Judaism," Antepli added. "These people have no shame." ♦

New army program takes on growing mental health issues faced by young Israelis

The IDF is broadening the notion of military service for recruits suffering from emotional problems — no guns required

By Ruth Marks Eglash

At the end of this month, a small group of Israeli teens will begin a rite of passage, donning military fatigues for the first time as part of their compulsory military service. But unlike their peers, the training for this crop of recruits will differ in one key way: They will never hold or fire a weapon.

The new and unique program launched last summer by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) will enable individuals suffering from anxiety, depression, and other diagnosed emotional and mental health disorders to enlist and serve their country in a softer, kinder way.

The new army track, which has already had two intakes — in July and November — will allow up to 500 recruits who qualify to formally join the army each year. Like all soldiers, they will undergo most aspects of basic training, although their's will be condensed into only 10 days — most tracks are much longer — and they will be allowed home at the end of each day. In contrast to all other soldiers, however, participants will not spend any time on a shooting range.

After the initial induction, the soldiers will serve for the same duration as all other soldiers — 32 months for men, 24 months for women — but will automatically be assigned to roles and bases close to their homes. While they will not have to undertake some of the basic duties required of other soldiers, such as guard patrol, they will be offered many of the same opportunities and training for roles that do not require the bearing of arms.

For now, the army is keeping the new program low-profile, in part to avoid any stigma that might be attached to the enrolled soldiers, but also because such special allowances might serve to weaken morale. Only individuals deemed by professional

psychologists and military mental healthcare officers (Kaban) as needing such a framework will be offered a placement.

Often dubbed “the people’s army,” most Israelis are drafted into the military at 18 — with exceptions for Arab and some haredi citizens. Youths of all social and economic backgrounds, educational levels and even physical abilities serve side by side, abiding by the same strict rules and living under the same conditions, creating a kind of social equalizing apparatus.

Until recently, however, those with physical or mental disabilities were excluded from active service. Over the past few years, the army has taken some steps to widen inclusion, creating a “Special in Uniform” program for young people with autism, Down syndrome and other intellectual disabilities. But for those suffering from emotional or mental health disorders, for whom holding or shooting a gun might be a dangerous task, the option to formally serve remained elusive.

“Since its creation, the Israeli army has been unique compared to other armies,” Amotz Asa-El, a fellow at Shalom Hartman Institute, told Jewish Insider. “It was assigned by [founding Israeli Prime Minister] David Ben-Gurion to take on social tasks, most famously teaching Hebrew to new immigrants, and that is how it became part of Israel’s social agenda.”

He called the creation of the new program “some kind of latter-day reincarnation” of that process. “There is a distinction between social tasks and military tasks in the army.”

While the move to allow women to serve in more combat roles in recent years might be a way to increase the pool of personnel that will help Israel in future wars, the army has also made a clear effort to “appear socially conscious and crusading,” said Asa-

El.

The new program also addresses a serious and growing need that has been brought into sharp focus by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Data from the IDF’s Manpower Directorate from 2019 — before the lockdowns and disruptions to daily life — showed a nearly 50% increase in draft-age men receiving exemptions from military service for mental health issues, Haaretz reported last year.

The article highlighted the military’s growing concerns at the time over the increase in requests for such exemptions, as well as attempts by some to use mental health as an excuse not to serve. (The army would not provide JI with updated figures). In contrast, those receiving exemptions for physical reasons was much lower, remaining stable over the years at only around 2% of all male draftees a year, the Haaretz report said.

Hilla Hadas, executive director of Enosh, Israel’s Mental Health Association, told JI that mental health disabilities far outnumbered physical disabilities among young people in Israel and, according to figures compiled by her organization, the number of young Israelis suffering from mental health problems was rapidly rising.

She cited a 27% increase in the number of teenagers and youth seeking mental health treatment over the past year and said the age of those needing psychological help was trending younger. Further statistics published recently by Enosh revealed that one-in-four Israeli teenagers considered or inquired about psychological treatment in the past year.

“Physical disability is much lower compared to those with mental or emotional disabilities,” said Hadas, highlighting that the past two years have greatly changed perceptions of mental health, with a greater

acceptance and awareness that it is an issue that needs to be addressed.

"We are seeing more and more young people who need help, and if the army does not allow them to join, then their mental health could decline further," she said. While it's too soon to gauge what impact this could have on society, she theorized that it could ultimately lead to fewer young Israelis being eligible for military recruitment in the future.

"Not everyone is the same," Hadas pointed out. "There are some military jobs that women do not do, and there should be some jobs that those with mental health problems do not have to do."

She said she believed the new program was related to the army paying more attention to issues of mental health in recent years, including among those who are already in active service. She welcomed the program, saying it was important in offering

"maximum inclusion" for those who suffer from mental and emotional health issues.

"The army is there for our security, but it also has a role to play in society," Hadas explained. "The army exposes you to new friends, new professions, and eliminates the differences between people. It is still a key component of Israeli society and this can be a real tool of inclusion." ♦

JANUARY 19, 2022

The Arab influencer pushing the Abraham Accords from Abu Dhabi

Loay Alshareef's people-to-people bridge-building has given the Abu Dhabi resident a potentially powerful platform

By Tamara Zieve

This article first appeared in The Circuit.

At the age of 28, when Loay Alshareef, then a French language student from Saudi Arabia, stumbled into his homestay in Paris to discover he was surrounded by Stars of David — his instinct was to turn on his heels and find another family to stay with. "I didn't feel comfortable at the beginning," he told *The Circuit*.

Putting it mildly, Alshareef said he "didn't have positive views about Israel or about the Jewish people," at that time, in 2010.

"I called the school and they said 'take your time'" — and with the gentle guidance of his "wise" host mother, he did.

That accidental and intimate almost year-long encounter with a Jewish family proved to be a turning point for Alshareef, an observant Muslim, whose father is originally from Egypt and who also has family from Bahrain, which he described as "a very nice mix." Alshareef grew up in a middle-class household in Jeddah with his brother and sister.

Today, he is a prominent face among movers and shakers in the region who have embraced the Abraham Accords, normalization deals signed in September

2020 between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, and are working to strengthen people-to-people ties between those countries and beyond. He's caught the attention of Israeli, U.S. and Gulf leaders, and frequently meets with prominent figures visiting the UAE, where he has lived since 2020.

Alshareef owns a PR company in Abu Dhabi and works with both governmental and non-governmental entities, and also teaches English and Arabic. He has also learned Hebrew, largely from watching TV and listening to songs and podcasts, which he readily explained to *The Circuit* in the language. Prior to moving to the UAE, Alshareef lived in Bahrain, and spent a couple of years in the U.S., where he earned a master's degree in software engineering from Pennsylvania State University.

He hasn't yet visited Israel, but hopes to do so when the COVID-19 situation isn't so rife — he's waiting to visit his mother back in Jeddah for the same reason. Ultimately, he strives to get an academic degree in Israel and study the history of the Dead Sea Scrolls, further embracing his love of Biblical Hebrew which he describes as "very authentic and very deep."

He said that while he appreciates the

focus on Israel as a startup nation, "the history of Israel itself is also a beacon in our world and deserves to have more attention to it."

Alshareef's initial U-turn toward Jewish-Arab understanding wasn't a sharp one, but a gradual process. "I was going through an inner struggle," Alshareef recalled in a Zoom call from Abu Dhabi. "And this change wasn't easy, but I really wanted it."

Having been raised in a country where anti-Israel and antisemitic messaging was imbued in him, integrating into a Jewish home opened his eyes, his mind and his heart.

"When I engaged more and more with them [the Parisian Jewish family], it changed lots of negative views," he said.

It took courage, he said, to leave "the herd," among whom hatred of Jews was the norm.

"There are good Jews, bad Jews, good Christians, bad Christians, good Muslims, bad Muslims — but this is not what we were taught. We were told that the Jews are conspiring against Muslims and the Jews are evil, the Jews hate Muslims from the bottom of their hearts. And to me, it was very baffling."

Being a history buff, reading the Bible

was a significant element of Alshareef's transformation. As he studied, he began to understand the connection of the Jewish people to the land of Israel.

"The Bible is all about the story of the relationship between Israel, the people of Israel and their neighbors, and the people of Israel and God. So when you dig deep into it, you start to realize how connected the Jews are to this land and why this land specifically, and from the times of Joshua bin Nun entering the land to the times of the Maccabees taking control over Judea, you get to know the real history of Israel," he said. "And then you start to believe in the legitimacy of the Jewish belonging to the land of Israel, or to the land of Canaan."

Today, Alshareef is fully invested in building bridges between Jews and Arabs, but understands the inherent challenges in doing so. "You cannot blame" people, he said, for "being taught for 70 years hatred towards Jews and Israel." Today, he noted, Saudi Arabia is undergoing a "great change," leaving behind previous education curricula that he described as "disastrous."

Marcus Sheff, CEO of The Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se), pointed out that 15 of the hijackers in the September 11 attacks grew up in Saudi Arabia, as did Osama bin Laden.

"There is a clear and direct link between school education," Sheff told *The Circuit*. Changes to the education system were slow in coming but in recent years, he said, there has been an institutional effort for change and "there is a clear strategic approach to modernizing the curriculum."

IMPACT-se has been monitoring the curriculum since 2003, and on an annual basis since 2019, when they presented a report and a list of examples of necessary changes to Saudi Arabian authorities, after which significant changes were made. The organization has seen the removal of "a great deal of content" that demonized Jews, Christians and non-believers and promoted violent jihad.

"Ideas which forbade friendships with Jews and Christians have been taken out, which is what we see now — the Saudi effort to do business with the outside world," he added. "You can't do that if you forbid relations with them."

Alshareef promotes such relations through social media videos, which he shares with his 180,000 followers on Twitter and 38,000 followers on Instagram, as well as educational and face-to-face encounters.

He said he often responds to questions about how relations can be friendly now with Israel after leaders in the UAE used to express negative sentiments towards the Jewish state. "I always say this answer: You have to know that in politics, circumstances change. And when circumstances change, you have to adapt with this. Israel, we saw it as a threat, to be very honest. In the first creation of Israel, it was viewed as a threat. Time proved that Israel is part of the region and wants to blend with its neighbors. It never poses a threat. The country that really poses a threat to us is Iran."

Alshareef also uses his social media platforms to promote and defend the UAE. Ahead of the launch of Expo 2020 in Dubai, he posted a video on social media pushing back against a European Parliament resolution calling on member states not to participate in the event due to human rights violations by the country.

"Human rights is all about protecting individuals and groups against discrimination and providing, without omissions, healthcare, education and human dignity, and that is all encompassed in the UAE," he said.

Since 2016, when he started traveling to the UAE, he developed a love for the country.

He found the UAE to be "ahead of everyone else" in its "openness and acceptance of others."

"It's a metropolitan country, we have different cultures, different sects, different religions, different people, and the harmony that they are living and they feel that they are accepted is phenomenal to be very honest," he said.

"So I believe me and the UAE, we have the same agenda. The same agenda of accepting, the same agenda of embracing other cultures and other people and especially when it comes to Israel — after the Abraham Accords, I would never be able to live in a Gulf state better than the UAE."

He wouldn't be able to engage in the same peace-building activities with Israelis in Saudi Arabia, he said, because there is not yet the same acceptance of Israel among

the people as in the UAE. "They will accept when the time is right," he added.

He has been branded a "normalizer," a "Zionist wannabe" and the like. "But Saudis are changing, to be very honest, to the better, to more accepting of the fact that Israel is part of our region, the Jews are indigenous to the land of Israel and this is what I'm trying to say to people."

Alshareef accepts that he is met with some online backlash.

"I speak with knowledge and with evidence and I always say that my ultimate goal is to bring Jews and Muslims together. So for that sake, if I have haters, that's fine."

Alshareef and other like-minded influencers have been holding joint gatherings — such as Shabbat meals — with Jewish community members, and have celebrated both Jewish and Muslim festivals as a group.

Rabbi Levi Duchman, the first resident rabbi of the United Arab Emirates and head of Chabad in the UAE, who has engaged Alshareef in various Jewish community activities in the UAE, first met him in 2018, when Alshareef was living in Bahrain. "I was super impressed by his knowledge and by his enthusiasm of learning about other cultures, about building bridges and about learning from each other," he told *The Circuit*.

"I am proud of this courageous relationship with Loay, and all the other young Arab youth that have been playing a very instrumental role in bringing different cultures and traditions together," Duchman added. "I think it very well resonates with the warm welcome our community has very gratefully received from UAE leadership, together shaping a very bright future."

Rabbi Yehuda Sarna, chief rabbi of the Jewish Community of the Emirates, described Alshareef as the "consummate cultural translator."

He first met Alshareef in 2018 when he joined the Jewish community for a service in Dubai — "One of the few non-Jews who attended in those years," Sarna told *The Circuit*. "We opened up the Torah to show him our scroll and he started reading. It happened to be [Torah portion] Yitro — as he read aloud he exclaimed, 'The ten commandments!'" Sarna recalled.

He added that this past November, at

the Abu Dhabi Forum for Peace gathering, Alshareef was quoting freely from Jewish prophets “and applied them seamlessly to contemporary situations.”

“He sees the potential connection between people and lies over the divide to bridge them,” Sarna said. “He has no fear except the fear of being untruthful to himself and his principles.”

Alshareef also meets with Jewish organizations working in or visiting the country. Last week, together with fellow regional peace activists Saoud bin Hamoodah and Majed Alseyabi, Alshareef joined a roundtable hosted by the American Jewish Committee for an interfaith group of

undergraduate students visiting from the U.S.

Reva Gorelick, program director for AJC in Abu Dhabi, said Alshareef’s contributions to the discussion, during which he spoke about the importance of personal identity, “underscore his genuine and passionate support of Israel and Muslim-Jewish relationships, and his demonstrated commitment to the ongoing dialogue about and in the aftermath of the Abraham Accords.”

Alshareef says that he is seeing people changing their perspectives before his very eyes, and that is what keeps him motivated.

At the Expo, for instance, many of his

Saudi friends had the opportunity to interact with Israelis. “They liked how the Israelis are open to them. One of them told me, ‘I didn’t feel that I’m speaking to an enemy.’ Because we were told for 70 years you are the enemy. And so it will not change overnight. But with these continuous efforts and struggle, it will change, *inshallah*,” Alshareef predicted.

“I want to open a new page of Muslim-Jewish relations, and I will do whatever I have to do for this reason,” he said. “I believe the Abraham Accords are here to stay and will flourish — I hear people saying they will survive — I say they will flourish.” ♦

JANUARY 19, 2022

For two competing Democratic incumbents in Illinois, one dividing issue: Israel

A new congressional map pits Democratic Reps. Sean Casten and Marie Newman against each other in a district on Chicago’s Southwest Side

By Gabby Deutch

How much weight does one congressional vote carry with constituents — especially when that vote marks a thick line in the sand between opposing factions within the Democratic Party?

That is a question Chicago-area Jewish activists are considering as the newly drawn 6th Congressional District pits two incumbents — Reps. Marie Newman, a leader in the Congressional Progressive Caucus, and Sean Casten, a member of the more moderate New Democrats — against one another in the Democratic primary. Those activists, who are gearing up to play a large role in the race as fundraisers and potential influencers, despite the district’s small Jewish population, are centering their efforts on the September 2021 vote to authorize \$1 billion in supplemental funding for Israel’s Iron Dome missile-defense system.

The vote came several months after an intense round of fighting between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, and amid a war of

words in Congress between a small group of critics of Israel’s actions and the vast majority of House members. Casten voted for the additional funding; Newman was one of only eight House Democrats to vote against it.

“In [her] last race, I thought Marie was an excellent candidate,” said Howard Suskin, a Jewish Democrat who practices law in Chicago and donated to Newman’s campaign in 2020, referring to her defeat of eight-term Rep. Dan Lipinski (D-IL). “But to me, the decisive factor and why I’m supporting Sean Casten is Congresswoman’s Newman’s vote on the Iron Dome, which to me was inexplicable.”

Newman was elected to Congress in 2020 after defeating Lipinski, an eight-term incumbent and a conservative Democrat whom Newman targeted for his opposition to abortion. Newman saw a grassroots groundswell of support touched off by endorsements from Emily’s List and other progressive women’s organizations.

In November, Gov. J. B. Pritzker signed

off on the new congressional map that would ultimately see Casten and Newman run in the same district. The new 6th District leans Democratic, but it is not a guaranteed victory for Democrats. A handful of Republican contenders have entered the race, though they have raised very little money and earned few significant endorsements.

The new district includes more of Newman’s current constituents than Casten’s: 41% of its constituents are currently represented by Newman, while 23% are represented by Casten. But Newman will have a harder time distinguishing herself from Casten, who is also pro-choice, than she did from Lipinski.

“Running against Sean Casten, it’s completely different than when she ran against Dan Lipinski. She basically had very large national fundraising base of people who didn’t like the idea of a pro-life Democrat,” said Frank Calabrese, a Chicago political analyst. “She’s not going to tap into that liberal anger running against Sean

Casten.”

Instead, voters are faced with two candidates who have near-identical voting records — except on Israel.

The political action committee affiliated with J Street, the liberal pro-Israel organization, has endorsed both Casten and Newman in the past. J Street, which supported the \$1 billion in Iron Dome supplemental aid, hosted a fundraiser for Newman a couple of weeks after the vote. A J Street spokesperson told JI at the time that the organization “is proud to endorse Rep. Newman, who throughout her time in Congress has been a vocal and principled advocate for diplomacy-first American leadership and Israeli-Palestinian peace.”

But sources close to the organization believe J Street PAC will sit out the primary, waiting until Democratic voters choose their nominee. A J Street spokesperson did not respond to multiple requests for comment from JI.

Some of the pro-Israel activists who backed Lipinski in 2020 are skeptical of Casten’s positions on Israel, but view him as a better option than Newman.

“Sean Casten has always been willing and eager to meet to discuss issues relating to the U.S.-Israel relationship,” said David Rosenberg, president of CityPAC, a pro-Israel bipartisan political action committee. “Even if we do not see eye-to-eye on every issue, he has been pragmatic in his approach and has taken a much more favorable stance than Marie Newman on many critical issues and votes.”

Many pro-Israel Democrats in Chicago also sat out the 2020 primary between Newman and Lipinski. The advocacy group Democratic Majority for Israel (DMFI) did not endorse either candidate, citing Lipinski’s anti-abortion and anti-LGBTQ positions as out of touch with the Democratic Party. The group has not gotten involved in Casten’s past races, either. DMFI has not yet made an endorsement in the new 6th District, and a spokesperson did not respond to a request for comment from JI.

One prominent group of local pro-Israel Democrats has enthusiastically endorsed Casten in the primary.

“He’s great on all the issues we care about,” said Steve Sheffey, who writes a

Chicago-focused Jewish political newsletter and, with fellow activist Dana Gordon, runs Politics with Steve and Dana, a group that hosts events for Jewish community members and Democratic candidates. “He’s one of the leaders on the environment. He’s 100% pro-choice. And Israel is great. So there’s really no issue.”

Casten’s campaign website touts the endorsement from Sheffey and Gordon.

One Jewish Democratic activist who is involved with pro-choice advocacy in Chicago told JI that some progressive Jews who strongly supported Newman in her battle against Lipinski are now supporting only Casten — including people who have never taken Israel into consideration before in Democratic politics.

“There’s already a lot of donors who have given to both in the past who are just with him now,” said the activist.

While Newman’s vote against Iron Dome funding may play an outsized role for some donors, voters in her district — which has one of the largest Palestinian-American populations in the country — may feel differently. Most of those constituents would remain in the new 6th District.

The redrawn district “maintains what I would consider all of the Middle Eastern, Palestinian community,” Calabrese told JI in October.

For some Jewish progressives, Newman’s vote on Iron Dome does not outweigh her image as an iconic figure in the abortion rights movement.

“The reason why my heart and spirit are with Marie here is because her victory was really a movement. It had movement energy. So there was this grassroots, really broad coalition of all different organizations and groups and constituencies coming together to be like, Dan Lipinski is no longer acceptable,” said one Democratic political activist in Chicago who has been involved with several area congressional campaigns in the past but is not currently connected to either Newman or Casten. The activist, who is Jewish, is not considering the Iron Dome issue.

“I was part of that movement. And it’s important to me — her victory was really important for those of us for whom choice is a top priority.”

Both members have begun racking up

endorsements from local unions, activist groups and other members of Congress.

Newman again earned the endorsement of Emily’s List, while Planned Parenthood Action Fund endorsed both Casten and Newman. On the congressional side, Newman’s supporters include progressive leaders Reps. Pramila Jayapal (D-WA), Rashida Tlaib (D-MI) and Andre Carson (D-IN); Casten’s congressional backers include local Reps. Brad Schneider (D-IL) and Bill Foster (D-IL), as well as national figures including Rep. Maxine Waters (D-CA).

In the final three months of 2021, Casten raised more than \$700,000 — his highest-ever for the fourth quarter of a non-election year, a campaign spokesperson announced Monday. Newman’s campaign has not yet released recent fundraising totals, but several people active in Chicago politics told JI they expect Casten’s fourth-quarter haul to dwarf Newman’s.

A Newman campaign official told JI her campaign raised over \$1 million in 2021. Casten raised that much by September, bringing his year-to-date total close to \$2 million.

With five months until the primary in June, the candidates have yet to release attack ads against each other. That could change as the race gets closer, particularly since Newman “has a major scandal hanging over her head,” said Dick Simpson, a professor of political science at the University of Illinois in Chicago and a former Chicago alderman.

The House Committee on Ethics is expected to decide next week whether to begin a formal investigation into Newman, who has come under scrutiny for allegedly convincing a potential candidate not to run against her in 2020 by promising him a senior job in her office.

“It means that when she begins the campaign, she will be continually answering press questions on, ‘Why did she do that? Was she guilty?’ Particularly if the House committee decides to open a formal investigation,” Simpson explained. “That means that will be dragging on exactly during the time of the Democratic primary here.” ♦

Note: The writer’s father, Rep. Ted Deutch, chairs the House Committee on Ethics.

Former Michigan state legislator mounts challenge to Rashida Tlaib

Detroit native Shanelle Jackson served in the Michigan House of Representatives from 2007 to 2012

By Matthew Kassel

Shanelle Jackson, a former Michigan state legislator in Detroit who now works in the private sector, told *Jewish Insider* on Thursday that she intends to challenge Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-MI) in the open-seat Democratic House primary for the newly drawn 12th Congressional District.

"I've been rallying the troops," Jackson, who said she is planning to formally launch her campaign in mid-February, told *JI* in a phone interview. "I think there's a great opportunity there."

The face-off sets up what will likely be a closely watched primary battle as Tlaib, the well-known lawmaker and prominent member of the Squad, seeks a third term in a district she has not previously represented.

Tlaib, 45, announced last week that she would run for reelection in the 12th District after longtime Rep. Brenda Lawrence (D-MI) said she would retire at the end of her term. Tlaib has represented Michigan's 13th Congressional District, which includes parts of Detroit and its surrounding suburbs, since 2019.

Jackson, 41, previously ran against Tlaib in the six-way primary to represent the 13th District in 2018. She came in last with 5% of the vote — Tlaib prevailed with 31% — but believes the updated House map presents a new opportunity in the neighboring 12th District, which favors Democrats. The primary will be held on Aug. 2.

"I think right now is the moment," Jackson, who is Black, told *JI*. "It's almost palpable in the city of Detroit and in this region: Black women are stepping up in leadership. We're hungry to have our voice in the room and at the table."

Speaking to *JI*, the congressional hopeful drew a sharp contrast with Tlaib, a member

of the Democratic Socialists of America, while presenting herself as a centrist Democrat who is in favor of "pro-business" policies that, she suggested, are in keeping with a broader commitment to bipartisan cooperation. "I think we'll be very different, obviously, in our approaches," she told *JI*.

"I don't hate banks," said Jackson, who works as a government relations senior manager at OppLoans, a lending agency based in Chicago. "I don't hate subprime lenders. I know, as an African American that has been poor and has been better, that we need all options on the table and that our situation is nuanced."

Jackson also emphasized that she is a supporter of Israel, which is almost certain to emerge as a high-profile issue in the race as Jewish community members and pro-Israel advocates have taken issue with instances in which Tlaib, the daughter of Palestinian immigrants who is among the first two Muslim women to serve in the House, has established herself as a fierce critic of the Jewish state.

"When she gets that mic in front of her, she goes crazy and goes to many extremes," Jackson, who served with Tlaib in the Michigan statehouse, told *JI*. "I really feel like it's now or never as it pertains to being able to sort of shut her down and calm down some of the antisemitic rhetoric."

Tlaib's campaign did not respond to a request for comment from *JI*.

Jackson, an evangelical Christian, said she has long felt a "strong reverence" for the Jewish state. In 2010, as a state representative, Jackson said she visited Israel on a delegation with the local Jewish federation, an experience she characterized as having left an "indelible" impression on her foreign policy outlook.

"Just saying it real plain, I believe that

the United States and Israel are sisters, and I can't imagine living in a world where our nation didn't have Israel's back," she said. "It's heartbreaking, to be honest with you, to have Rep. Tlaib not even wanting to explore that path."

Jackson opposes the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement targeting the Jewish state — Tlaib, for her part, is among a small handful of House Democrats who support the effort — and advocates for increasing bilateral trade between Michigan and Israel.

She endorsed a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which Tlaib has rejected. "She obviously is carrying the water of Palestine in all that she does," Jackson said of Tlaib. "Meanwhile, Detroiters, we don't have a voice. It's just the truth."

As she prepares to launch her campaign, Jackson said she is planning to reach out to Jewish voters in the Detroit-area district, which takes in Southfield, a majority-Black suburban enclave that is also home to a robust Jewish community. "I want to convey to the Jewish community that, as an African-American woman, to me, our stories are extremely similar," she told *JI*. "We can look at the history of the civil rights movement, we can look at our shared history here in this country."

"I think that we have sort of a natural bond, and obviously that's not there with her," Jackson said of Tlaib. "So where I don't have the answers, or the things that I don't know, I'm open to learning because of this natural bond and kinship and love that I have for the Jewish community."

The 12th District covers Wayne and Oakland Counties and also includes the traditionally conservative city of Livonia as well as Dearborn, which is home to the largest Arab-American population in the

United States.

Michigan's independent redistricting committee approved the new congressional boundaries in late December, but the map is currently being challenged in court by a lawsuit that alleges the updated lines disempower Black voters.

Beyond the district, Jackson said she has had conversations with pro-Israel advocates in Florida, Georgia and Illinois as she seeks to establish a national support to compete with Tlaib, who, as of September, had raised nearly \$1.4 million, according to the latest filings from the Federal Election Commission.

David Rosenberg, the president of CityPAC, a bipartisan pro-Israel advocacy

group in Chicago, said he recently spoke with Jackson via Zoom and was enthused by her candidacy. "Shanelle's approach to the U.S.-Israel relationship is one of pragmatism and passion," he told JI. "She understands that it is in both America's and Israel's interest for the relationship to be as strong as possible."

"As a spiritual person, it seems like she just has a natural affinity for the land of Israel," Rosenberg added. "Shanelle fully appreciates the harm that Rashida Tlaib has done to Israel and to the Jewish community over the years and knows that it also harms her constituents. She would be a breath of fresh air for those who care about Israel and Jewish-related causes if she were to serve in Congress in Tlaib's place."

Jackson was born and raised in Detroit and graduated with a degree in political science from the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She served in the Michigan House of Representatives from 2007 to 2012.

The former lawmaker has, according to her LinkedIn page, previously worked in various roles with the Michigan Department Of Transportation, Detroit International Bridge Co. and Marathon Petroleum Corporation.

Tlaib and Jackson are so far the only candidates who have declared that they are running in the district.

"I think she is definitely in for a challenge," Jackson said. "The district is right for that." ♦

JANUARY 17, 2022

Paul Packer calls early dismissal from U.S. commission 'shocking'

The former chairman of the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad was replaced last week by television personality Star Jones Lugo

By Matthew Kassel

On Friday, President Joe Biden announced that he had selected the lawyer and TV personality Star Jones Lugo to lead the United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, the government agency responsible for identifying and protecting historic sites in Eastern and Central Europe, including those connected to the Holocaust.

Paul Packer, until last week the commission's chairman, says the high-profile appointment came as news to him.

Just hours before the announcement, Packer said he received a letter, written on behalf of the president, requesting that he resign from his position or face termination by the end of the day.

The missive from the White House, reviewed by *Jewish Insider*, was a surprise to Packer, who had been appointed by former President Donald Trump in 2017 and expected that he would remain in the role

until his term was set to expire on Feb. 27.

Packer wrote back to Gautam Raghavan, the deputy director of the White House presidential personnel office, that he was "shocked" to receive the letter, according to correspondence he shared with JI. It was "incomprehensible" why the administration "would act this way," he said, adding, "While I can understand your desire to appoint a new chairman when my term ends in February, I ask that you reconsider today's threat."

He says he has yet to receive a response.

"To be fired two weeks before Holocaust Memorial Day, I think, is inconceivable," Packer said in an interview with JI on Monday afternoon, referring to the annual day of commemoration that takes place on Jan. 27.

For months, Packer, who is Jewish, said he had been leading efforts in coordination with foreign officials and senior leaders at the State Department to launch two projects

tied to the occasion — commemorating mass graves in Poland and cemeteries in Lithuania.

His departure, he said, jeopardizes such efforts. "That's why I was so surprised, with the rise of antisemitism in America, to get cut short with five weeks left," he told JI.

"This is something where every single day now, there's an average of at least a few Holocaust survivors who are passing away," he said, "and it's not only incumbent upon myself, it's incumbent upon all of us, every American, to make sure that the words 'never again' really mean never again."

Packer, who is a Republican, suggested that his dismissal was politically motivated, not least, he said, because the Biden administration had also terminated the other Trump-appointed board members on the commission.

"This administration took a bipartisan issue and made it very partisan," Packer charged, "and that's what's disappointing."

A White House official confirmed that a similar letter was sent to seven members of the board on Friday but did not respond directly to Packer's allegations.

Among those forced out was Darren Beattie, a former Trump White House aide who was, over the objection of the Anti-Defamation League, appointed to the board in 2020 despite having previously attended a conference with white nationalists. More recently, he has promoted baseless conspiracy theories associated with the Capitol riot on Jan. 6, 2021.

In addition to Jones, Biden appointed six new board members to serve on the commission, including G. Jonathan Greenwald, a former longtime diplomat who is a member of J Street, and Nancy K. Kaufman, who previously served as CEO of

the National Council of Jewish Women.

Despite his disapproval of the manner in which the White House had handled his ouster, Packer said he was nevertheless "honored to see that a TV star" was replacing him.

Jones, an original co-host on "The View," will also take over as the judge on the 24th season of the long-running syndicated TV show "Divorce Court" this September.

"I guess the commission has garnered so much attention and has really elevated itself over the last four-plus years," he told JI. "We really are voices for the Six Million."

Packer said he was proud of his efforts to encourage Holocaust remembrance abroad, including, among other things, a memorandum of understanding in which the Republic of Georgia agreed to partner

with the U.S. to renovate a Jewish cemetery. "It's been an unbelievable run," said Packer, who now lives in Florida and is a managing member of Globis Capital.

"This is something that was a labor of love," he said of the unpaid role with the commission. "I had more satisfaction over the last four-plus years doing this than probably any personal satisfaction that I've ever had on Wall Street."

Though he is no longer with the commission, he said his work is not over. "As a proud American and a proud Jew and somebody living in America now," he told JI, "my next step when it comes to this will just still be advocacy, advocating for those who were murdered." ♦