

THE WEEKLY PRINT

Donna Edwards steps back into the fray; Josh Shapiro's open Pennsylvania primary lane; The story of Rodoba Noori's harrowing evacuation from Afghanistan; Adam Fox, on the edge of stardom; Sol Werdiger's Super Bowl LVI game plan; With politics in his blood, Gideon Taylor takes on Jewish community relations; and Addressing the gender imbalance in Israeli high-tech.

FEBRUARY 9, 2022

Donna Edwards steps back into the fray

The former Maryland lawmaker has changed — or maybe it's the Democratic Party that's changed. She's still figuring it out

By Gabby Deutch

A lot has changed since Donna Edwards was last in Congress just over five years ago. After eight years representing the Washington, D.C., suburbs, the former Maryland congresswoman suffered multiple election defeats — in 2016, to Chris Van Hollen, in a U.S. Senate primary, and in 2018, to Angela Alsobrooks, in the race for Prince George's County executive.

In the years since, Edwards drove a used RV 12,000 miles across the country on a road trip, part beatnik soul-searching and part political quest to understand the sources of America's disunity.

And she's changed too — or maybe it's the Democratic Party that's changed. She's still figuring that one out.

"I recently had somebody describe me as a centrist, which was so bizarre," Edwards, 63, told *Jewish Insider* in a recent Zoom interview. "I'm still a progressive. In some ways, I look at some of the younger members, and they have a lot of energy and stuff about them, and I think, 'Maybe that was me 30 years ago, but the me today is a little bit more pragmatic.'"

When Edwards walked the halls of Congress, from 2008 to 2017, "centrist" was not a word that would have been used to

describe her. She ran on a left-wing platform to unseat Al Wynn, a formidable Democratic incumbent who she painted as out of touch on issues such as the Iraq War, which he had voted to authorize. Ever since that race, which she won with the support of groups including Emily's List and MoveOn.org, she has been a darling of national progressive organizations.

Edwards found herself itching to get in on the action when her old seat opened up after Rep. Anthony Brown (D-MD) announced a run for state attorney general. "I was, like everybody, really deeply troubled by what happened at the Capitol on January 6, and thought that now is not the time to run away from the fire, but to step into it," Edwards explained.

She announced her candidacy more than two months after her competitors began their campaigns. But Edwards has been able to muster some progressive star power from her previous time in office. (The fact that she spent the last few years as a paid contributor on MSNBC probably helped.)

In the less than two weeks after she entered the race in January, her campaign said it raised more than \$300,000. Neither of her competitors — Jazz Lewis, a member of the Maryland House of Delegates, or Glenn

Ivey, a lawyer and former state's attorney in Prince George's County — raised that much in their first two months on the campaign trail.

Maryland's 4th District, which is mostly composed of the majority-Black Prince George's County, has a rather small Jewish population. But the district's location near both Montgomery County and Baltimore, the two hubs of Jewish life in the state, means it has attracted strong interest from local Jewish activists. And Israel is poised to be a major factor in the Democratic primary, at least for donors and activists in the state.

Edwards' tenure in Congress was colored by a strained relationship with the mainstream pro-Israel community in Maryland, dating back to her early days in office.

"The relationship between the Jewish community and Donna Edwards got off to a rocky start," Ron Halber, executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington, told *Politico* in 2009. "I would be lying if I told you there wasn't concern." That year, amid tensions between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, Edwards voted "present" on a resolution "recognizing Israel's right to defend itself against attacks from Gaza" that passed 390-5.

Halber declined to comment when asked about Edwards entering the race. But “the big issue,” one pro-Israel Democrat told JI when Edwards entered the race last month, “is whether to support Jazz or Glenn.”

When she ran for the seat in 2008, Edwards was one of the first candidates ever endorsed by J Street.

“The interesting thing for Donna is that she was ahead of her time,” J Street President Jeremy Ben-Ami told JI last week. “She’s been someone who really typifies what it means to be pro-Israel, and at the same time to have a very, very clear set of critiques about what the government and the policies of the [Israeli] government are.”

J Street has not yet made an endorsement in the race, as the organization is still talking to all the candidates. But Ben-Ami called Edwards’s positions on Israel-related issues “rock solid.”

AIPAC is entering campaign politics for the first time this year with a new political action committee, but it has not yet spent money on any races. “We have not yet made a decision on this race,” AIPAC spokesperson Marshall Wittmann said regarding Maryland’s 4th district. AIPAC’s PAC raised \$714,000 in December 2021 alone.

In her conversation with JI, Edwards said that she would largely approach issues related to Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a similar way to her previous time in office. “I rarely change my mind about these things, because I thought about it a lot in advance,” Edwards said, when asked whether she would have voted in favor of a bill providing supplemental funding for Israel’s Iron Dome missile-defense system that passed the House in September 420-9.

“I’m guessing that I probably would have voted more recently in support for that,” she added of the Iron Dome vote, while noting that she was unfamiliar with the exact legislation. In 2014, she voted in favor of a similar resolution that provided Israel with \$225 million in supplemental funding for the Iron Dome. Earlier that year, she voted in favor of the U.S.-Israel Strategic Partnership Act.

Edwards offered a similar answer when asked whether she supports the \$3.3 billion in U.S. aid provided to Israel annually. “I think I voted for every Israel security appropriations bill that ever came in front

of me. I mean, I’d have to go back and check, but I’m pretty sure that’s true. I don’t really see that changing,” Edwards said.

But she did not vote in favor of all the legislation backed by AIPAC-aligned advocates. She voted against a 2013 bill that would have strengthened sanctions on Iran. She also did not sign onto several letters, supported by AIPAC and its allies, that sought to pressure the Obama administration on Iran sanctions, Syria sanctions, Egypt policy and the peace process, according to *The Washington Post*.

In a 2019 tweet, Edwards quoted a *Huffington Post* article that said, “[O]ne member of Congress has stood up to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.” Edwards referred to that member “my friend” Rep. Betty McCollum (D-MN), using the article’s headline “The Minnesota Congresswoman Who Can Criticize Israel.”

Ben-Ami argued that Edwards’ positions are reflective of where the Democratic Party now stands on foreign policy. “The majority of the party is where Donna is at, and the majority of American Jews are where Donna is at — and that is supportive of Israel, but very, very concerned and critical of what’s happening vis-a-vis the Palestinians,” he noted. “Now you see races where people who hold the positions that Donna Edwards holds are facing a real stiff assault from the traditional establishment of the Jewish community, but they’re fighting the tide.”

One political activist in Prince George’s County told JI that Jewish supporters could play a big role in the Democratic primary. “If the support from the Jewish community is split, I think that makes it near impossible” for Lewis or Ivey to win, the activist said. “I’m saying she’s gonna win.”

Some members of the Maryland Jewish community say Edwards was unwilling to hear them out during her time in Congress. “Her perspective was very one-sided when it came to issues dealing with Israel,” Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt, rabbi at the Conservative Congregation B’nai Tzedek in Potomac and an AIPAC member, told JI in October. “I spoke with her on a number of occasions. I met with her and members of her staff, and it was clear that we weren’t going anywhere.”

“I do think that one of the things that I’ve come to recognize,” Edwards explained, “and part of it is through travel to Israel, is

the vulnerability that Israel understandably feels in an area where it’s surrounded by nations that either don’t respect Israel’s sovereignty or where there have been tensions. So it’s important to have the ability for the United States to provide that kind of strategic assistance.”

Edwards’ father was in the Air Force, and her family moved frequently when she was growing up — she attended 14 schools between kindergarten and high school graduation. “I first became fascinated, actually, with the Middle East because my dad was stationed in Saudi Arabia,” Edwards explained. “He did joint trainings with the IDF, and so I began to think about the world as a much bigger place.”

As she developed an interest in foreign policy, “my focus was always on human rights, democracy, stability in the world, and I think that’s the lens through which I look at foreign policy.”

Edwards says her commitment to democracy colors her views on Israel. “Israel is the only existing democracy in the region,” she pointed out. “So with the threat to democracy [and] democracies around the world, we don’t want to see one fail.”

Edwards wants to see a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. “I just always leaned toward what is going to provide Israel security, but also engage Israel with its neighbors so that the region can exist in peace and stability,” said Edwards. But such an outcome now “feels so much more distant for a whole host of reasons,” she explained.

Among those reasons, Edwards continued, is the impact of the Trump administration’s withdrawal from the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran. “The wars in Syria, Yemen, have escalated, without any checks not just on [Iran’s] nuclear program, but without any checks on the other ways in which it engages in the most nefarious ways, increasing supplies to Hamas and Gaza.”

America lost some of its negotiating power in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict when Trump left the Iran deal, Edwards argued. She also criticized the former president’s approach to solving the conflict.

There were “Trump administration policies that actually put the question of negotiating really in a much more

precarious position, not the least of which was the Iran nuclear deal, but also thinking that you could sort of pressure and pound the Palestinians to the negotiating table,” Edwards said.

Returning to the 2015 nuclear agreement is a priority for Edwards. “I hope that the Biden administration, as it seems to be doing, is engaging again to try to construct a new deal,” said Edwards. “When I came out of Congress, we were in an agreement, the JCPOA, the Iran nuclear deal. Then not long after that, Trump pulls that away. And I think it actually has made Israel more vulnerable, because we don’t have any real oversight into what Iran is doing or not doing in its nuclear program.”

Edwards does not support the Boycott,

Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. “I have not supported it, either when it first emerged, and not now,” said Edwards. “I know, that sets me apart from some other members of Congress where people might say, ‘Oh, she might be aligned with them.’ And really, I mean, my history tells me that I have not.”

However, she questions whether Congress should weigh in on the issue. “Congress has a role whenever it wants to have a role. I think for that kind of [anti-BDS] legislation to be successful, it would have to pass the House and the Senate and be signed into law by the president. I just don’t see that happening,” she said. “I don’t really know that it is something that Congress necessarily even has to weigh in on.”

Edwards, calling herself a “pragmatic progressive,” said, “I deal in political reality.”

“I think our job is to push as hard as possible, but to recognize when we have to negotiate, and when you have to cut a deal — and then move on to the next thing,” said Edwards. She cited her support for Medicare for All, noting that when the Affordable Care Act was being negotiated, she wanted a public option for healthcare.

“But then when we realized that that was just not going to happen,” she recalled, “I negotiated, and ended up getting some important provisions in the Affordable Care Act that actually has saved consumers billions of dollars. But I wasn’t willing to fall on my sword and to kill the legislation because I didn’t get what I wanted.” ♦

FEBRUARY 8, 2022

Josh Shapiro’s open Pennsylvania primary lane

The only election Pennsylvania’s attorney general ever lost was at Akiba Hebrew Academy. As he runs for governor, can he keep it that way?

By Gabby Deutch

When Josh Shapiro went to bed on election night in 2020, it looked like he was going to lose his bid to be reelected as Pennsylvania’s attorney general.

It wasn’t until two days later that Shapiro, 48, pulled ahead and ultimately won — similar to how Joe Biden was not declared the winner of the Keystone State, and the election, until four days after voters cast their ballots.

As the results trickled in over those anxiety-inducing days, headlines and social media posts claiming that Republicans had won in the state, only to have their victories overturned by Democrats, began to proliferate online. (In reality, the vote-counting process was slowed by the large number of mail-in ballots, with votes in heavily Democratic urban areas being counted last.) President Donald Trump and his allies publicly questioned the validity of Pennsylvania’s results. Rudy Giuliani, at the time Trump’s personal lawyer, flew to

Philadelphia the day Biden was declared the victor and announced that Trump would be contesting the results.

Pennsylvania had become ground zero for, as Shapiro called it, “the big lie.” As the state’s top law enforcement officer, he was in charge of fighting back.

Shapiro, who is now running to be governor of Pennsylvania, says his state is the “epicenter” of the national battle over voting. As the only Democratic candidate for governor, he is letting the 15 Republican contenders attack each other ahead of the state’s June primary, while he attacks the “big lie.”

“They’re beholden to the big lie. They peddle the big lie every day. They didn’t acknowledge that Joe Biden won the election, and they will appoint secretaries of state who I believe will undermine our democracy in the 2024 presidential election,” Shapiro told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview. “I think that is critical.”

Pennsylvania will be one of the most

closely watched states in this year’s election cycle. With Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf term-limited and Sen. Pat Toomey (R-PA) opting not to run for a third term, the state has the rare combination of wide-open fields in both the Senate and gubernatorial races.

2022 appears set to be a difficult year for Democrats. A December poll conducted by *Morning Call/Muhlenberg College* found that President Joe Biden had a 40% approval rating in the state, down from 55% last spring. Still, that does not appear to have hindered early enthusiasm for Shapiro, who raised \$6.3 million in the fourth quarter of last year alone.

“He’s doing wonderfully because so far he’s preempted a primary, which is very unusual,” said Neil Oxman, a Democratic political consultant based in Philadelphia.

Last month, Shapiro won the endorsement of the state Democratic Party, which opted not to make an endorsement in the Senate race. (The Republican Party is not endorsing candidates in either race.)

And in the swing state that Biden won by just 80,000 votes in 2020, Shapiro bested his Republican rival by more than 400,000 votes.

"He led the statewide voting, and I think it's because he was a very active attorney general who people of both parties sort of perceived as just kind of doing his job," said Oxman.

"I take my cues from Washington County, Pennsylvania, not Washington, D.C.," Shapiro explained, repeating a line from his stump speech referencing the county in the western part of the state near Pittsburgh. "We're running a campaign that's focused on meeting people where they are and meeting their needs."

This philosophy is exemplified in Shapiro's approach to the COVID-19 pandemic. When it comes to vaccination, he emphasizes education and outreach over mandates. That position puts him at odds with many Democrats, but it was a rallying cry of Republicans, like Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin, who did well in 2021's off-year elections.

"We need to celebrate the fact that in really record time, the United States developed a vaccine that has literally saved millions and millions of lives," Shapiro said. But his goal is "educating and empowering the public, giving them facts, as opposed to dictates, [and] making sure that they understand the power of what a vaccine can do to save their lives, and in the case of schools, save children's lives," noted Shapiro.

"I want to keep schools open. I want to keep businesses open. And we know, as a matter of fact, the best way to do that is by more people getting vaccinated," Shapiro, whose platform does not include vaccine mandates, explained.

He seems uninterested in wading into thorny culture-war issues, but he has also clearly learned some lessons from Democrats' faux pas in 2021. The most infamous was a comment from Virginia Democrat Terry McAuliffe, who at a gubernatorial debate with Youngkin, said, "I don't think parents should be telling schools what they should teach." Youngkin ran with his opponent's remark, arguing that Democrats don't care about their children's education.

Shapiro did not want to weigh in on how

Democrats fared in Virginia, but he is paying attention.

"I believe parents should be integrally involved in their kids' education. I believe that parents play a critical role in their kids' education and need to reinforce what's learned in the classroom. So that, to me, is a no-brainer," said Shapiro.

Shapiro shies away from labels — when asked whether he identifies as a progressive or a moderate, he responded with "I'll leave the punditry to you" — but pointed to his "proven track record of winning tough races."

"I don't see Mr. Shapiro as being extreme left, no matter what the people on either side say about him. He's behaved as a moderate across every dimension," said David A. Harris, a law professor at the University of Pittsburgh and political observer.

Shapiro has held elected office since 2005, first as a state representative, then as a county commissioner in suburban Montgomery County and finally as attorney general. His passion for politics began early. As a middle schooler, he launched an international pen-pal movement to connect young Americans with Jewish refuseniks in the Soviet Union. Shapiro's pen pal, Avi Goldstein, and his family left the USSR in time to make it to Shapiro's bar mitzvah in Pennsylvania.

He later ran for student body president at Akiba Hebrew Academy (now Jack M. Barrack Hebrew Academy) in Merion Station, Pa. — the only election Shapiro ever lost. At the University of Rochester, he became the first freshman in the school's history to be elected student body president.

"I am someone who, because of my faith, because of my teachings, believes that every person has a responsibility to get off the sidelines, get in the game and do their part," Shapiro told JI. "I grew up in a home with parents who were activists in the Soviet Jewry movement. We grew up in a home where we spent Friday nights around the table having Shabbat dinner, talking about these issues, and Saturday mornings at shul. And it taught me a lot about the importance of serving others and being grounded in your faith."

Shapiro keeps up that Shabbat tradition even during a busy campaign schedule. He views Friday night dinners with his wife

and four children as a way of "enjoying one another's company and reflecting on our weeks and using Shabbat as a moment to pause and reflect and to talk and fill me up spiritually for the week ahead."

Shapiro experienced a wave of antisemitism in his time as attorney general, following the release of a report from his office that found the Catholic Church in Pennsylvania engaged in a widespread cover-up of sexual abuse by priests. He did not know about the investigation into the Church when he won his first race in 2016, but he saw it through, and found that the Church had covered up the abuse of more than 1,000 children over several decades.

"There were a number of statements, emails. I don't read a lot of my social media, but social media postings like that, that were just clearly antisemitic," Shapiro told *The New York Times* in 2018. "If at the end of the day, your response to the grand jury report, which uncovered this type of horrific abuse and cover-up, is to attack me with an antisemitic slur, then frankly you've got the issue."

Later that year, a gunman entered the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh and killed 11 people during Shabbat morning services. Shapiro, who has been an advocate for gun violence prevention reforms, immediately left for Pittsburgh.

"I was at the crime scene. And as horrific as that was," recalled Shapiro, "lots and lots of people gathered together that evening in a misting rain at the corner of Forbes and Murray, which is really the center of life in this neighborhood called Squirrel Hill, which is a wonderfully vibrant, diverse community. People from all walks of life, Jewish, non-Jew, came together. We prayed together, we sang together, we held hands. And we lifted one another up."

Shapiro blamed the recent increase in antisemitism in the United States on "leaders [who] are failing to speak and act with moral clarity, and allowing their words to be misappropriated by hate groups and others who wish to bring hate to our communities," and pledged to speak against hate as governor.

"An attack against one based on what they look like or where they come from, who they love or who they pray to, it makes us all less safe," added Shapiro. He also pointed

out that as attorney general, he built up the state's civil rights division to be able to better focus on hate crimes.

Robin Schatz, director of government affairs at the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia, said Shapiro's staff has always been responsive to community needs.

"Following the attack at Tree of Life in Pittsburgh, he's always been out ahead of the game," Schatz told JI. "He took [what was] with many people a very unpopular stance, when he was dealing with the abuse by clerics in the Catholic Church. I think just everything he does is very well considered and aligns closely with Jewish values."

Praise for Shapiro's "Jewish values" is a common refrain among his supporters. One such group, Democratic Jewish Outreach Pennsylvania, honored Shapiro with a "Defender of Democracy" at the acclaimed Philadelphia restaurant Zahav in November. Jill Zipin, the group's co-founder, told JI that "the single most important issue in the governor's race is protecting American democracy."

While the issue resonates with

Democratic activists, the extent to which it will bring voters to the polls remains unclear. A CNN poll from January found that a majority of Americans think democracy is under attack in this country, but more Republicans than Democrats agreed with that statement.

"I imagine if you were to go to a corner bar or a diner in Pennsylvania, people aren't talking about these issues," said Ari Mittleman, a Pennsylvania native who runs a government relations firm and hosts a podcast about Pennsylvania politics. "But at the end of the day, every member of every Chamber of Commerce across Pennsylvania, whether they're an attorney or not, cares about the rule of law. We might take these things for granted, but we saw how fragile it was. And we saw how Pennsylvania really was the bull's-eye."

The Republican candidates for governor include several state lawmakers who were involved with efforts to overturn the state's election results in 2020, most notably state Sen. Doug Mastriano, who joined a Texas lawsuit filed against Pennsylvania seeking

to invalidate the state's results. In a response brief he filed as attorney general, Shapiro called the suit "legally indefensible" and "an affront to principles of constitutional democracy." The Supreme Court dismissed the suit for lack of standing.

Republicans control the state House and Senate in Pennsylvania, and Shapiro pledges to work with them "if the Republicans want to act in good faith to protect our democracy." But in the event that they do not, Shapiro said, "I will not hesitate to use my veto pen."

"But my goal," he added, "is to work with others to get meaningful things done."

Shapiro still lives in Abington, outside of Philadelphia, and moving to the governor's mansion would be his first time living in the state capital full-time.

"There's a strong and vibrant Jewish community," said Shapiro of Harrisburg. "We'll have lots of Shabbat dinners at the governor's residence that bring a lot of people from all different walks of life together for good food, good conversation and good challah." ♦

FEBRUARY 7, 2022

The story of Rodoba Noori's harrowing evacuation from Afghanistan

The harrowing evacuation of Afghan refugees from Afghanistan via Tajikistan to the UAE was the first Israeli-Emirati joint humanitarian mission

By Rebecca Anne Proctor

This story was first published on The Circuit.

For five months, Rodoba Noori, 20, an Afghan refugee from the town of Herat, has resided inside the stark, white-walled rooms of Emirates Humanitarian City (EHC) in Abu Dhabi, alongside 10,000-12,000 other Afghan refugees, following the Taliban takeover of the country last August. Most are still in limbo awaiting answers to their entry status to the United States or to other countries. Some still don't know where they will go. Noori is one of the few

whose days of waiting will soon be over. She is on route to Canada, where she will join her mother, who also escaped, before continuing her studies at Bard College, a private liberal arts college in upstate New York, where she was recently admitted on a full scholarship.

Noori's harrowing evacuation from Herat in August and planned move to Canada are due to the efforts of IsraAID, an international non-governmental humanitarian aid organization based in Israel, and Noori's friend Danna Harman, a former journalist, activist and now staff member at IsraAID.

Noori's story is one shared by thousands

of refugees from Afghanistan whose lives have been completely uprooted. On Aug. 21, six days after the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, faced with an uncertain life at the hands of the new government — particularly regarding the status of women — Noori felt she had no choice but to flee. There was the possibility of being killed, and the possibility of long-term separation from her family, but for Noori, her future depended on it.

On Aug. 13 the Taliban captured Herat, the country's third-largest city. Before its takeover, even as she heard that fighting had begun, Noori hadn't thought to abandon

the only country she'd called home. "It was such a hard day for me when my city was captured," she told *The Circuit* on a Zoom call. "I realized that everything is going to change. I would have been like a prisoner in my home and wouldn't be able to leave for my education."

In Herat, Noori was studying medicine at Herat University. Her dream is to become a doctor — one spurred by her late father's cerebrovascular disease.

Noori's mother told her that if she wanted to fulfill her dream, then she needed to leave. "It is not your place anymore," Noori recalled her saying, urging her to flee with her younger brother, Abdul Rashed, 14.

"After the Taliban came, all women had to stay in their homes; we could not leave without one man who was either a brother, husband, father or son," she said. Noori said that, contrary to what the Taliban has told the media about the situation improving for women and girls in the group's second takeover of the country, women's rights have disappeared again. "They are telling lies," she said. "Three months before [the] Taliban returned, we were free and now we are not. [The] Taliban even sent letters to my university threatening that if they opened the doors to the university, they would attack it with suicide attacks. No one has been able to return to school."

"Under Taliban rule, women and girls cannot leave a room without a man," continued Noori. "Before [the] Taliban we were so free. We could go to school, go out as we pleased, be with men and talk to the media. We could travel to other countries alone as women. We had lots of freedoms."

In addition to her medical studies, Noori was also a member of Afghanistan's first-ever robotics team. It was through that experience that she met Harman, who traveled to Afghanistan in 2017 to report on the team for *The New York Times*.

"When I was with the robotics team, I had the chance to get out of Afghanistan, but I didn't because my family was in Afghanistan, my friends, relatives; Herat was my hometown and my father was also there," recalls Noori. "There was no reason for me to go then. Sometimes, though, you need to do things you don't want to do."

Harman and Noori became close friends, and it was Harman whom Noori called

when she was seeking to flee Afghanistan. Harman called IsraAID and the organization, through an arduous and nail-biting process that involved passing numerous Taliban checkpoints, helped Noori and her brother, along with dozens of others that included women's rights activists and female athletes, flee Afghanistan to Tajikistan and then to Abu Dhabi, where they now await their papers to immigrate to Canada.

Noori recounts the terrifying journey out of Afghanistan with pain, compassion, sadness and, at times, even laughter. On Aug. 21, she and her brother boarded buses leaving for Kabul, a grueling, 24-hour journey. There was no air-conditioning on the bus and there were no bathrooms. "There was nothing to wash our hands with, and even the streets when we went outside were completely destroyed after the Taliban's attack. "Me and my brother couldn't sleep on the bus." It was also her brother's first trip ever out of Herat. Banks were closed wherever they went, making it impossible to get money.

When the siblings reached the Afghan capital of Kabul, they spent the night at the home of Noori's classmate. It was then that Harman helped her find transportation options to get to the airport to board an evacuation flight. There were three different buses: one for employees of the German government; one for those working for *The Los Angeles Times*; and a third for others wishing to get into the airport. "I kept jumping from bus to bus because sometimes the Taliban would change their mind and not let a certain bus into the airport," Noori recalled. "When one bus was told not to go, someone would call me to run and get another bus." She and her brother spent nine days, from Aug. 22-30, jumping from bus to bus. They ate and slept on the buses. "We didn't have money to buy good food, so we ate junk food."

Harman helped Noori and her brother get an invitation letter to Germany, so they boarded the German government's bus. But when they finally reached the airport and the Taliban read the list of those who had permission to enter the airport to board a plane, she and her brother's names were missing. "Then the Taliban fired their guns as people went to the airport; we were so scared, but I kept showing the Taliban men

my invitation letter for the airport, but they refused me, saying my name wasn't on the list," she recalls. One of the officials told her to tighten her head scarf, remarking that a few hairs were loose. "I was so close to the airplane; I couldn't lose my chance and so I kept showing my invitation letter, but he wouldn't let me in."

It was 2:30 a.m., and Noori and her brother finally left the airport — tired, exhausted and with their hopes dashed of getting on a plane. "It was the scariest night of my life; I couldn't even go to my friend's house as it was so late and her father kept complaining when we were there that he didn't have extra money to help us, so that night we had to sleep on the street." It was a full moon, she recalled, and they went to an area where there happened to be many dogs. Noori, usually afraid of dogs, fought her fear but began to cry. "But I hid my tears from my brother because I didn't want him to see my weakness," she recalls. "Then, The Los Angeles Times bus called me again and told me where to come. but again it wasn't successful, and we couldn't make a flight out." Noori recalled watching how most evacuees at the airport weren't Afghans but foreigners.

"Foreigners were evacuated with Afghans every day, but for the last two days that I was there, no Afghans could get into the airport because the foreigners were evacuating their commanders, soldiers and other people from their nation," Noori said.

Finally, on Aug. 26, she and her brother got a break. They managed to board a bus, showing their letters at the airport — this time, however, their names were on the list. But a suicide attack that day, which killed 13 U.S. soldiers and 70 Afghan citizens, rocked the airport, and once again they couldn't leave. Harman advised them to take a bus bound for neighboring Tajikistan. After so many failed attempts trying to leave from the airport, it was the only way out. That bus brought them to Kunduz City, on the border with Tajikistan. "Taliban opened the border and said they were sending us to Tajikistan. They even hit some women telling them to leave and go," she recalls. "The night before, the Taliban had celebrated taking over Afghanistan."

"I remember how on the border to cross into Tajikistan there was a river, and

I remember thinking how I was leaving my spirit behind in Afghanistan — it was just my body crossing the border to a new country,” said Noori.

The Taliban put them in another bus in Kunduz City, telling them they were going to Tajikistan, but in fact the bus was heading back to Kabul. When Noori realized this, she called Harman to tell her. “Everyone on the bus was yelling and screaming not to go back to Kabul,” she remembered. The driver and a security man in the bus were both from the Taliban. Suddenly, the bus stopped in a deserted area and a Toyota Corolla arrived. “We thought maybe they brought us here to kill us, and everyone on the bus started crying,” recalls Noori. “But instead, they just wanted to send us off the bus. The passengers stayed at different homes nearby for several days until they finally managed to cross the border to Tajikistan by car. The IsraAID team had spoken to the Taliban and gotten permission for the group to cross.

“I remember how on the border to cross into Tajikistan there was a river, and I remember thinking how I was leaving

my spirit behind in Afghanistan — it was just my body crossing the border to a new country,” said Noori.

There, in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, she happily reunited with Harman after an absence of three years. On Sept. 6, Noori and her brother became part of a 42-person group of refugees assisted by IsraAID that boarded a flight to Abu Dhabi.

“The journey changed my life,” she said. “One day I had not a bed, and the next day I had a huge bed. One day I had no food, and the next day I had too much food. I haven’t been able to go to school, and now I am going to Bard College on scholarship.”

The harrowing evacuation of Afghan refugees from Afghanistan via Tajikistan to the UAE is the first Israeli-Emirati joint humanitarian mission between the two countries, the fruit of the signing of the Abraham Accords in September 2020, which normalized relations between the two countries.

“The UAE were particularly helpful and quickly approved this group because of the Israeli connection, which was very

important for them,” Yotam Polizer, the CEO of IsraAID, told *The Circuit*.

IsraAID had called numerous countries around the world seeking a home for the Afghans trying to flee, and the UAE was one of the only ones that would take in the refugees. “This is not a job most of us do for a living, but we all felt compelled to help,” Harman told *The Circuit*. “We started looking for ways to help Rodoba, and then other girls on the robotics team heard about it and asked me for help and the group grew.”

Harman is now in Albania, where she helped to rescue IsraAID’s second group of refugees from Afghanistan, which includes Noori’s mother, who went to Tajikistan on Sept. 29 and then was flown to Canada, where she awaits her daughter and son.

For Noori, the trek toward a new life is almost complete. Her immigration papers are expected to be ready by March and then she will go to Canada. If all goes as planned, just over six months since leaving Afghanistan she will finally be free to live the life she wants. ♦

FEBRUARY 11, 2022

Adam Fox, on the edge of stardom

Can the Rangers’ young star go from Jericho to hockey’s Promised Land?

By Sam Zieve Cohen

In a city whose seemingly never-ending sports devotion defies the unfulfilled dreams and spells of mediocrity that have come to characterize the last two decades, New York City fans nevertheless possess the stamina and market-share ability to turn any star player of talent into a national sports celebrity in a way no other fan base can.

By this criteria, Adam Fox should soon become a household name. The 23-year-old New York Rangers defenseman starts the halfway point of his third season as a star on the rise. After a promising rookie campaign, Fox surprised the hockey world by winning the Norris Trophy in his sophomore season as the league’s top defenseman — a feat previously only accomplished by Boston

Bruins great Bobby Orr. The win also made Fox the first Jewish player in NHL history to receive a major individual award. Now in his third season, the Long Island native’s continued improvement has played a significant role in the Rangers’ surprise success this season.

Growing up in Jericho, a town on Nassau County’s North Shore, Fox took to hockey early, first learning to play as a 4-year-old. For many years, despite living deep in New York Islander’s territory, his father, Bruce, owned Rangers season tickets, affording Adam and his brother the frequent opportunity to attend games. The exposure also turned the brothers into committed Rangers fans.

Like much of the surrounding Nassau County, Jericho includes a sizable population of Jewish residents.

“I grew up in a pretty good Jewish community. I didn’t feel like an outsider at all for being Jewish,” Fox recalled in an interview with *Jewish Insider*.

For his bar mitzvah, Fox chose, perhaps not surprisingly, a hockey-themed party. “I had these T-shirts with [hockey] sticks on them and everything,” Fox described. “I didn’t want to have any adults there. I know people like to do that.”

Off the ice, Fox sounds exactly like the nice Jewish boy his background suggests. He speaks in a thoughtful, calm and thoroughly polite manner. He describes a Jewish upbringing that included attending services and gathering for holiday meals.

“The Jewish holidays are especially big on just bringing family together and spending time,” Fox remarked. “When it

comes to food, I know my family loves some brisket and some latkes. So I think those are a staple in my house.”

After graduating high school in 2016, Fox committed to attend and play hockey at Harvard University.

College attendance remains rare for NHL players, with only one-third choosing to postpone their professional ambitions for the campus green. Despite being drafted by the Calgary Flames in 2016, Fox’s decision to commit to Harvard was based on his own expectation that he would not continue to play hockey professionally. “I wasn’t really looking for a future in hockey,” he explained. “I think, first and foremost, the education was the number one reason for wanting to go there.”

At Harvard, Fox majored in psychology and was selected as a First Team All-American. With Fox as the leading scorer, the hockey team reached the semifinals of the NCAA Division I national championship in 2017.

“It was great. I loved it,” Fox enthused of his time as an undergraduate, crediting the education with instilling a maturity he now finds important to his game.

After his junior year at Harvard, Fox found his signing rights traded from Calgary to the Carolina Hurricanes and, eventually, to the Rangers. In 2019, with a year remaining at Harvard, Fox left Cambridge for New York, securing a roster spot during preseason training.

“It’s been surreal,” Fox said of playing for his childhood team. “There could also be a little more added pressure being that you’re close to home and [in] a major market like New York. But at the same time, [I’m] able to fulfill a dream that [I’ve] had since I was a little kid and play for the Rangers every day. It’s definitely a blessing.”

The continued proximity to Long Island and the community in Jericho makes it all the more special.

Even when he is unable to find the time to drive the 30 miles from Madison Square Garden, Fox says he frequently receives and appreciates messages of support from his friends back home.

“That area, all of Long Island, obviously holds a close place to my heart. I’m a part of that community, and it’s obviously good for me to be in this position. It’s nice to have

people who look up to you and see that ‘Jewish athlete from Long Island.’”

While Fox admits does not think about it every day, he considers Judaism “a part of my identity,” explaining, “It’s who I am.”

Fox has drawn rave reviews for his hockey intelligence and vision on the ice. He plays with a quickness and ease that makes the absolute most of his 5-foot-11 frame. Watching him play, he seems to possess a sixth sense for the puck, pivoting to throw his stick out at just the right moment to block a shot or tip a pass, exhibiting the finesse an undersized defenseman needs in the rugged NHL.

“Ever since I was younger, I was never the biggest, strongest or fastest, so you kind of have to find different ways to be effective,” Fox told *JL*. “For me, it was never about being overly physical, it was just making the right play.”

Last season, Fox was promoted to the first power-play unit. Skeptics questioned whether the young player, only in his second year, could handle such a key assignment, but Fox has thrived in the role. His passing, always a highlight of his game, was put to immediate good use, with Fox serving as the central point of attack.

Since then, the Rangers have excelled at the power-play, currently ranking seventh in power-play goals this season. Fox and fellow first-unit standouts Chris Kreider, Artemi Panarin and Mika Zibanejad individually rank in the league’s top 10 in total points (a combination of goals and assists).

Observers compare Fox’s talents to those of Hall of Famer Brian Leetch, one of the greatest defensemen in hockey history, who led the Rangers to win the 1994 Stanley Cup — the franchise’s sole championship since 1940.

The comparison was made by the iconic Rangers play-by-play announcer Sam Rosen, who declared Fox “Brian Leetch-like” at the end of last season.

“The thing that always stood out to me about Brian is the great vision he had of the ice, whether it was to make a pass to the center or make a pass to the winger breaking the wall and just lead a play into the offensive zone. The rushes from end to

end. He was so special. And we’re seeing this on a nightly basis from [Fox],” Rosen, who has called Rangers games since 1984, told the *New York Post*’s Rangers podcast.

After last season, the entire hockey world has taken notice. Fox was selected to his first All-Star Game, which was held last weekend (although he sat out due to an upper-body injury), and he is on the shortlist for a possible Norris Trophy repeat (a feat not done since 2008).

Increasingly, opposing teams are strategizing around the reigning Norris Trophy winner, yet Fox continues to thrive under pressure. According to data compiled by *The Athletic*, Fox connects on 92 percent of his passes in the offensive zone. Despite missing two weeks, Fox is tied for first in points among all defensemen.

Now just past the halfway point of the season, the Rangers lead the Metropolitan Division and are among the favorites to make the postseason for the first time since 2017. In an especially success-hungry city, the pressure to turn an excellent regular season into a triumphant playoff run is high.

When he’s not playing in front of packed crowds at Madison Square Garden, Fox keeps to many of the routines of a 20-something living in New York City.

In his Upper West Side apartment, he and roommate Ryan Lindgren (a Rangers teammate and fellow defenseman) compete using a portable indoor putting green to decide which of them picks up their delivery food dinners from the lobby of their building. The two also trade TV show suggestions, for when their schedules permit. At Lindgren’s suggestion, Fox recently started watching “Seinfeld.”

The 23-year-old pled his youth when asked why he had waited to start the 1990s comedy series (let alone that it took the prompting of a Minneapolis gentile). “I finally was like, let me watch it and, you know, [it’s] pretty funny,” Fox remarked, adding that he hoped to start Larry David’s “Curb Your Enthusiasm” next.

Despite these cultural touchstones, Fox is no ordinary young New Yorker early in his career. In November, the Rangers rewarded him with a seven-year contract

extension reportedly worth \$66.5 million. At \$9.5 million per year, the new deal is the largest ever for a defenseman leaving his entry-level contract.

Fox has leveraged his growing talent and fame to advocate for causes he's long supported. His girlfriend's father, former Atlanta Falcons linebacker Tim Green, founded Tackle ALS after his diagnosis several years ago. Since then, the organization has raised over \$5.5 million for ALS research at the Healey Center for ALS at Massachusetts General Hospital.

"I know that the 'ice bucket challenge' was something that went around when I was younger, but to be around firsthand and see the impact [ALS] has, it's changed my outlook and made me want to help out and do something to help out with that cause."

While the pandemic has limited public community events, Fox and the Rangers have helped raise money for ALS research through raffles of game tickets and hockey sticks signed by the defenseman.

While he may not seek the exposure, Fox understands that his position casts him as a role model — especially to young Jewish hockey fans. "Understanding what it means for some Jewish kids to see me out there representing [them]," Fox said, pausing slightly. "Things like that are just stuff you

learn along the way and understand that you are in a position to influence and maybe inspire people."

During a recent January game at Madison Square Garden against the Los Angeles Kings, Fox played the late-game hero, scoring the winning goal in a shootout. This was a rare spot for Fox, or any defenseman, who is usually not called on for these one-on-one scoring opportunities. Coming in as the 12th shooter of the sudden-death period, Fox faked a forehand shot that caused Kings goalie Jonathan Quick — who had already made several impressive saves — to move off-balance to his left, before Fox delivered a backhand flick on the goalie's right.

The entire sequence looked polished, perfectly executed and extremely confident.

After the game, Fox admitted he never practiced the move. "I don't expect to go too often, so I work on other things," he said laughing. "I haven't been in a shootout since maybe my junior days."

Nevertheless, his play impressed Rangers Head Coach Gerard Gallant.

"I think he should be one of our top shooters. He doesn't love to do it a lot, but I think after tonight's goal he's going to get a

lot of confidence doing it," Gallant predicted after the Kings game. "I talked to him earlier in the year about going, he said 'No, I don't feel comfortable going.' But I think that's going to change now."

The next day, Fox still sounded less certain than his coach.

"If it had to come down to me to do, I was happy to be able to come through," he told JI. "Hockey is the ultimate team sport in that sense. I think it's not always just one person getting all the glory, and I think that's the great part about it."

"I think obviously you have the dreams of scoring the Game Seven overtime winner to win the Stanley Cup... I definitely have those dreams," Fox continued. "You know, a shootout winner at MSG is up there, but I definitely have bigger goals that I want to accomplish with the Rangers."

Those "bigger goals" need no additional explanation. With the young star only in his third season, the New York hockey fandom is abuzz with what Fox could mean to the franchise.

And for Fox, who also grew up rooting for the Jets and Mets, he could bring championship glory to one of his childhood teams for the first time in his life. ♦

FEBRUARY 10, 2022

Sol Werdiger's Super Bowl LVI game plan

For the sports jersey maker and Agudath board chairman, his big-game ritual is about more than football. But a Bengals win would be better for business

By Matthew Kassel

Sol Werdiger, founder and CEO of the youth sports apparel manufacturer Outerstuff, has attended every Super Bowl game for more than two decades.

While he enjoys the competition, Werdiger, who also serves as the chairman of Agudath Israel's board of trustees, has always made sure to arrive a few days early so he can mingle with Jewish community members while hosting a Friday night Shabbat meal, which typically includes

kosher food from local purveyors as well as a ticket raffle. The festive dinners have become something of an annual ritual for the 70-year-old entrepreneur, who enjoys regaling his guests with any number of colorful Super Bowl stories he has collected over the years.

On Friday, Werdiger had been planning what he described as a "kiruv" event with Olami, a nonprofit Jewish organization with which he is an executive mentor, in the Pico-Robertson neighborhood of Los

Angeles, where the hometown Rams will be facing off against the Cincinnati Bengals on Sunday at SoFi Stadium for the NFL's 56th championship game.

The only tradition Werdiger himself will be breaking is that he won't be there for Shabbat. "The plans have changed only because of some good news," Werdiger said ecstatically in an interview with Jewish Insider on Wednesday, noting that he had a somewhat more significant Jewish ritual to attend. "Thank God, my grandson had a boy."

It's my first great-grandson's bris on Friday morning."

Werdiger, who lives in New York, said he was still sending free tickets to be raffled off on Friday, and he had taken care to ensure that the event would be properly catered — an easy task because "there's no shortage of kosher food" in Los Angeles. Other cities, he suggested, have proven more challenging. "I was very much looking forward to this event," Werdiger said. "Regretfully, I had to cancel."

Instead, Werdiger is now flying into Los Angeles on Saturday night after the Sabbath, as are his children, who will be joining him at the game. "We'll be there at the Super Bowl," he told JI, adding that he would be hosting "whoever wants to come into our hospitality suite at one of the downtown hotels" in Los Angeles. "We serve food before the game and after the game. A lot of people know us and know we're there."

Next Sunday, Werdiger said he will also be hosting guests for the NBA's All-Star Game in Cleveland.

The Orthodox leader is grateful for any opportunity to engage in Jewish communal life now that COVID restrictions have eased as the virus wanes in cities across the country. At last year's Super Bowl in Tampa, Werdiger was unable to host a catered event and engage in Friday night prayers with locals. He had dinner in his hotel room before the game.

From a business standpoint, Werdiger said the situation has also improved considerably over the past year. "Thank God," Werdiger told JI. "The stadiums are open. People are going. People are shopping

at the stores. There's more enthusiasm around, especially the NFL. There were some great postseason matchups. We had a rough spell over COVID with arenas closed. A big part of our business is selling at the games."

According to Werdiger, the underdog Bengals are a more reliable source of revenue than the Rams. "We get all the if-win orders in advance," he said. While he emphasized that "we like both teams," Werdiger suggested that, "business-wise," a Bengals victory would lead to more jersey sales than a Rams win.

Despite his line of work, Werdiger admitted that he is by no means "a sports-crazy guy." Over the years, he said he has often questioned how he ended up in the sports apparel industry. "There's a reason that God puts everybody into a position that they're in," he told JI, "and I always said to myself, 'Why has God put me into sports?'"

He has found the answer, he said, by joining with Jewish community members of varying religious persuasions in a manner that has imbued an otherwise secular American pastime such as football with an extra layer of meaning. "You can make a difference at the game," Werdiger said. "We have had so many stories at the Super Bowl where we've had minyan and where a guy said, 'I didn't know, that's great, I have to say Kaddish for a parent,' or a guy came and davened with us for Shabbat and people came to us and ate kosher meals."

Such experiences have extended beyond games like the Super Bowl as Werdiger has participated in a program initiated by the late Orthodox rebbetzin, Esther Jungreis,

to engage in outreach to unaffiliated Jewish families.

"When they come to my office and they see there's a guy who makes sports jerseys, it's so exciting for them," he said. "You can really show them that you could be Jewish, you could be religious, you could eat kosher, and you could close on the Shabbat and close on the chagim and still be successful. It's a very impactful message to these kids, because sports resonates with all of them."

After one such visit last year around the Super Bowl, Werdiger said that a boy who was about to have his bar mitzvah insisted to his parents that the event be kosher. The demand prompted an alarmed call to Werdiger's office from the boy's father, who wanted to convey that it would cost an additional \$50,000 to make the accommodation.

Still, the man, whom Werdiger declined to name, seemed happy to honor his son's request in the end. "I ended up going to the bar mitzvah," Werdiger recalled. "It was an elaborate, fancy bar mitzvah, and he kept on bringing me over to his rabbi, and said, 'Here's the guy who made me make this bar mitzvah kosher. It never would have been kosher.' So you talk about a story that resonates around the Super Bowl, I think that's a great story. It's the power of sports. It gives me a better understanding."

"There's no question," Werdiger concluded, "that the reason God put us into the sports business is because He knew that we'll use it beyond just selling a lot of jerseys." ♦

FEBRUARY 7, 2022

With politics in his blood, Gideon Taylor takes on Jewish community relations

Taylor, who was appointed executive vice president of the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York last July, discussed the challenges facing the city's Jewish community

By Ruth Marks Eglash

Gideon Taylor is no stranger to politics. The son of the first Jewish cabinet minister in

Ireland, Taylor is now building his own political career of sorts as the recently appointed executive vice president

of the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York.

Responsible for pulling together an

increasingly polarized Jewish community and reaching out to an increasingly hostile wider community, Taylor – whose father was Mervyn Taylor, minister for equity and law reform in Dublin during the 1990s, and who passed away last September – understands the vast complexities of his new position.

He is also aware that the scale and scope of the Jewish community in New York are somewhat different from where he grew up. “I live on the Upper West Side and there’s more Jews on my block than there were in the whole of Ireland,” he quipped to *Jewish Insider* in his first interview since taking over in July.

“I think that New York is going through a time of incredibly radical change socially, economically and politically,” Taylor continued. “If there was a way to measure that change in simple terms and indicators, I think you would come to the conclusion there’s been more change in New York in the past few years than there was in the previous 20 years.”

Taylor recognizes the myriad challenges of uniting an extremely diverse Jewish population, as well as building ties with a rapidly changing general population, but he believes it is all possible with a bit of patience and a lot of education and outreach.

“New York is a big, complicated, diverse place, with many hundreds of thousands of people who grow up barely meeting or interacting with any Jews,” he said, adding, “In some ways, New York is a melting pot city, and, in some ways, people live in their own worlds, their own bubbles, and their own segments. I think the role of the JCRC is to break down those barriers and connect people — that’s what community relations is all about.”

Taylor moved to New York in the 1980s after studying law in Dublin and at Oxford University and began his career in Jewish communal service at the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), participating in missions to rescue Jews in Syria, Yemen and Ethiopia. He went on to serve as executive vice president of the board of directors of the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference), overseeing efforts to recover property that once belonged to Holocaust victims and distributing Holocaust

restitution and compensation to survivors. More recently he worked in commercial real estate before taking over the JCRC.

He succeeds Michael Miller, who headed the organization for 36 years and became one of the city’s most prominent Jewish leaders. Miller’s tenure covered some of the more turbulent times in recent New York City history, including the Crown Heights riots of 1991, in which two people died and more than 200 were injured. In a sign of Miller’s enduring influence, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) thanked him (along with Taylor) for his work at an event last month.

Speaking to JI, Taylor noted the contrast between today’s political and societal structures compared to when he first arrived in the city. “Then, the power structures were all very well-defined and concentrated in the hands of relatively few people, but now, the demographics have shifted tremendously and so have the structures of power,” Taylor said, citing a decline in Jewish members of the City Council from 27% just two years ago to 12% today.

He also identified New York’s rapidly changing demographics – with more divergent religious beliefs and increasing numbers of new immigrants – as another challenge to building bridges between the Jewish community and the rest of the city.

“I think a priority for us is building relationships with the people who are going to be running New York in three years, five years, and 10 years time,” Taylor said. “We want to expand our fellowships in schools, take in children from public schools, private schools, from Jewish, Catholic, and Islamic schools.”

And on college campuses, Taylor said the JCRC is already working with diversity officers. “We need to be at that table and engaging with those voices because they’re becoming more and more influential on issues around race and society,” he said.

Taylor also noted that if the Jewish community wants outside groups to care about the issues that are important internally, then it is essential for Jews to engage with issues important to those external partners.

“The JCRC needs to be the voice of the mainstream Jewish community at the tables where those critical issues of the day are

being discussed in New York,” he continued, highlighting issues such as criminal justice reform and combating all forms of hate.

“The second one is a big priority for us,” Taylor highlighted. “Antisemitism is one example of hate crimes, but hate crimes, in general, are like cancer that corrodes the city, and what we’ve seen is that a person who attacks a Jew on the street is often the same person who will attack a person of color, or will be promoting anti-Asian hatred, Islamophobia or homophobia. Hatred knows no boundaries.”

He emphasized education as a way to combat racial hate and antisemitism, pointing out that the goal is to engage exactly with those “who’ve been immersed in a world of hate, or even in a world of BDS” because often they’ve grown up in that world and heard nothing else.

“We are trying to begin the conversation at a much earlier stage,” Taylor explained.

Among the many activities facilitated by the JCRC, Taylor points to its educational fellowships aimed at promising young leaders, as well as its efforts to shape state’s educational curriculum and tackle anti-Jewish content or sentiments. The programs it uses to train upcoming leaders also include addressing conversations around Israel, which has become a catalyst for antisemitism.

“Israel is a core part of the Jewish community and of our identity as Jews,” stated Taylor. “On the one hand, there are clearly very many diverse opinions about Israel both within the Jewish community and outside the Jewish community, and the way to approach this from a community relations perspective is... educating people.”

One way of doing that is by offering local leaders a chance to visit Israel. In the past, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the JCRC brought up-and-coming elected officials, including the recently inaugurated Mayor Eric Adams, to Israel, where programming offered a glimpse into Palestinian life. The pandemic has slowed those down but, said Taylor, they are hoping to resume them in the coming months, including with an invitation extended to the state’s new governor, Kathy Hochul.

Whether local politicians will accept those invitations is another matter. In 2020, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA),

which supports efforts to boycott, divest and sanction Israel, asked its candidates not to travel to Israel. When Democratic Rep. Jamaal Bowman (D-NY), a DSA member, went on an Israel trip with the dovish J Street last year, the Madison, Wisc., chapter called for his expulsion, a move the national DSA briefly considered.

"The goal is for them to come back from Israel and understand the complexity," said Taylor of JCRC's outreach efforts to elected

officials. "It's not a trip to try to convince a person to be one way or another, we want them to hear a diversity of opinions and issues within Israeli society and within Palestinian society and reject the simplistic assertions that tend to drive so much the discourse."

Taylor is aware, however, that while such efforts have more long-term goals, they may fail to address a growing sense of alarm within the Jewish community in

light of violent attacks such as the Tree of Life synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh and the more recent hostage-taking event in Colleyville, Texas.

"Sometimes threats like these create unity, but I think there needs to be ongoing work," he said. "We need to be having discussions about this on an ongoing basis and not just when there's a crisis, but obviously tackling this [violence] is also a priority for us going forward. ♦

FEBRUARY 10, 2022

Addressing the gender imbalance in Israeli high-tech

Female students in Israel do not traditionally study STEM subjects, but some are trying to change that

By Ruth Marks Eglash

Not far from Ben Gurion Airport, in a spacious and airy hangar, sits Israel's latest collection of highly sophisticated Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs). Large and small, short distance and longer range — even the first Israeli drone, circa 1980, strung from the ceiling — the space has everything one might expect to inspire, create and develop these innovative flying machines. However, among the workstations, spare parts and a plethora of highly trained engineers, there's one thing conspicuously missing: women.

The space is part of a sprawling campus belonging to Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI), a state-owned company that develops all manner of civilian and military aerial systems it sells to more than 100 countries. It is a leader in the field both in Israel and around the world, however, among its 15,000 engineers only around a third are female.

The shortage of female engineers at IAI mirrors Israel's broader technology and innovation sector today where women make up roughly a third of employees. And IAI is among the leaders in the industry looking for ways to address this gender imbalance.

"We want to raise the percentage of women in the engineering positions in the high-tech world in the future, not only for

the IAI but for all of Israel," Gili May, IAI's chief relationship officer, who is responsible for the company's social responsibility outreach, told Jewish Insider. "I think IAI has an obligation to fight for the right of women to take their place in the field of engineering. Of course, we hope that those graduating from our program will come back to us in the future, but that does not really matter as long as some of the girls from this program end up becoming engineers."

The company's Engineers of the Future program, launched six years ago, offers 100 teenage girls each year the chance to take a peek inside the industry, showing them the kind of jobs available and even connecting them with female mentors already working in the field who can guide them through their hectic adolescent years.

"I was always interested in science, and I always wanted to head in that direction but doing this program really helped to develop my dreams, it showed me what was possible and what I might be able to accomplish," Eliya Harari, who participated in the program in 2017, told JI.

Now 21, Harari is completing a degree in computer science at Bar-Ilan University. She said that while she was interested in computers in high school, she did not receive too much encouragement or support

from her family, her teachers or her peers.

"When you are young, there are so many things that you want to do and it is distracting," Harari said. "But when I joined the [IAI] program, I met other girls who were like me, and that really made it fun and gave me some support."

A recent study by Power in Diversity, a joint venture of more than 60 Israeli venture capital firms and more than 170 Israeli startups aimed at promoting diversity and inclusion, found that women account for only 33% of all industry employees. Dror Bin, CEO of Israel's Innovation Authority, told JI in an interview last month that boosting the number of women in the sector was one of the authority's main priorities, also in part to address an overall shortage of manpower in the country's high-tech sphere.

"The manpower shortage in Israel's high-tech [sector] is chronic," Maty Zwaig, CEO of Scale-Up Velocity, a branch of Start-Up Nation Central, which seeks to advance Israel's high-tech industry and provide solutions to its human capital challenges, told JI.

Zwaig said that along the traditional route to careers in Israeli high-tech there were many points where young women could and should be encouraged and engaged much more, which would ultimately increase their

participation in the industry.

“The pipeline to the high-tech industry in Israel begins with STEM, then there is the army and then university,” she described, using the acronym for the curriculum focused on science, technology, engineering and math. “We have a clear understanding of points where things go wrong, where we lose girls in the system.”

According to the Council for Higher Education in Israel, while the number of students overall studying STEM has increased over the past decade, still only 29% of students in subjects such as computer sciences, electrical engineering and electronics are female, Haaretz reported last month. The report highlighted that the gender gap begins in junior high school, where boys make up most of the students taking such subjects and continues on through the “pipeline” that Zwaig describes.

The number of girls or young women involved in science and technology dwindles even further when Israelis reach the army, said Zwaig, a former lieutenant colonel in the IDF, where she headed R&D units in the Intelligence Corps, citing her organization’s own research.

Only around 27% of army programmers

are women and only 17% of cyber units are female, she said, adding that by the time many young women reach university, degrees focused on technological or science – subjects that almost guarantee a future in engineering or some aspect of high-tech and innovation – feel out of reach.

At IAI, which has been working to advance female engineers in its own ranks, the four-month training program for junior high school girls not only promotes STEM, it also works to develop bonds with those already working in the field.

Dikla Avraham, one of the few female engineers at IAI and a mentor for the program (not Harari’s mentor), said that such outreach was important in introducing “young women to the world of engineering and science,” which they might be reluctant to join because it’s such a male-dominated industry.

The program, she said, gave young women confidence and the mentoring showed that it is possible to also become wives and mothers, even while working in a highly competitive and very demanding industry.

May, who is also IAI’s spokesman, said that encouraging teenage girls to stick with

scientific subjects throughout high school, the army and into university when there were so many life distractions came down to is “branding.”

“Of course, you need the basic capabilities in order to succeed in one of these subjects, but you don’t have to be a rocket scientist in order to matriculate in physics,” he pointed out. “We want to emphasize that studying these subjects is cool and that being an engineer is cool too.”

Scale-Up Velocity’s Zwaig is hopeful too, saying that even beyond the traditional life path laid out for Israelis, “it is never too late for women to go back and learn these topics” and find employment in the high-tech field.

Among the programs run by Scale-Up Velocity, is a retraining course for ultra-Orthodox women who are the main breadwinners in their community and are becoming increasingly present in Israel’s high-tech hub.

“If women want to do something that pays more, then they can find a way in,” Zwaig concluded. “The main problem is that women, at a certain stage, tell themselves this field is not for them, but there are so many positions they can do, it’s just a matter of self-perception.” ♦