

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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JANUARY 27, 2022

Nides to JI: People-to-people relations will build the Abraham Accords

In his first interview with an English-language media outlet, Amb. Tom Nides shares his vision for deepening the normalization agreements

By Ruth Marks Eglash

The first-ever Abraham Accords Working Group, inaugurated last night, will strengthen and deepen the connections forged since 2020 between Israel and five Muslim-majority countries, and underscore the importance of Israel's long-standing ties with Egypt and Jordan, U.S. Ambassador to Israel Tom Nides told Jewish Insider in an exclusive interview on Thursday.

In his first interview with an English-language media outlet since becoming ambassador, Nides explained the importance of the U.S.-facilitated forum, which will bring together Israel-based ambassadors and representatives of Arab states that have peace and normalization agreements with Israel. Its goal, he said, is not only to build upon already blooming business ties or to expand the people-to-people relations but also to show the benefits of cooperation and serve as an example of stability and peace in a volatile region.

Egypt and Jordan have peace agreements with Israel dating back to the 1970s and 1990s respectively. The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain signed the

Abraham Accords with Israel in September 2020, followed by Kosovo, with Morocco and Sudan normalizing ties later that year.

"At the end of the day, it's all about the people of these countries recognizing the importance of the other's culture and of other people," Nides told JI. "That will drive business, it will drive political stability, and the national security implications of this are also obviously quite important."

"The more comfortable these countries are vis-a-vis working with each other, the more it will only enhance the long-term benefits for all the countries and for Israel," he added.

Nides said that the Biden administration is "fully committed" to continuing the work already put in motion by the partner countries and by the previous administration, giving credit to Jared Kushner, former President Donald Trump's senior advisor, and former U.S. ambassador to Israel, David Friedman. As Washington now seeks to broaden those accords with new regional partners, Nides said he believes his role as envoy to Israel is to deepen and solidify the already existing ties.

At the inaugural meeting, which

was held virtually and included UAE Ambassador to Israel Mohamed al-Khaja, Bahraini Ambassador to Israel Khaled al-Jalahma, Moroccan Charge' d'Affaires to Israel Abderrahim Beyyoudh, Counselor to the U.S. Department of State Derek Chollet and Director General of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Alon Ushpiz, Nides laid out the group's three main working areas.

Boosting bilateral trade, including developing energy and technological partnerships, is one aim.

Second, Nides said, the involved countries will work to increase tourism with Israel. There are already direct flights between Israel and the UAE, as well as between Israel and Morocco. Flights from Tel Aviv to Manama, Bahrain, are set to begin in a few months.

"We need to figure out how to dramatically increase tourism," Nides told JI, describing plans to convene in the coming months a regional meet-up of tourism ministers, including representatives from Washington.

"The reality is there's already been a dramatic increase in Emiratis coming to Israel and a lot of Israelis going to Dubai; for

the Moroccans, the holy sites in Israel are important, and vice versa, there's going to be an enormous influx of Jews to Morocco," Nides predicted. "I think the people-to-people [angle] is the single biggest part of the Abraham Accords and I really want to figure out how to fix any problems, because the tourism piece is an enormously important part of this."

In addition to building connections via trade and travel, Nides said there will also be an effort to increase cultural collaboration. His vision, he told JI, is to create an "Abraham Accords/normalization cup," that will draw youth from all partner countries to sports tournaments, joint cultural activities in dancing and singing, and more.

"We want to show to the world why it is so interesting to be part of the Abraham Accords," Nides said, adding that cultural events would also introduce younger kids to the many unique cultural aspects of each of the participating countries, including food and entertainment. "We'll have a whole working group around cultural activity," he said.

"I don't like to be simple about this, but at the end of day, the more people understand each other, the better off they are when there are problems — it is an easier way to resolve

issues," he said. "Personal connections drive policy, there's no question about it, and my role is to try to create the mechanism in which to accomplish that."

While Egypt and Jordan are not part of the latest round of normalization, Nides called them the "grandparents" of such agreements and said it was important to include them in this working forum, especially in terms of developing economic and regional ties further.

Nides arrived in Israel at the end of November, and although he is still living in a hotel (after the envoy's official residence in Herzliya was sold to the late GOP super donor Sheldon Adelson), he has made quite an impression on the country and via social media.

On Twitter, he has shared details of his meetings with a variety of Israeli officials and decision-makers, and with regular citizens. He's also used his account to share the wares he's sampled in some of the country's best-known eateries.

In his only other interview so far, Nides generated some controversy by telling mass-circulation daily *Yediot Aharonot* that unlike the previous ambassador, Friedman, he would refrain from visiting West Bank settlements. He also discussed his close

relationships with senior administration officials such as Secretary of State Tony Blinken, White House Chief of Staff Ron Klain, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and CIA chief William Burns.

Asked by JI about criticism that the Biden administration might not be as enthusiastic or dedicated to broadening Abraham Accords in the same way as the previous administration, Nides countered that his team in Jerusalem and representatives of the State Department in Washington are spending "enormous amounts of time on this."

"I give the Trump administration, Jared and the team, Ambassador Friedman, an enormous amount of credit for starting this," he said. "But as you know, the easy part of these things is starting them, the more difficult part is deepening the piece and getting things done."

"If it was that easy, then we would have had all these countries join the first time around," Nides continued. "So obviously, we have work to do, but make no mistake, we are not only focusing on it, but we also believe that it's really important. It's really important for the region and it's important for the Biden administration." ♦

JANUARY 25, 2022

In a first, an official Holocaust Remembrance Day event in Egypt

The event was the first of two in the region — the other will be held in Abu Dhabi — hosted by the U.S. Embassy and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum

By Gabby Deutch

Egyptian officials, American scholars and foreign diplomats gathered on Monday at a luxury hotel on the banks of the Nile to commemorate International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the first time such an event has ever been held in Egypt.

The gathering was hosted by the U.S. Embassy in Egypt and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, D.C. A similar event will

take place later this week in Abu Dhabi, where Noura al Kaabi, the United Arab Emirates' culture minister, is slated to speak. (International Holocaust Remembrance Day is commemorated on Jan. 27, the day the Auschwitz concentration camp was liberated.) Plans for additional events in Riyadh and Dubai were scrapped because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It was symbolically, I think, very important that we were able to do this in

Egypt," Robert Satloff, executive director of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy and a speaker at the event, told *Jewish Insider* from Cairo. "I was just delighted with what happened today and the fact that this occurred in the largest, most populous, trendsetting Arab state."

The event is the latest symbol of changing attitudes in the Middle East in the wake of the Abraham Accords signed in September 2020. While Egypt was the

first Arab nation to sign a peace treaty with Israel, in 1978, the Camp David Accords did not lead to a significant shift in Egyptian attitudes toward Israelis and Jews.

"There is a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, but that peace has always been a cold peace," said Mina Abdelmalak, who conducts Arabic outreach for the USHMM and was born and raised in Egypt. "It was never translated into the mainstream, people-to-people level. It was mostly government-to-government. So to be able to push this a little bit, that is significant."

Abdelmalak and Tad Stahnke, the museum's international outreach director, spoke at the event, as did Jonathan R. Cohen, the U.S. ambassador to Egypt, and Magda Haroun, the head of Egypt's Jewish community. Satloff took questions from the audience following a screening of "Among the Righteous," a documentary he produced about Arabs who helped protect and save Jews during the Holocaust.

"If you would have told me a few years ago that such an event would take place in Cairo, I would laugh," Abdelmalak told JI on Monday. "Until this morning, it wouldn't have completely surprised me if the government of Egypt would say, 'Due to security reasons, this is not going to happen.'"

Some four dozen people attended the invitation-only event, including human rights activists, business people and former members of Egypt's parliament.

"This wasn't hidden away in some obscure corner of some small, out-of-the-

way building. This was right smack in the middle of Cairo. This was an event to which diplomats from around the world — Middle East diplomats, European diplomats and ambassadors — were there," explained Satloff.

The Abraham Accords "raised the bar for everyone," Satloff said, including the "first-generation peacemakers" — Egypt and Jordan. But there were other factors at play, too: Egypt, like Israel, sees Iran as a foe. Last week, Egypt's permanent representative to the United Nations gave a speech in Arabic on behalf of the Arab Group, condemning Holocaust denial as the United Nations General Assembly debated and then passed a resolution on the subject. The only country to vote against the resolution was Iran.

Satloff attributed the attitude change at least in part to Israel's new leadership. With the "post-[Benjamin] Netanyahu enhancement of bilateral relations, it's easier to be more public about it," added Satloff. Domestically in Egypt, there is also "more consideration of the issues of religious minorities, countering extremism, interfaith relations. I think all these come together to make the environment more receptive and accessible to the type of event that we had today."

The public event marked an important milestone for the USHMM, but came only after the USHMM's efforts to build relationships in Arabic-speaking countries over many years.

"We have for the past several years been working to cultivate partnerships

across the Middle East and North Africa to develop educational programming to reach young adults and emerging leaders in those countries with accurate and relevant information about the Holocaust," said Stahnke. Education efforts have begun to have an effect in Morocco and Tunisia, he added. But yesterday's event in Egypt, the most populous Arab country with nearly 100 million people, marked the most visible success.

Outright Holocaust denial is rarer than it used to be, Satloff said, explaining that it has been replaced by "relativism." He defined the concept as "the idea that bad stuff happened, but bad stuff happens all the time, that sort of thing. Or: 600, 60,000, 600,000, 6 million, what's the difference?"

Holocaust distortion has found a home in Egypt in the past because of the overall sentiment in the country regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Abdelmalak said the result is that "the Holocaust has been weaponized" in Egypt.

"It takes a lot of work with civil society to ensure that we push back against years and years of Holocaust denial being established in that part of the world," Abdelmalak added. Attendees at the event also reflected upon Egypt's own treatment of its Jewish community, including in the 1940s, when some Arab leaders spread Nazi propaganda and pogroms racked Cairo.

"I think everybody left with the sense that it was worthwhile and valuable," said Satloff, "and perhaps just the first of many, which itself is a very important milestone." ♦

JANUARY 24, 2022

The 'Seder Guy' attempting a leap to the LG's office

Eric Lesser got his start as the 'bag man' on the Obama campaign. He's already a state senator and has his eyes set on becoming lieutenant governor

By Gabby Deutch

As a 23-year-old junior staffer on Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, Eric Lesser was tasked with being the future

president's "bag man." Lesser made sure everyone's suitcases got from one place to the next as the campaign hopped from city to city. One April

morning, he loaded up the U-Haul for a drive from Philadelphia to Harrisburg, Pa., with suitcases and other precious cargo — matzah, macaroons, bottles

of Manischewitz and several Maxwell House Haggadahs.

The campaign was on a whistle-stop tour through Pennsylvania, where Obama would lose to then-Sen. Hillary Clinton a few days later. Given the intense campaign schedule, Lesser knew he wouldn't make it home to Longmeadow, Mass., for the Passover Seder. So he organized one on the campaign trail.

Twelve hours later, in a windowless basement multipurpose room in the Harrisburg Sheraton, Lesser and other Jewish staffers commenced the Seder. A handful of senior campaign aides, including Obama confidant Valerie Jarrett and current White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki, joined them around the table.

"Then a Secret Service agent pops his head in and peeks under the table and looks around," said Lesser. "And then I hear this voice, a very familiar voice going, 'Oh, is this where the Seder is?' And it was Obama."

Once seated, Obama asked attendees about their families' traditions and their favorite parts of the festive holiday meal. At the end of the Seder, when everyone said "Next year in Jerusalem," Obama added, "Next year in the White House."

And so it happened: For the eight years of Obama's presidency, the original group of campaign staffers continued to meet in the West Wing for a Seder. But by 2016, the group had grown and changed. Younger staffers like Lesser now brought spouses and children. Lesser had finished a stint working in the White House, graduated from Harvard Law School and was serving as a Massachusetts state senator; like a good politician, he showed up to the 2016 Seder with something local — *shmurah matzah* made in Massachusetts.

Now, as a candidate for lieutenant governor in Massachusetts, Lesser has more on his plate than handling bags and planning a Seder.

"I think that there's a collective feeling in Massachusetts that it's a great place to live. People are very proud of Massachusetts and our reputation as being leaders on so many issues," Lesser, 36, told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview at a café in downtown Boston. "But it's really hard to live here. And that's going to be the heart of my campaign."

The argument at the heart of the Western Massachusetts native's campaign is that

Boston isn't the only part of the state that deserves a chance to prosper. "The overall message that I'm going to focus on is that different regions of the state can work together and complement each other," he explained.

The Democratic frontrunner for governor is Attorney General Maura Healey, who officially entered the race last week after months of speculation. She has worked in the Boston area her whole career, and Lesser thinks a lieutenant governor from further west than Worcester will even out the ticket.

"I think that providing a little bit of a sense of regional equity and balance to a ticket is really important," said Lesser. "The area of the state I represent, the greater Springfield area, is a big area, but it's often invisible to decision makers on Beacon Hill."

Lesser enters the race as a four-term state senator, first elected in 2014 at age 29 — then the youngest state senator in Massachusetts. He has joined a crowded field of Democrats vying to become the state's second-in-command. Other contenders include Salem Mayor Kim Driscoll, fellow Western Massachusetts state Sen. Adam Hinds, state Rep. Tami Gouveia and entrepreneur Bret Bero.

Charlie Baker, Massachusetts's popular Republican governor, has announced he will not seek a third term, creating the best statewide electoral environment for Massachusetts Democrats in years. (Massachusetts is one of six states with an entirely Democratic congressional delegation.)

"People don't realize we've had one Democratic governor in 32 years here in Massachusetts. That's it," said Doug Rubin, a Boston-based Democratic strategist. "I think this is a unique opportunity for Democrats to step up."

While Democrats elsewhere in the country fret over a midterm election season characterized by growing inflation and plummeting approval ratings for President Joe Biden, Massachusetts Democrats see an opportunity to take the governor's mansion. The only Republican candidate for governor, Geoff Diehl, is running a Trump-inspired campaign, a move that almost certainly will not gain support in a state where former President Donald Trump earned just 32%

of the vote in 2020. (Baker, a moderate Republican, won 66% of the vote in his 2018 reelection — the same percentage Biden received in 2020.)

Healey's two competitors, Harvard political science professor Danielle Allen and state Sen. Sonia Chang-Díaz, are both running as progressives, while Healey has avoided that term since she entered the race.

Lesser, for his part, has "always identified myself as a progressive," he said. "I was a supporter and a co-sponsor of the police reform that we did in Massachusetts last year, which is one of the most aggressive reforms in the entire country. And I did that in an area that's more purple, but I believed in it, and it was the right thing to do."

He intends to win over those skeptical voters by "focusing on those core issues: People feel the prices are going up, they feel rent checks going up, they feel housing going up."

"Families are really stressed about childcare," explained Lesser.

In Massachusetts, the governor and lieutenant governor do not run on a joint ticket; they are elected separately. (If elected, Lesser would be the first Jewish individual to serve in either position.) The lieutenant governor role is viewed by many as a jumping-off point for higher office. The most successful person to do that was John Kerry, who served as lieutenant governor in the 1980s.

Lieutenant governor hopefuls are "thinking about being in a position where they can cultivate a statewide following and improve their political fortunes," said Jerold Duquette, a Western Massachusetts resident and political science professor at Central Connecticut State University.

Lesser's political ambitions took hold his freshman year of high school, when he notched two achievements: being elected high school student body president (a position he held for four years straight) and becoming the youngest member of the Longmeadow Democratic Town Committee.

"We had to give him a ride," said Candy Glazer, who chaired the committee for 25 years, "because he wasn't old enough to drive."

One day, Lesser walked into a school assembly to see several teachers lined up in a row, as if in a firing line.

"These teachers aren't coming back," the principal said, the result of statewide budget cuts. "I remember as a 16-year-old, sitting there and feeling really angry that 14-, 15- and 16-year-olds were paying the price for frankly, bad decisions made somewhere else," recalled Lesser.

He undertook an effort to override the budget cuts by getting town residents to vote to raise their own taxes and better fund local schools. He canvassed door-to-door with other students, parents and teachers. But it wasn't enough.

"The first vote failed. But something really instructive happened that I've always kind of kept with me, which is [that] after the first vote failed, the pink slips went out, and it became very formalized, what was going to happen," said Lesser. "I sensed that the community's feelings changed when people saw the stakes, that it was going to be these teachers. So we put another measure back up."

The second vote passed, and 40 teachers got to keep their jobs.

"I remember him being at the community house watching the votes come in and seeing how happy the teachers were that they could rip up the pink slips," said Glazer. "That was something that was very unusual for a teenager to do and just caught my attention. And we've kept the political friendship through the years."

Lesser's early political activism also owes a great deal to the Jewish community in Western Massachusetts. Born in Queens, Lesser and his family moved to Longmeadow, a town of 15,000 outside Springfield, when he was 7.

"I remember the very first night we stayed over in the house — it was so quiet, and you could hear bugs," said Lesser. "We were sort of scared because it felt like a very foreign place."

The Lessers eventually adjusted. His parents opened a small medical practice, where his father was a doctor and his mother was a social worker. That upward mobility for his parents, who both grew up working-class, was a big reason for the move. And a desire to help other people in Western Massachusetts achieve that same success has animated Lesser's time in office.

"We've got a high quality of life. We've got a comparatively better cost of living [than

Boston]," Lesser said of his part of the state. But unlike Boston, "we don't have that red-hot economy."

The policy for which he is best known is the East-West Rail, a transit project to create a rail service linking Boston, Worcester, Springfield and Pittsfield.

"We actually have gotten pretty close," Lesser said of the progress made on the project in less than 10 years. "When I first ran for office in 2014, as a 28-year-old, I was laughed out of a lot of rooms. And the idea of connecting the state by high-speed rail was really dismissed as some sort of fantasy. And we just kept at it."

When the legislature first passed a bill requiring the state to study the feasibility of the project, Baker vetoed it. But now, a commuter train already links Boston and Worcester — and the state is competing for federal funding from the federal infrastructure bill passed last year to build out the rest of the train service.

"The focus he's had not just in Western Mass., but in other parts of the state — the East-West Rail, some of the work with gateway cities — that work, I think is incredibly important, and positions him really well in a statewide race," said Rubin, the Boston-based strategist.

With more people than ever working remotely, Lesser argues that a rail link connecting the state simply makes sense: People who are tired of the high cost of living in Boston can move out closer to the Berkshires, in the western part of the state, and commute into Boston a couple of times week if needed. "They get on a train and go to Boston. They can do Zooms the whole way back and forth," he explained.

Part of this is a ploy to get fellow Western Mass. locals — people like him who left the region as young professionals looking for opportunity elsewhere — to consider moving back home.

"Eric likes to say, when he speaks to political groups, to people particularly like my age, or parents or grandparents, 'How many people here have adult children who do not live here?' And a lot of hands go up," Glazer said.

Many young members of the region's tight-knit Jewish community have moved away as well. "It was a really vibrant place to grow up in terms of Jewish life. But

the challenges the Jewish community in Western Mass. has faced are similar to the challenges that the broader community has faced, which is [that] we were an industrial center," Lesser noted. "When those jobs left in the '80s, '90s and 2000s, the Boston area was able to fill in new jobs in tech and in higher ed and education. Western Mass. has done some of that, but it has obviously not been done at the same pace."

The Springfield metro area has a strong, historic Jewish community ("the public schools were closed on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur," Lesser noted), perhaps best known for serving as the home of the Harold Grinspoon Foundation and the headquarters of the nonprofit PJ Library. Growing up, his family was active in a local Reform synagogue, and that's where Lesser's interest in social justice and political advocacy was kindled.

He participated in a Black-Jewish dialogue with a local Baptist church, and as a member of his synagogue's NFTY youth group, he participated in action campaigns with the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. In April of 2002, as a high school student, he traveled to Washington to join a pro-Israel march on the National Mall that drew tens of thousands of participants at the height of the Second Intifada.

In 2008, Lesser traveled with Obama to Israel for a brief campaign visit, which was followed by a stop in Berlin. "It was not lost on me that I was on a plane with potentially the first African American president leaving Israel on the way to Germany," recalled Lesser. "I thought about my grandparents and what they would have thought," he added. "Only in America."

Later, he traveled to the Jewish state on a delegation of Massachusetts legislators. ("We introduced him as the Seder guy," said Jeremy Burton, executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston, which organized the trip.)

"It's very different going in an official capacity. One of the things that struck me is, it's a very important relationship for Massachusetts," Lesser said of the state's connection to Israel. Several hundred Israeli companies operate in Massachusetts, employing people across the Bay State, and Lesser was pleased to learn the extent of the business and cultural ties between the

states. “Certainly something as lieutenant governor I’d want to do is to continue to strengthen those ties.”

Combating hate crimes and bias incidents has been a priority for Lesser, who helped create a nonprofit security grant program in Massachusetts, modeled off a similar program at the federal level. The program began with \$100,000 in 2018. Four years later, the program has \$2.1 million to award to “nonprofits at risk of terrorist or hate violence: LGBTQ organizations, African American churches, mosques, synagogues and religious centers,” he explained.

Ultimately, it’s an understanding of the nitty-gritty parts of the policymaking process that Lesser wants to bring to the job of lieutenant governor. “I’m the only candidate that has really extensive federal experience, and historically, a big part of our job has also been helping to work on the nuts and bolts of getting the federal money to the state.”

What Lesser actually did when he worked for the federal government was a bit different. “He was upbeat, positive, friendly, obviously bright and inquiring,” David Axelrod, a senior advisor and close friend to Obama, who hired Lesser as an assistant when Obama became president, told JI. “He always got our bags to the right place at the right time, so I figured he could probably get me to the right place at the right time in the White House.”

His job was to make sure Axelrod could keep everything together. Not infrequently, he had to draw upon his knowledge of stain removal.

“I’m not the most fastidious person in the world. I’m famous for spilling stuff on myself,” Axelrod admitted. “Eric always kept club soda nearby. He would race in there like a volunteer fire department, because I’d have to go on TV or I’d have to be somewhere and, you know, having a big block of oatmeal on my jacket was not desirable.”

It’s a gig that could have been scripted into “Veep,” the HBO sitcom that skewered American politics. Lesser would know: He served as a consultant for the show throughout its seven-season run. He loves the show, and like any good political junkie, he has strong opinions on the three seminal political shows of the last two decades — “Veep,” “The West Wing” and “House of Cards.”

Like the other activists and political insiders who came of age during the optimistic Obama era of “Yes, we can,” Lesser’s favorite of the three shows doesn’t come as a surprise.

“‘House of Cards’ is too cynical for me,” Lesser admitted. “I’m a diehard ‘West Wing’ fan.”

Jed Bartlet — the earnest, idealistic president in “The West Wing” — got his start in New England politics, too. ♦

JANUARY 26, 2022

She could be the first Jew of color in Congress

A self-described ‘HinJew,’ Vermont state Sen. Kesha Ram Hinsdale is hoping to make history in the House

By Matthew Kassel

It seems almost comically overdetermined that Kesha Ram Hinsdale, a progressive state senator and former assemblywoman in Vermont, is now mounting a bid for Congress that in many ways embodies the fears of her old high school classmate, the former Trump administration advisor Stephen Miller.

The two occasionally butted heads when they crossed paths as students at Santa Monica High School in the early 2000s, just as Miller was honing his reputation as a young conservative provocateur eager to puncture such long-standing liberal precepts as multiculturalism, diversity and inclusion — all of which are core to Ram Hinsdale’s newly launched campaign for Vermont’s at-large House seat.

“I hope to be able to advance the

experience of immigrants in the United States, of Black and brown people in the United States,” Ram Hinsdale said in a recent interview with *Jewish Insider*, “but first we have to undo a lot of the damage that people like Stephen Miller have caused.”

The 35-year-old state lawmaker of Jewish and Indian descent wants to upend the status quo in historic fashion as she seeks to dismantle what for generations has been an unbroken chain of congressmen who have exerted their dominance over federal politics in the Green Mountain State.

Despite its reputation as a national standard-bearer of progressive politics, Vermont is the only state in the country never to have elected a woman to Congress, much to the dismay of local political activists who have regarded the distinction as a historical blemish in urgent need of

being corrected.

With three female candidates now competing to succeed Rep. Peter Welch (D-VT) in the Democratic primary this August, Vermont stands poised to send a woman to Congress for the first time in history.

Should Ram Hinsdale prevail in the upcoming general election, the Chittenden County legislator would not only become Vermont’s first congresswoman but also the first member of a racial minority ever to hold the state’s lone House seat.

Rounding out the list is another unprecedented achievement that, in something of an unexpected inversion, would represent what no other state in the country seems to have done before at the congressional level, according to a variety of Jewish leaders, professors and activists who were consulted by JI. If elected, Ram

Hinsdale would likely enter the House as the first Jew of color, a possibility that, for the most part, has so far flown under the radar.

For her part, Ram Hinsdale said she only recently made the discovery during discussions with Jewish organizations in the state and nationally, including J Street, the left-leaning Israel advocacy group. While she is still actively mulling what it means for her personally, not to mention the state and the country, the Vermont lawmaker suggested that the insight has helped underscore what she regards as a key tenet of her campaign.

"This is a critical moment in our nation's history," Ram Hinsdale, who lives in the Burlington area of northwestern Vermont, told JI. "I believe we need to truly meet the moment and think about how, particularly the Democratic Party, works to align around the most marginalized and unheard voices."

As a self-described "HinJew," Ram Hinsdale occupies somewhat rarefied political territory in Vermont, which, as the second-whitest state in the nation, has long been defined by a lack of diversity, even as recent census data showed that its minority population is on the rise. The first-term senator, who announced her candidacy in mid-January, believes that her background speaks to a pressing need that has long been unfulfilled at the federal level.

"Even though it's a truly unique story, it's also a very American story," she said, "and one that Vermonters really resonate with as they think about the complicated backstories they may have as well."

If Ram Hinsdale wants to make history of another sort in what would amount to a hat trick of previously unaccomplished political feats, her electoral track record as a local lawmaker in Vermont suggests she is in no way pursuing a quixotic mission for the House.

Ram Hinsdale was just 22 when she defeated a Vermont Progressive Party incumbent to become the youngest state legislator in the country in 2008. She assumed the role just after receiving her bachelor's degree in natural resource planning and political science from the University of Vermont in Burlington, where

the California native became so enamored of her newfound environs that she never left. In 2016, after eight years and four terms in the Assembly, Ram Hinsdale set her sights on statewide office, placing third in the Democratic primary for lieutenant governor.

Following a short break from public office, during which she received her master's in public administration from the Harvard Kennedy School, Ram Hinsdale marked her return to politics with an exclamation point of sorts, mounting a state Senate bid that would result in her election last cycle as the first woman of color to serve in Vermont's upper house.

Throughout a combined decade or so as an elected official, Ram Hinsdale has carved out a diversity of legislative niches around issues such as environmental advocacy, healthcare, affordable housing and social inclusion in public schools and beyond.

Jen Ellis, a Burlington-area resident and public school teacher who is better known as the woman who crafted Sen. Bernie Sanders' (I-VT) famous mittens, told JI that Ram Hinsdale is the kind of legislator who "shows up for people." Last April, for instance, Ellis recalled that Ram Hinsdale was "the only senator" to have appeared alongside public school teachers who were rallying against proposed pension cuts in the state capital of Montpelier.

"She brought letters that her constituents had sent to her and she read them out loud. I was so moved by her speech that I actually gave her the mittens I was wearing," said Ellis, who furnished the Vermont legislator with a bright-red pair of the highly coveted hand coverings that, as Ram Hinsdale enthused on social media at the time, had matched the scarf she was wearing.

Last Thursday, Ellis announced to her more than 20,000 Twitter followers that she had made a new pair of personalized mittens for Ram Hinsdale, whose congressional campaign she has endorsed enthusiastically. For the "Bernie mitten-maker," such gestures seem designed to draw parallels with Vermont's progressive godfather. "She's so similar to Bernie, actually, in her politics and in her intelligence and her work ethic and the way that she approaches Vermonters," Ellis said of Ram Hinsdale. "The thing I really admire about her is she's not a performative ally."

Ram Hinsdale is among three Democratic candidates vying to replace Welch, who announced last November that he was vacating his seat after Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-VT), the longest-serving member of the upper chamber, said he would retire at the end of his current term. While Welch is favored for the Senate seat, having earned a high-profile endorsement from Sanders the day he launched his campaign, political observers in Vermont believe the congressional primary is comparatively more mutable at the moment.

A recent poll from Vermont Public Radio and Vermont PBS suggests that race remains in flux, not least because Ram Hinsdale announced her candidacy just after the findings were published and, consequently, wasn't included in the survey. Among 600 respondents, Molly Gray, the current lieutenant governor of Vermont, earned the most support, pulling in 21%, while Becca Balint of Brattleboro, who serves as president of the state Senate, came in with 7%. Still, the overwhelming share of those who were surveyed, 70%, were largely undecided with seven months to go until the primary.

"I think it's far too early to anoint a front-runner based on that survey," said Matthew Dickinson, a professor of political science at Middlebury College who specializes in state elections in Vermont. "At this point, I wouldn't say anyone's a longshot."

While one of the three candidates is expected to claim the rare open seat after advancing to the general election, thanks to a political environment that is widely viewed as hospitable to Democratic House candidates in the state, they are all largely aligned in the progressive lane, having expressed their support for such policies as the Green New Deal, Medicare for All and affordable housing, among others.

Beyond such commonalities are some distinguishing stylistic approaches, said Dickinson, who suggests that Gray, 37, is in some ways presenting herself as a sort of establishment figurehead, owing to her longstanding ties to both Welch and Leahy as well as what appears to be strong name recognition throughout the state. For her part, Balint, 53, began her recent campaign kickoff video with a reference to her Jewish grandfather, who was murdered

in the Holocaust, before transitioning to a testimonial about her efforts to achieve social and political inclusion in Vermont as the first openly gay woman elected to the state Senate.

Elaine Haney, the executive director of Emerge Vermont, a political organization that supports women candidates in the Democratic Party, said in an interview that Ram Hinsdale is “far more deeply involved with communities of color,” including Indigenous groups across Vermont, than her primary opponents. “She’s always been very engaged,” Haney told JI, “in making sure representation happens at whatever table she’s at.”

Ram Hinsdale, who in addition to her role as a state legislator works as a consultant on what she has described as “equity and community building work with school districts, municipalities and nonprofits,” is a founding member of Emerge, which, according to Haney, won’t be making an endorsement in the primary.

The congressional hopeful has characterized herself as a “practical progressive,” and experts suggested that she may prove capable of tapping into the national grassroots fundraising network that has buoyed several left-wing candidates in recent years who have also renounced contributions from corporate political action committees. Just hours after announcing her candidacy, Ram Hinsdale’s campaign trumpeted that she had raised nearly \$130,000. By comparison, Balint’s campaign reported a first-day fundraising total of more than \$125,000 this past December, while Gray pulled in \$50,000.

When she launched her first bid for the legislature, “it was pre-Obamacare, and I was running without access to health care,” said Ram Hinsdale. “It was very real for me that we have bold ideas, but we take incremental steps forward, and we don’t leave the negotiating table empty-handed. I think we’ve seen a lot of practical progressive champions in Washington who would otherwise be accused of being inflexible or too far to the extreme left, and nothing could be further from the truth.”

Ram Hinsdale voiced her admiration for both Leahy and Welch, the latter of whom she described as “incredibly responsive to constituent needs,” while identifying

with prominent members of the House Progressive Caucus such as Reps. Jamie Raskin (D-MD), Pramila Jayapal (D-WA) and Ayanna Pressley (D-MA).

Born and raised in Santa Monica, Calif., Ram Hinsdale has long found herself in liminal territory. She is the daughter of an Indian-American Hindu father, whose family was displaced during the violent partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, and a Jewish mother, whose descendants fled the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv before the Holocaust. They met as college students at UCLA and were married in a Hindu-Jewish ceremony that long predated what Ram Hinsdale described as a now “fashionable” trend in Silicon Valley and beyond for so-called “HinJew” weddings that invoke the customs and traditions of both religions.

While childhood wasn’t so harmonious for Ram Hinsdale, including moments of financial upheaval, such circumstances have since contributed to her appreciation for government services such as free lunch programs that, she says, helped the family subsist during trying times. Though her parents found some early entrepreneurial success with a cleverly named Indian restaurant, New Delhi Deli, in Los Angeles, the premature closure of their ill-fated Irish pub would expose the family to a series of mounting business woes that were compounded by a subsequent divorce.

Still, Ram Hinsdale looks back on her adolescence, when she and her two siblings were raised primarily by their mother, with a sense of gratitude for the values that she describes as core to her personal and political self-conception.

“I think it gave me an incredible lens on the ways that our cultures and our religions often have much more in common than they are different,” Ram Hinsdale said of growing up in a household in which every aspect of her heritage was emphasized. “Both of my parents felt really strongly about the environment and environmental protection. They felt really strongly about giving back to the community and having a sense of justice and fairness.”

Equally formative, she suggested, was her experience attending a Jewish preschool

that would “shape” much of her “early leadership and exploration” on the path to elected office. “This idea that you could question everything,” Ram Hinsdale mused, “feels particularly based in my Jewish faith.”

During her time at Santa Monica High School, the future lawmaker found herself clashing with Miller as he unleashed his litany of stridently right-wing arguments that she now regards as presaging the anti-immigration policies and conservative culture war fixations that he would help enshrine years later as a senior Trump advisor.

“He would find me in the hallway and argue that climate change was caused by volcanoes, and I was wrong that it was man-made,” Ram Hinsdale, who at the time was finding her voice as an outspoken progressive advocate, said of her interactions with Miller, though she clarified that they had not always been so fractious. In her recollection, Miller had seemed innocuous enough when he traveled in her brother’s middle school social circle, but the young conservative provocateur became increasingly radical in the ensuing years, “and shed a lot of his friends who didn’t present as white” or align with his views.

In December of 2020, Ram Hinsdale enjoyed some measure of personal and professional vindication as one of Vermont’s three electors to cast a vote for incoming President Joe Biden, gleefully remarking in an interview that “nothing” had given her “greater pleasure” because her teenage foe would soon be gone from the White House.

Speaking with JI, Ram Hinsdale was careful not to suggest that her decision to run for Congress had been motivated, at least in any overwhelming sense, by a desire to undo the policies of her old classmate, even as she acknowledged that any reasonable Democratic mandate would naturally require such an approach.

“I don’t want to give him that much credit, and I don’t want our politics to be so winner-take-all that someone like him could impact people’s lives in that way,” she said of Miller, who is now 36 and the founder of a recently launched political group, America First Legal, that targets the alleged indiscretions of the Biden administration. “In many ways, perhaps going to a diverse, pretty socially liberal school like ours helped him sharpen

his insidious conservative arguments and become an architect of so many damaging policies.”

As her campaign moves into its third week, Ram Hinsdale has also distinguished herself by proudly and somewhat playfully embracing her Hindu and Jewish heritage — in contrast, say, with Sanders, who has often kept his Jewish identity at a distance even as he has become more outspoken about his faith in recent years. The state senator identifies as a “HinJew” in her Twitter biography, and, near the beginning of her campaign kickoff video, characterizes the mixed-religion household of her childhood as “your average Hindu-Jewish family that celebrated Christmas alongside Hanukkah and Diwali.”

In a concession to her Christian husband, Jacob Hinsdale, whom she married last year in a weekend-long lakeside wedding in Vermont that included a two-hour-long Indian ceremony as well as a conventionally American celebration, Ram Hinsdale said she dispensed with some of the more traditionally Jewish customs such as the ritual glass breaking, which they had briefly considered before abandoning the custom. “Honestly, my husband, who is French Canadian and Congregationalist, is like, ‘There’s a lot going on,’” she said with a laugh.

Still, “Hava Nagila” found its way into the festivities, as did a “bagel brunch” that her Jewish family members — who in Vermont include Jonathan Goldsmith, the former Dos Equis spokesperson more widely known as “The Most Interesting Man in the World,” and his wife, Barbara, a “direct cousin” of Ram Hinsdale’s mother — found inclusive enough. “My family felt very celebrated and seen as Jews,” she recalled.

“I’m very impressed to see someone running for office embrace their Jewish identity,” said Rabbi Eliyahu Junik, a program director at Chabad of Burlington who has known Ram Hinsdale for years and recently saw her when she participated in a public menorah-lighting ceremony during Hanukkah. Owing in large part to rising incidents of antisemitic violence, he said, “we feel that she is a great example for the

Jewish community of how you can embrace it and celebrate it and not be intimidated by all the hate that’s going on around these days.”

Susan Leff, the president of Temple Sinai, a Reform synagogue in South Burlington, and the founding director of the nonprofit organization Jewish Communities of Vermont, agreed. “We’re excited about the prospect that she might represent Vermont in Congress as a Jewish woman,” she said of Ram Hinsdale. “We’d be proud to have the first Jewish woman of color in Congress.”

Even before she took office, Ram Hinsdale had sought engagement with her Jewish roots both locally and internationally, including a Birthright trip to Israel a decade ago that marked her first and only visit to the Jewish state. “We had a lot of in-depth conversations about Judaism on the trip,” said Rabbi Zalman Wilhelm, who runs the Chabad Jewish Student Center at the University of Vermont and traveled with Ram Hinsdale to Israel, where she had a bat mitzvah at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. “I know it was something that was very emotional for her.”

“What was meaningful to me about that was this idea that I had grown up with a sense, in some ways, that you had to have the resources to have a fancy coming-of-age event, and that was never in the cards for my family,” Ram Hinsdale said of her own experiencing participating in the Jewish rite of passage. “It actually meant a lot that some of the Jewish people I was around, when I visited Israel, made it clear that all I had to do was really believe in the words I was saying and have that faith.”

By extending the trip an extra day so she could visit the Knesset, Ram Hinsdale said she was further “moved to see how much imagery and art was in the building,” with an emphasis on “living close to the land and being in relationship, peacefully, with one another,” that particularly appealed to her as a Jewish Vermonter.

“The harvest has a place in so many of our numerous holidays, and that is a lot of what I would consider to be the Jewish experience here in Vermont,” Ram Hinsdale said while highlighting a program that she participates in with the local Hillel in an effort to provide students with local vegan and vegetarian Shabbat meals. “We’re constantly talking about ways that we can

live into those Jewish values of thinking about how to take care of others when we take care of ourselves and repair what’s broken.”

On Middle East foreign policy matters, Ram Hinsdale largely aligns with J Street’s approach to the region. By way of example, she expressed support for Rep. Andy Levin’s (D-MI) Two-State Solution Act, which, among other things, would bar Israel from using U.S. military assistance to annex the West Bank, while also endorsing legislation sponsored by Rep. Betty McCollum (D-MN) that would place additional restrictions on American aid to Israel.

The state senator suggested that she supported legislation to provide \$1 billion in supplemental funding for Israel’s Iron Dome missile-defense system that passed the House by an overwhelming margin last September. Still, she did not explicitly state whether she would have voted in favor of the measure and, instead, reiterated a broader goal of ensuring “that the resources we send do not support occupation or annexation.” Ram Hinsdale voiced some sympathy for a small handful of lawmakers on the left who criticized the manner in which the legislation, now stalled in the Senate, had been introduced, while emphasizing her appreciation for Sanders’ suggestion that the U.S. provide the same amount of funding for Gaza.

Such hesitancy is a departure from comments Ram Hinsdale made to *eJewishPhilanthropy* following her visit to Israel years ago. In the interview, published in 2012, Ram Hinsdale said she had been inspired by the IDF soldiers who accompanied her as they traveled through the country. “It is Israel ‘Defense’ Forces not the Israel ‘Attack’ Forces,” Ram said, offering what the publication described as a full-throated defense of Israel’s right to defend itself. “The media is often skewed against Israel and it was important for me to see firsthand how it feels to live in Israel and, in the case of the soldiers, to defend it.”

In the interview with JI, Ram Hinsdale argued that she would bring a “unique lens” to such issues if she is elected this November. “I personally cannot imagine what it’s like to be a child in the West Bank, to be a child directly impacted by the Israel-Palestine ongoing conflict,” she explained,

recounting an experience from her youth in which she was detained by the police for what she described as a “bogus” curfew charge that left her feeling “dehumanized” after a court appearance. “I do know what it’s like to be arrested at the age of 13 in Los Angeles simply for looking too brown and how traumatic that experience was for me,” she said, noting that the officers were “joking about getting overtime” and questioned whether she “was Mexican or not.”

“That kind of one-time experience of detention and feeling like my rights were being stripped from me left a deep mark on me, and I can only imagine what that’s like to go through daily,” she elaborated. “I don’t know that a perspective like mine, as a Jewish person of color who also has family who fled a Muslim country in 1948, can be replicated in Washington without my presence and that lived experience.”

Ram Hinsdale said she believes the U.S. can learn from Israel when it comes to environmental issues such as “water retention,” and she expressed reservations with the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions

movement, which came up last fall in Burlington during a heated City Council meeting that drew national attention. “I would weigh that very carefully,” she said of the movement, “even if we were talking about our greatest enemies, because ultimately, what that does is punish hard-working, peaceful people who have nothing to do with any of these conflicts. I get very concerned when that is brought up first as a possible action against Israel.”

Describing Israel as “an important partner” even beyond questions of foreign policy, Ram Hinsdale said that America’s relationship with the Jewish state is one she looks forward to “continuing” as a member of the House. But she argued that debates over Middle East policy can, at times, distract from engaging with Jewish issues that have little to do with what she recognized as a meaningful alliance between the U.S. and Israel. “So often,” Ram Hinsdale said, “we frame Jewish identity around that conflict in a way that we lose track, in the United States, of the other important facets of Jewish identity.”

The aspiring congresswoman believes that her Jewish background provides her with a rare vantage point from which she can explore such matters. In the initial weeks of her campaign, for instance, Ram Hinsdale said that she has invited “a number of temples in the state” to participate in open dialogue with her about a question she has been mulling since recently discovering the added factor that indicates her election would be historic for Jewish community members not only in Vermont but across the country.

“What does it mean to other people to potentially send the first Jewish person of color to Congress?” Ram Hinsdale said she is now wondering aloud, though the aspiring congresswoman suggested that she hadn’t yet alighted on an answer. “Let’s have an open conversation, because we as Jews very much like to ask questions and answer them in community. I’m really open to doing that. I think it would be a really meaningful process.” ♦

JANUARY 27, 2022

Nina Turner’s uphill challenge in Cleveland rematch

Turner’s Democratic primary race against Rep. Shontel Brown in Ohio’s 11th District comes amid changing political landscape

By Matthew Kassel

The sun had barely risen on Wednesday morning, but Pinchas Landis, an Orthodox Jewish rabbi from University Heights in suburban Cleveland, was already fielding a cascade of text messages as media reports of a surprise rematch between Nina Turner and freshman Rep. Shontel Brown (D-OH) began circulating among members of his community.

Turner’s announcement arrived only five months after Landis had helped unite large segments of Cleveland’s sizable Orthodox community in opposition to the former state

senator and progressive stalwart, largely over views she expressed last year during the course of her campaign that many Jewish voters saw as hostile to Israel.

With just over three months remaining until the scheduled May primary, Landis told *Jewish Insider* that he was “springing to action” hours after Turner declared her primary challenge. But he also voiced a note of optimism that Brown, who received widespread support from the local Jewish community and positioned herself as a friend to Israel, would have no trouble defending the seat.

Such assertions of confidence were

somewhat harder to find at the beginning of the race a year ago. In her stunning upset over Turner on election night last August, Brown overcame an initial polling deficit of more than 30 points in the hotly contested special House election to succeed Rep. Marcia Fudge (D-OH), who vacated the seat for a Cabinet position in the Biden administration.

In an interview last week on *JJ’s “Limited Liability Podcast,”* Brown credited the Jewish community with helping her “get over the finish line” in a tight race. “This was an organic, authentic relationship that had been forming for years,” said Brown,

who prevailed over Turner by a margin of six points. "I have been working in the community as a legislator for nine years, six of them as a county council representative representing communities with a significantly large Jewish population."

Brown outperformed Turner in heavily Jewish enclaves of Ohio's 11th Congressional District, including Shaker Heights and Beachwood, which saw some of the highest turnout in the race. The majority-Black district, which is home to an estimated population of 22,000 Jewish voters, currently encompasses Cleveland as well as a sliver of Akron and the suburbs in between. While the boundaries have remained unsettled since the state Supreme Court struck down a GOP-drawn map as unconstitutional in mid-January, the redrawn district is expected to take in more of Cleveland.

The race was widely viewed as Turner's to lose thanks in part to her high name recognition throughout the district as well as her status as a former presidential campaign surrogate for Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT), which would help activate a national grassroots fundraising network she used to establish an early cash advantage.

But now, some political observers in Cleveland believe the reverse dynamic is more likely to play out as Turner mounts her comeback campaign during an election year in which Democrats will presumably be tending to more immediate concerns as they seek to defend their tenuous majority in the House.

"Let's face it, there are bigger fish to fry," David Cohen, a professor of political science at the University of Akron's Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics, told JI. "This is a very steep uphill battle for her," he said of Turner. "I just don't see how she's going to make it to the summit."

Jeff Rusnak, a Democratic strategist in Cleveland who supported Brown in the primary but wasn't involved with her campaign, agreed. "Maybe it's kind of odd for Nina to pick this fight at this moment," he mused. "I think it's a lot tougher now than it was last year."

"She's decided to run when you have an incumbent who is serving and doing a very solid job and performing and making important votes," he said, arguing that

voters in the district "don't need any more divisiveness" after a bruising primary that played out prominently on the national stage.

In the final weeks of the race, a number of leading Democrats, including House Majority Whip Jim Clyburn (D-SC), in Brown's camp, and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), backing Turner, descended on the district in a high-profile showdown between competing moderate and progressive factions within the party.

In a statement provided by Brown's campaign, the congresswoman, 46, touted her efforts to advance the policy objectives of the Biden administration since she entered the House more than two months ago after coasting through the general election in the heavily Democratic district.

"I hit the ground running, and I look forward to continuing to fight and deliver for the 11th Congressional District," said Brown, who emphasized that she had voted in favor of the \$1 trillion infrastructure package that passed the House with overwhelming Democratic support last November.

Turner, for her part, opposed immediately approving the infrastructure package, aligning herself with the group of Squad members in the House who voted against the funding in protest of the Senate's delay in passing a broader social safety net and climate package.

"These are unprecedented times," Turner, 54, said in a campaign kickoff video she shared with her more than 500,000 Twitter followers on Wednesday. "Our leaders can't settle for 'just enough.' They must fight for what we deserve. I'm Nina Turner and I'm running for Congress because we deserve a voice for change in Washington."

The two candidates' opposing views on infrastructure in particular may come into focus as the primary heats up, experts who spoke with JI predicted, because the issue illustrates a key difference between their approaches to Democratic cooperation. Last cycle, Turner struggled to recover from past comments in which she had suggested that voting for Joe Biden was akin to eating a "bowl of shit," while Brown, a former Cuyahoga County councilwoman and party chair, presented herself as faithful to the Democratic establishment.

Such contrasts also took hold around Middle East foreign policy, particularly during the May conflict between Israel and Hamas. As Brown expressed support for Israel's "right to defend its citizens," Turner shared a social media post likening Israel to an apartheid state that alarmed a number of Jewish voters in the district.

Earlier in the race, Turner had also endorsed conditioning aid to Israel, echoing calls from some far-left members of Congress who have criticized U.S. funding for the Jewish state.

"Nina Turner deciding to run against Shontel demonstrates how out of touch she is with the district's constituents, especially after blaming 'dark money' for her last loss," said Jessica Cohen, an Orthodox resident of Cleveland Heights who campaigned for Brown last summer.

Turner has spoken out against political action committees that poured money into the race, including Democratic Majority for Israel (DMFI), which spent more than \$2 million on Brown's behalf. During her concession speech last August, Turner alleged that "evil money" had "manipulated and maligned" the election, drawing scrutiny from critics who charged that she had promoted an antisemitic trope, though her campaign later clarified that she had been referring to "corporate" and "Republican money."

Cohen wasn't buying it. "Nina's dog whistles and her antipathy to Cleveland's Jewish community will not be forgotten," she said.

"Nina Turner continues to oppose the money that came into her special election race from Republican and Trump-aligned sources," Kara Turrentine, Turner's campaign manager, said in an email to JI on Wednesday. Turner "will continue to fight against the rising tide of hate, division and racism fueling the growing number of antisemitic attacks across this nation."

Marty Gelfand, an attorney and Jewish community activist in Cleveland Heights, supported Turner in the primary and believes she was treated unfairly by outside groups during the election. "I do think that she was defamed in the last primary race by a lot of dark money," he said.

Despite some reservations about opposing a Democratic incumbent, Gelfand

suggested that he was considering backing Turner again in the midterms because he thinks so highly of her. “I intend to speak with Nina in the near future about what her thoughts are,” Gelfand told JI, “and then I’ll make a decision.”

“Nina Turner believes in the human dignity of all people and values the relationship she built with Cleveland’s Jewish community as a city councilwoman and state senator,” Turrentine said. “She will continue to stand with Cleveland’s Jewish community and all the people of greater Cleveland.”

In an interview with JI last February, A.D. Motzen, the former Ohio regional director for Agudath Israel of America who is now the group’s national director of state relations, described Turner as attentive to the needs of Orthodox constituents, particularly around school choice, when she served as a state senator in Cleveland between 2008 and 2014. “This came from her belief in helping struggling families in her district to get the education they needed,” he said shortly after Turner announced her candidacy in the special election.

Turrentine said the campaign “intends to reach every person, every family and every community” within the newly drawn district, the lines of which the Republican state legislature has until Feb. 13 to enact following the first map’s rejection..

Meshulam Ungar, a student at Brandeis University who is originally from Maryland

and helped canvass for Brown last summer in Orthodox communities throughout the suburbs of Cleveland, said he expected “that the Jewish community that came out for” Brown “in 2021 will come out in 2022” as well.

Pro-Israel groups that backed Brown last cycle also expressed their continued support for the congresswoman. Mark Mellman, the president of DMFI’s political arm, said Brown “has proven to be an effective advocate for Northeast Ohio and for the Democratic agenda.”

Jeff Mendelsohn, the executive director of Pro-Israel America, the bipartisan advocacy group whose political arm raised \$800,000 for Brown’s campaign last year, said his organization is “proud to support” the congresswoman as she seeks her first full term in the House. “We look forward to mobilizing our community again,” he told JI.

The Jewish Democratic Council of America also endorsed Brown in the primary but did not respond to an email inquiry from JI about future support.

It remains to be seen whether Turner will garner support from such influential progressives as Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez now that Brown has joined their ranks in Washington.

Speaking with JI’s “Limited Liability Podcast” last week, Brown described her relationship with the Squad as “collegial,” noting that there have been “some areas” where they have been able to work together.

“Where there are areas that we are unable to work together, I hope to be able to convince them to maybe change their opinions about things,” Brown said. “It’s a work in progress.”

A spokesperson for Justice Democrats, the left-wing political group that endorsed Turner last year and has frequently targeted Democratic incumbents, did not respond to a request for comment.

With several important primaries now on the horizon, it is also an open question as to whether individual campaign contributions and other spending from outside groups will flow as freely into the race again. Last year, millions of dollars supporting both Brown and Turner poured into the district.

Turner’s campaign said on Thursday that she had raised more than \$100,000 on the first day of fundraising.

By comparison, Brown was sitting on more than \$276,000 as of mid-November, according to the most recent filings from the Federal Election Commission.

Not long after Turner announced her candidacy, DMFI’s political arm indicated a measure of caution in an email blast on Wednesday afternoon, including a bright-red siren emoji in the subject line that suggested the pro-Israel group was still keeping a vigilant eye on the race as it asked that supporters kick in a donation.

“While we have many tough fights ahead to defeat extreme anti-Israel candidates,” the message warned, “Nina Turner leads the pack.” ♦

JANUARY 24, 2022

Meet the Israeli diplomat at the forefront of the Abraham Accords

Eitan Na’eh was the first Israeli diplomat in the UAE before moving to Bahrain

By Ruth Marks Eglash

This story first appeared on The Circuit.

Less than a month after presenting his credentials to King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, Israel’s ambassador to Bahrain, Eitan Na’eh, is still marveling at his new position. The longtime Israeli diplomat, who

was famously expelled from Turkey in 2018, some days cannot believe that he represents his country in an Arab kingdom that less than two years ago had no formal ties with Israel.

“I sit here in Manama and look outside to a beautiful view of the [Persian] Gulf, and I am still pinching myself,” Na’eh told *Jewish*

Insider in a recent interview. “I feel lucky to work in these countries.”

Na’eh arrived in Manama, Bahrain’s capital, last November, vacating his post in Abu Dhabi, where he spent nine months serving as the first diplomat to represent Israel in the United Arab Emirates. Israel signed normalization agreements with

the UAE and Bahrain in September 2020, with Morocco and Sudan joining what is now known as the Abraham Accords a few months later.

"From the first day I landed here, I found myself sitting in homes and living rooms with people from all over the region – Iraqis, Saudis, Kuwaitis, Lebanese and Palestinians – and they all told me, 'Enough, let's put our political disagreements aside and do business; that in its place will calm things down,'" Na'eh told JI over Zoom from Manama.

While Na'eh is focused on developing economic and trade ties between the two countries, he is also well aware of the kingdom's regional and geographic value as a country that sits in the Persian Gulf just off the coast of Saudi Arabia.

"We are looking at Bahrain as a gateway to the region, to the East, and from the East to Israel," he said.

Aside from the lucrative financial opportunities, including in tourism — Na'eh said direct flights from Tel Aviv to Manama will begin in a few months once the Omicron strain of COVID-19 subsides — Israel is long believed to have its sights set on drawing Saudi Arabia, the most powerful country in the region, into a closer alliance.

"What I've learned since coming here is that Bahrain and Saudi enjoy a very close and amicable relationship, and I hope we will find an opportunity to cooperate with

them," Na'eh said. "Israel is obviously open to such cooperation — economic, financial, trade and investment."

"Coming now from the first two countries – the UAE and Bahrain – that signed the Abraham Accords," he added, "I would say that the idea is to build a model, a model of coexistence and a model of cooperation, where other countries in the region will begin to say, 'Why not us?'"

Na'eh told JI that he hears more and more people in the region asking when such relations will be formed between their countries and Israel. It is "bound to happen" eventually, he said of Saudi Arabia.

"The Gulf countries, certainly Bahrain, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, are very advanced and I think together with Israel, we can do wonders," Na'eh stated, adding that it was important not to ignore the Arab states who first signed peace deals with Israel: Egypt and Jordan.

"There is a real curiosity here about Israel, about the religion, the culture, the food, the holy sites, and the people," he said of Bahrain, though he cautioned that there remained some contentious issues, such as the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"We don't expect countries to simply become all lovey-dovey in a day," said Na'eh, adding, however, that the Abraham Accords had "reversed a trend."

"In contrast to the past, when countries raced to show who boycotts more, who

incites more, or who shows more animosity towards Israel, there are now countries in the region that are racing to invite Israeli companies to work there," he said.

In terms of the economic opportunities between Israel and Bahrain, Na'eh observes that the scale of economic cooperation is quite different to the UAE. According to figures compiled by the Abraham Accords Peace Institute, trade between Israel and Bahrain stands at around \$6.5 million, compared to \$1.15 billion between Israel and the UAE.

However, he noted, the desire in Bahrain to build upon and strengthen growing cooperation with Israel is equally vibrant as in the UAE.

"I have found a real will among people here to live in peace and coexistence," Na'eh noted. "There is an indigenous Jewish community here that has lived here for many years, and the only synagogue in the Gulf was in Bahrain." Na'eh said he is working with counterparts in the Gulf state to create more avenues of cooperation. "I think that there is plenty in the economic sphere and of course, in people-to-people relations, politics and security," he said. "It is time to move on and time to explore, and the best way forward to live together is to trade together. That's what the Abraham Accords is all about." ♦

JANUARY 27, 2022

Breyer retirement leaves open the Court's 'Jewish seat'

Five of the last six justices to sit in Breyer's seat were Jewish

By Gabby Deutch

Following news reports on Wednesday that Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer plans to retire at the end of this term, Court watchers and political activists have begun to speculate about whom President Joe Biden will choose to replace Breyer. The associate justice, 83, who was nominated by President Bill

Clinton in 1994, will have served nearly 28 years on the nation's highest court.

During his campaign, Biden pledged to nominate a Black woman to the Supreme Court. One jurist Biden is reportedly considering is California Supreme Court Justice Leondra Kruger, who has Jewish and Jamaican roots.

Breyer's retirement could reduce the

number of Jewish justices on the Court to one — Elena Kagan — following the death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg in 2020. But his seat on the Court has historically been held by Jewish justices.

Breyer's seat on the Court was once routinely, if unofficially, called the "Jewish seat," because five of the last six justices to fill that seat were Jewish. After Louis

Brandeis' nomination to the Court in 1916, he was the sole Jew until President Herbert Hoover appointed Benjamin N. Cardozo in 1932.

Brandeis retired in 1939, leaving Cardozo as the only Jewish justice. Future Jewish justices would go on to occupy Cardozo's seat — he was succeeded by Felix Frankfurter, Arthur Goldberg and Abe Fortas. When Fortas left the Court in 1969 over an ethics scandal, he was replaced by Henry Blackmun, a Methodist, and the "Jewish seat" disappeared. But not forever.

The next Jewish justice named was Ruth Bader Ginsburg, in 1993, who did not fill the "Jewish seat." That went to Breyer, a year later, when Blackmun retired. "No one saw us as filling a Jewish seat," Ginsburg said in a 2003 speech.

Breyer told the writer Abigail Pogrebin in 2005 that he was "a little surprised" that his Jewish faith did not come up in his confirmation hearings. "If you told my grandfather that there would be two Jews on the Supreme Court at the same time and nobody would make an issue of that, he would have found that to be impossible." Nearly 80 years before Breyer joined the Court, Brandeis's confirmation hearings were tinged with antisemitism.

Breyer often speaks to Jewish audiences, although he has spoken less frequently about his Jewish faith and upbringing than other Jewish justices. He told Pogrebin that his Hebrew school and Jewish summer camp experiences "made an impression," and that he views the world like his father did: "My favorite way of looking at things is what Hillel said: 'If I am not for myself who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?' That captures it to me."

It is that saying, Breyer explained, that guides his basic understanding of the law, even if his Jewish faith and education do not shape his legal decisions. "The heritage of law in this country is to make people's lives better, to make certain there's a reasonable level of social equality, to make certain people's basic freedoms are guaranteed," he said. "Everyone who is a judge in the United States traces that back to the founding of this nation, and the Jews are immediately aware that it goes far further back than that."

Breyer's talks to Jewish audiences have

focused on religion and law, such as a 2006 conversation at Georgetown's Keshet Israel Congregation where Breyer spoke about his views on the separation between church and state. He was also a regular at Jewish events in Washington — the liberal justice attended former President Donald Trump's first White House Hanukkah party in 2017. Earlier that year, he spoke at the U.K. Embassy at an event marking 100 years since the Balfour Declaration.

In 2014, he and Kagan spoke at The Jewish Federations of North America's General Assembly. Breyer spoke of learning about "social justice" at Temple Emanu-El in San Francisco, the Reform synagogue where he had a bar mitzvah.

"I think of *tzedakah*, and it's related to *tzedek* [Hebrew for 'justice'] — and it's not quite pure charity, like giving through love, and it's not quite rule of law either. But it is trying to create a better world," Breyer told the audience. "I say, 'Justice, justice, justice shall you pursue' — the word that suddenly strikes a bill with me is the word 'you,' because it's not referring to judges alone, nor to lawyers alone. It's referring to everyone."

Breyer grew up in San Francisco in a middle-class Jewish family with roots in Romania, whose Jewish history Breyer is reportedly actively exploring. He and his wife, Joanna, the daughter of a British aristocrat, raised an interfaith family. Their daughter Chloe is an Episcopal priest.

Upon joining the Court, Breyer and Ginsburg together asked then-Chief Justice William Rehnquist to reschedule a case that was originally supposed to be heard on the High Holidays.

"The argument that was utterly convincing for the chief was that in an argument, there will inevitably be Jewish lawyers," Ginsburg said in a 2018 speech. "Do you want to take away from them the opportunity to present their case? And that resonated. So now we don't sit on the High Holy Days."

When Breyer got the call that Ginsburg had died from pancreatic cancer, he was watching a virtual Rosh Hashanah service with his daughter and grandchildren.

"I was looking at it on Zoom, the service, and they were at the Kaddish. Right there," Breyer said at a 2021 event with the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York. "She had

been quite sick, and it wasn't unexpected, but still I was moved. And I said, 'a woman of valor, a great judge, and a good friend,'" referring to the Jewish song "*Eshet Chayil*," Hebrew for "woman of valor."

Breyer has been known to follow and refer to Israeli Supreme Court decisions or other aspects of Israeli law. He attended the Brookings Institution's Saban Forum — the annual gathering of Washington and Israeli insiders — each year, and once participated in a panel with Israeli Supreme Court justices.

"He was very involved in our conversations and a very good conversationalist," said Natan Sachs, director of the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. Breyer was also very interested in Israel "and its democratic character." When the Saban Forum took place in Jerusalem in 2009, Breyer flew overseas for the event. It was his first trip to Israel. ♦

The many names, and lives, of a child hidden in the Holocaust

Yad Vashem exhibition highlights the harrowing stories of those, like Israela Hargil, who survived the Holocaust outside of the camps and sometimes in compassionate Christian hands

By Tamara Zieve

At the age of 3, Iza Harnik was forced to assume an entirely new identity, memorize a new life story and learn prayers belonging to her newly adopted religion — a false but life-saving guise that saved the young Jewish girl from the Nazis when a Christian family provided her with refuge in German-occupied Brody, formerly Poland, today Ukraine.

On June 22, 1941, the Germans began the invasion of the Soviet Union. Brody, which had been occupied by the Red Army since 1939, was bombed before the Germans occupied it at the end of June 1941.

Despite her young age during World War II, Iza, today named Israela Hargil, retained vivid memories from that time. “I remember we were in a kind of cellar with a group of Jews — and the bombs, it was very noisy outside,” Hargil, 84, told *Jewish Insider* in a phone interview this week.

“When it became quiet outside my father went out cautiously, and when he came back he said he met his Polish friend, [Jacenty] Miklaszewski, and he offered to take me to his house. Well, I had nothing to say about it,” Hargil said.

She remembers going back to their home to find chaos — cupboards toppled over and books strewn on the floor. “My father said, ‘How lucky that we did not hide Iza behind the library books,’” she recalled.

Hargil’s harrowing story is documented by the Yad Vashem Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem, which is spotlighting her and others who survived under false identities, in a new virtual exhibition launched for this year’s International Holocaust Remembrance Day, which falls today.

The exhibition, “Remember Your New Name: Surviving the Holocaust

Under a False Identity,” tells the stories — through testimonies, personal documents, photographs, artworks and footage — of 14 Jews who survived outside of the ghettos, concentration and extermination camps, under assumed identities in countries across Europe.

Hargil’s mother, Elsa Harnik, a teacher and musician, was killed alongside her brother Shoylek Kahana some two weeks after the occupation of Brody, when German soldiers interrogated and murdered approximately 250 Jewish men and women.

By January 1942, the Jews of Brody were confined in a ghetto. Iza was smuggled out, and into the home of Miklaszewski and his wife, Maria. Her father, Kalman-Karl Harnik, knew Miklaszewski from the orchestra he conducted.

Iza’s grandmother Sheindel perished in the ghetto. Kalman-Karl escaped and hid, with Miklaszewski’s assistance, in a pit in a village near Brody.

Iza’s new name was Eva. She had to learn her new Polish identity, along with Christian prayers that she would recite while kneeling by her bed. She was instructed to tell anyone who asked that her parents were killed in the bombing of their village and she was subsequently adopted by her “uncle and aunt.”

“Whenever the neighbors or anybody asked, I told them this story,” Hargil said.

The Miklaszewskis had a daughter four years “Eva’s” senior, Władysława, who became her friend and adopted sister.

Hargil said she was “very quiet.” But their neighbors were still suspicious. Etched in Hargil’s memory is the day a neighbor burst into the house when only “Eva” was there, shouting that she knew the family was sheltering a Jewish girl. “Eva” slid under a bed and remained there for hours.

The family moved “Eva” several times, for fear of denunciation. Hargil remembers staying with a mother and her baby, for whom she was left to care for while the mother went out to work. After that, she lived with a large family on a farm, where she helped tend to the cows — she remembers their enormous stature towering over her small frame. She was then moved yet again to the home of an elderly woman whom she remembers for taking good care of her when she was sick.

Eventually, the Miklaszewskis picked “Eva” up and took her with them to Krakow, where they had extended family. Before they left, they took her to her father’s hiding place. The family asked her not to tell her father about their leaving, fearing he would want to keep her with him, “so I didn’t say a word.”

“I got a warm feeling and embrace from my father, whom I missed and longed for,” she said, noting that while they were apart, she never spoke about how much she missed him.

The Miklaszewskis and “Eva” took a train to Krakow and, for the first time, felt relieved from the burden of suspicion.

“That was the first time I was free to move around,” Hargil told *JJ*.

In Krakow, “Eva” went to a kindergarten run by nuns and then to first grade.

“I learned that the Jews are a terrible people, very ugly, very hateful, that killed God, Jesus. And I didn’t want to belong to them but I always remembered that I am a Jew, always it was in the back of my mind,” Hargil said.

Hargil said she enjoyed the Christian rituals, dressing nicely and going to church, celebrating Christmas and other holidays.

“I had no desire at all to belong to this [Judaism],” she said in her testimony to

Yad Vashem. “I have many good, beautiful memories of [the Christian] religion. We went to church every Sunday, we got dressed up, and the church was beautiful. The views were all aesthetic: lovely pictures, colorful windows, a quiet atmosphere, pleasant lighting... The priest, prayers, songs and organ all evoked positive associations within me. Everything was beautiful, and I was part of it. But there was always the dread... of being found out to be Jewish.”

Her memories from those four years living under a false identity are a mixture of happy and sad ones but ultimately, Hargil told JI, “I’m grateful that they made such an effort to save me and to help my father.”

In 1982, Yad Vashem recognized the Miklaszewski family as Righteous Among the Nations. Hargil stayed in touch with them for many years.

“Eva” was reunited with her father in 1946 — but the rebuilding of their relationship was gradual.

One day, during recess at school, a teacher asked “Eva” to show a relative how to get to her family’s house. That man was her father — but she didn’t know it yet. They chatted and the encounter felt natural to her. “My father was a teacher and a musician so he knew how to talk to children,” Hargil

explained. After a long walk together to the Miklaszewski home, the man was revealed to be her father. “We entered the house and they started shouting ‘Karl! Kalman! Eva, it’s your father!’”

Once again, “Eva” hid under a bed and didn’t want to come out. “Because I knew that this is Jews, and that will be terrible for me,” Hargil related.

Kalman-Karl stayed with the Miklaszewski family while his daughter slowly opened up to him. He bought presents for her and her adopted sister and worked his way back into her heart. But she wasn’t prepared to leave with him to another town, unless Władysława went with them. He took the two on a trip together and eventually returned Władysława to Krakow while he and his daughter remained in Bielsko, where three of their relatives who had survived Auschwitz had made a home.

“There started my Jewish life,” Hargil said. This, too, was a gradual transition. At first, she continued going to church on Sundays, but later attended Hebrew school and participated in the Gordonia Zionist youth movement.

Today, Hargil fully embraces her Jewish identity and Israel, where she moved with her father in 1948. Three of Kalman’s

brothers also moved to Israel. After a short period in Tel Aviv, Iza moved to Kibbutz Ramat Yohanan. Iza’s family decided to change her name to the patriotic name “Israella,” telling her that the name “Iza,” meaning goat in Hebrew, was inappropriate. So for the third and final time, Hargil switched her name — “another change in my life,” she remarked. Four years after they arrived in Israel, Kalman-Karl died.

Hargil served in the army, met her husband and together they traveled to the U.S. and U.K., where she studied art.

Today, Hargil lives in a retirement home in Modi’in, where she moved after her husband died last summer. She has three daughters, five grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

Hargil reflected that despite having been moved from place to place so much during her childhood, moving — even as an octogenarian — was still difficult. Today, she continues to work as an artist, displaying her work — sculptures, collages and presentations of partially eroded photos of her family that were buried in the ground during the war and later retrieved — at exhibitions. She is preparing to open an exhibition at her retirement home at the end of this month. ♦

JANUARY 26, 2022

The secret Nazi POW camp and the Jewish soldiers who guarded it

Welcome to ‘Camp Confidential,’ the bizarre WWII story two Israeli filmmakers couldn’t turn down

By Hannah Brown

“You couldn’t forget it and you couldn’t make it up,” says former American soldier and European refugee Arno Mayer in the Netflix documentary, “Camp Confidential: America’s Secret Nazis.”

The 36-minute film by Israeli directors Mor Loushy and Daniel Sivan, shortlisted for an Oscar for best short documentary subject, mixes interviews, archival footage and animated sequences to reveal a strange incident in American history that was

classified until about a decade ago.

A group of young, mostly German-Jewish refugees who became U.S. soldiers and served in military intelligence toward the end of World War II were taken to a top-secret location near Washington, D.C., known as P.O. Box 1142.

It was not a prison camp, but something like a bungalow colony, complete with a swimming pool, tennis courts and Ping-Pong tables, and the soldiers were soon shocked to learn that they were to interrogate

high-ranking Nazi POWs there. Many of them were German scientists the U.S. had welcomed in towards the end of the war to make sure that America, not the USSR, got their expertise. The group included the noted Nazi rocket scientist Wernher von Braun, who had built, among other military technology, the V2 rockets that had caused tens of thousands of deaths in England and incalculable property damage.

But the soldiers were not merely tasked with interrogating von Braun, or the other

elite Nazis scientists who came with him. Rather, they were told to show the POWs a good time, bringing them whiskey, newspapers and magazines poolside, taking them to dinner and nightclubs and joining them for rounds of tennis and other sports.

When Loushy and Sivan first heard about the story, they were incredulous. The duo, who have been a pair personally and professionally for 17 years, are two of Israel's most acclaimed documentary filmmakers, the directors behind "The Oslo Diaries," a behind-the-scenes look at the Oslo peace negotiations and an examination of the agreement's legacy. The pair have produced a number of documentaries, with Loushy directing and Sivan producing and editing — among them the award-winning "Censored Voices," an examination of soldiers in the Six-Day War who spoke of the trauma resulting from a conflict that was considered a resounding victory for Israel.

Loushy and Sivan were surprised when Austrian filmmakers Jono and Benj Bergmann, who were working on a scripted series, told them about the strange goings-on at P.O. Box 1142 during and after the war.

"I was finishing up 'The Devil Next Door' and our first reaction was, 'We don't want to hear anything about it, we are done doing films about the Holocaust.' We had nightmares, it haunted us," said Sivan. But the Bergmanns — who produced "Camp Confidential" with Loushy and Sivan — persisted.

The more Sivan and Loushy heard, the more intrigued the Israeli filmmakers became. They learned the camp itself (formerly part of Fort Hunt in Alexandria, Va.) was bulldozed in 1946 and everything to do with its existence was classified. But the National Parks Service had done extensive interviews with veterans of the unit in 2006, as well as with some of the German prisoners.

"At first, I was skeptical. We heard about those interviews and I said, 'Only when I hear them, will I decide about it,'" said Loushy. When they listened, they were blown away. "We realized it's quite a big, important story, so we are glad we had the opportunity to tell this story that was censored for so many years."

They were saddened to learn, however, that since the interviews had been done,

all but two of the veterans had died. "It's heartbreaking, you feel like you know the person, you've been listening to their voice and their stories," said Sivan. But they were able to use the tapes of their interviews in the film, and extensive new interviews with Arno Mayer and Peter Weiss, the two surviving veterans, whose evocative, honest and no-nonsense testimonies color the film.

They also made the key decision not to use the tapes of the Nazi scientists. Explained Sivan: "We thought, 'Do we want to have their perspectives?' It's not as if they said, 'We came as Nazis and we were pampered.' It's more like, 'We fled from Hitler, we were refugees.' We decided we have had enough of the whitewashing; we wanted to tell the story of these Jewish veterans...to give them a voice."

The more the filmmakers researched the topic, the more surreal it became to them. Mayer and Weiss described how the Nazis asked to send Christmas presents to their families, and in the strangest sequence, the soldiers are shown taking them to Lansburgh's, a Jewish-owned department store in Washington, D.C., to buy gifts, including bras and underwear for their wives. The Nazis were so conspicuous in the long leather coats and Tyrolean hats they insisted on wearing that they were escorted back to the camp by military police. It gave Mayer "nasty pleasure" to take them to a Jewish department store, he recalls in the film.

But while this interlude is bizarrely funny, having to take care of Nazis in a country club-like atmosphere took its toll on the soldiers, who had to keep the whole episode secret.

"As a Jewish refugee from Europe, that's about as bizarre an assignment as you could get," Mayer says in the film. "If you want to see the stereotype of the Prussian, blond hair, blue eyes, goddamn it, it was Wernher von Braun." Mayer was named morale officer in this strange reality, because it was determined that "it would serve a purpose to be nice to them." In yet another strange incident, Mayer recalls being tasked with translating Christmas sermons from the Army's Catholic and Protestant chaplains. "It fell to me to translate these two fuckin' sermons from English into German," he says. Afterwards, he declined to have a drink

with these Germans, who called him "little Jew boy" behind his back.

"We like working with recreations and archives. But when it comes to the Holocaust, we know it has to be very, very clear and accurate because Holocaust deniers are everywhere, fake news is everywhere," Sivan said.

Says Weiss, "We would have preferred to treat them like the war criminals they were. I tried to suppress the rage because I wouldn't have been very effective if I had acted as if I wanted to kill them."

To this day, they are racked with guilt over the roles they played. Mayer says he thought of asking not to do the work, "but you didn't do things like that when you were in the Army, and also you didn't do things like that when you were a recent refugee."

Both in the National Parks Service tapes and the interviews for the films, the former soldiers seem to relish the chance to unburden themselves by sharing their secrets. "They really wanted to tell their story, they wanted that the story will come to light," Loushy said. "Not only about the past; they talk about questions that are so relevant to our time. Which countries are cooperating with dark regimes? Where are our red lines as a human society, what lines we can't cross? Can we whitewash the Nazis crimes so a man can go to the moon? So I really do think that they wanted to tell the story and bring these questions to light. It was very therapeutic for them."

Mayer and Weiss went on to distinguished post-Army careers that seem to have been inspired at least in part by their wartime experiences. Mayer became a historian of modern Europe and is the Dayton-Stockton professor emeritus at Princeton University. Weiss became a renowned human rights lawyer and the vice president of the Center for Constitutional Rights.

Few photos of the compound could be unearthed, so the directors decided to use animation when recreating the soldiers' memories, which they mixed with archival footage of World War II and of von Braun's successful career with NASA. "We like working with recreations and archives. But when it comes to the Holocaust, we know it has to be very, very clear and accurate because Holocaust deniers are everywhere, fake news is everywhere,"

Sivan said. “Anything to do with the story of the Holocaust, you can’t tweak it at all. We need to be very honest with the viewers and say, ‘This is us recreating the memories and these are the real images.’ So animation was a very good path to show we are narrating the memories.”

The scenes of von Braun being embraced by President John F. Kennedy and celebrated at ticker-tape parades following the moon landing are disturbing, and the filmmakers hope that the film inspires discussion about collaborating with people and countries guilty of heinous crimes. “We all need to ask

these questions, not only about von Braun, but also about us today,” said Sivan. He referenced a line from Tom Lehrer’s song, “Wernher von Braun,” a withering critique of the U.S. acceptance of the scientist: “‘In German und English I know how to count down/ Und I’m learning Chinese/ Says Wernher von Braun.’”

The film has received rave reviews around the world, and the filmmakers are happy that the documentary has reached a wide audience through Netflix. “About five years ago, Netflix made documentaries cool again by putting documentaries in the same

section as scripted [content];, nobody ever tried that before, [to] put documentaries in the same row,” said Sivan.

The international acclaim has been great, but they are especially happy it passed muster with two very important viewers: Weiss and Mayer.

“We screened it for Peter, and he said, ‘I’m 96, I have a new career of being a movie star,’” said Sivan.

Loushy added, “He loved it and said we did right with it. We try to do right by our characters.” ♦

JANUARY 21, 2022

How soap is changing women’s lives around the world

Erin Zaikis’s nonprofit broadens its scope from recycled soap to investing in female ‘changemakers’ around the world

By Esther Kustanowitz

This article first appeared on eJewishPhilanthropy.

On a post-college trip to Thailand, Erin Zaikis met a group of school children in a small village on the Thai-Myanmar border who didn’t know how to use soap.

“I couldn’t believe it, because I’d never really thought about soap once in my life... It is just always where I needed it to be,” Zaikis, 32, told *eJewishPhilanthropy*.

Zaikis soon learned that – due to lack of access to soap, clean water and functioning toilets – millions of children were dying each year from conditions like diarrhea and pneumonia. Much like the challenge of world hunger, she realized, global hygiene suffered from a problem of “access and distribution,” she said.

“The world actually does have enough soap for 11 billion people, but it’s really a problem of waste from hotels, and from soap companies not getting [their product] to those who need it,” Zaikis, who was formerly the U.S. CEO of IsraAID, said.

With the seeds of a project growing,

she pitched the idea – a nonprofit recycling gently used hotel soap – at a competition sponsored by LinkedIn, won a “big Styrofoam check” for \$10,000 and founded the Sundara Fund in 2013 (“Sundara” means “beautiful” in Sanskrit). During Sundara’s first seven years, Zaikis and her team worked across India, Uganda and Myanmar, hiring more than 40 women and providing them with their first-ever formal employment. Sundara recycled over 1 million bars of soap, while reaching 200,000 people with intensive hygiene education each year. The nonprofit also created hygiene education modules in local languages, reaching an estimated 3 million people, Zaikis said.

“Before, we only used soap for bathing and didn’t know that there were other times in the day where we should be using soap, like before cooking and after going to the bathroom,” reads one testimonial, from recipients in Ashte, India, on the Sundara website. “We only used water to wash our hands at those times. Now that we have soap distributed by Sundara monthly, we use it for all those times, as we know now that doing so prevents sickness.”

At Sundara’s peak, the organization had 10 factories (in India, Myanmar and Thailand) and 43 employees. But when COVID-19 hit, the organization lost more than 400 hotel partners – representing 75 percent of their operating funds – in three weeks as thousands of planned visits were canceled. It also had to cancel its annual gala, where the organization had traditionally raised the majority of its U.S. funds, she added. “It was just very hard for us to survive that time financially,” Zaikis recalled. “And the world has never needed hygiene education more.”

She realized the organization needed to refocus its investment on women in these countries who were potential changemakers. Sundara raised around \$100,000 and put it into RISE, a social innovation fund to financially empower women who might otherwise have been marginalized and unable to support their families. (The organization is now called RISE by Sundara, while Sundar India continues to provide soap and hygiene products and education.)

“When you give a woman a job, her posture improves, she starts speaking

louder, she starts coming up with ideas of what she could do with a bit of investment into her community,” Zaikis said. “I really believe that a financial investment into a woman is the best way to change the problems we’re seeing in the world. I think a lot of men in positions of power are failing us. And so the way to better this situation is by improving the financial stability of women. Because without money, they can’t advocate for themselves. They can’t leave abusive partnerships. They can’t invest into their own health, send their kids to school. It really starts with money,” she said.

In a new episode of “The Five-O-One” podcast, Zaikis told host and philanthropy advisor Talia Lefkowitz that supporting a factory in India costs between \$25,000-\$50,000; that supports full-time work for four to five women and brings soap to about 200,000-250,000 children each month. To support one female changemaker for a year, it costs \$7,500, she said. Changemakers are currently operating in Indonesia, Nepal, Zimbabwe, India, Kenya, Ghana and Nigeria,

Zaikis told Lefkowitz. (A transcript of this episode is available at www.thefiveoone.org.)

Zaikis told eJP that RISE received more than a thousand entrepreneurial idea submissions; it is now supporting 11 RISE fellows and 11 emergency aid entrepreneurs from India, Nepal, Nigeria, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Indonesia and Armenia. The Armenian fellow is starting the first-ever public laundromat in her community, where women wash clothes in frozen river beds that hold toxic waste runoff from Soviet-era factories, leading to increased cancer risk, Zaikis explained. The effort will also employ eight women who can service 1,000 people in this community; when it’s not being used as a laundromat, the building will be used as a women’s community center. RISE’s fellow in Indonesia is creating a low-cost water filter for her community, where the groundwater is polluted by tin mining, leading to an increase in birth defects and cancer rates.

With the shift in focus to empowering

women entrepreneurs comes new opportunities to be thoughtful about individual buying habits, Zaikis said.

“Every time you go out and purchase something, you’re voting for the kind of world that you believe in with those dollars. And so if you believe in something like female empowerment, really extend that not just to your charitable giving, but also to your purchasing power, seeing if you can support businesses that are started by women,” she said. When communities run collection drives for women in shelters or who are experiencing homelessness, Zaikis advised, they should include soap, hand sanitizer, sanitary napkins and tampons; the period products are particularly important because, she noted, they are expensive, and are taxed in many states.

“We have to think about ways that we are caring for the most vulnerable women here in our community....and these small changes actually do make a difference.” ♦