

THE WEEKLY PRINT

Inside New Jersey's Orthodox boomtown; AOC heckled by pro-Palestinian protestors at two Austin events; Jamaal Bowman pulls support for Abraham Accords bill; Tzipi Livni opens up about her Gulf visits before the Abraham Accords; and Art to bring dreamers together in space.

FEBRUARY 18, 2022

Inside New Jersey's Orthodox boomtown

This 'company town' is home to the largest yeshiva in the U.S., and its business community is booming. Now Lakewood's small airport is getting a state-of-the-art makeover. What does it all mean for this once-sleepy town?

By Gabby Deutch

In the beginning, God created New Jersey.

OK, maybe not Him. First there were the Delaware Indians, followed by Dutch and British colonists who landed off the Jersey Shore in the 17th century. Then New Jerseyans fought against the British in the Revolutionary War. The state that is now best known for Bruce Springsteen and its proximity to New York City earned the nickname "Garden State," and for many years, the middle chunk of the state was home to a lot of farms and few people.

By the early 1900s, wealthy New Yorkers ventured out of the city via train and horse-and-buggy carts to relax and decompress in Central New Jersey towns that were by then dotted with luxury hotels. In the 1940s, when Jews were being slaughtered in Europe, one rabbi looked to New Jersey and identified his pastoral promised land.

In Lakewood — an Ocean County township that is not especially close to either Manhattan or Philadelphia — Rabbi Aharon Kotler, a Talmid chacham, or learned man, who left Europe at the outset of the Holocaust, planted roots. In 1943, a year after opening a small yeshiva in White Plains, New York he moved the school to

this New Jersey town that would become a pivotal piece of the American Jewish puzzle.

"A place out of town, suburbia, even today is not always so welcoming to yeshivas," said Rabbi Aaron Kotler, the grandson of the man who birthed modern Lakewood and who has himself contributed to its massive transformation in recent decades. Kotler's grandfather liked Lakewood because at the time, Jews were frequent visitors to the town and patrons of its thriving hospitality industry, which included several kosher hotels. "There were not many places like that that would have been theoretically friendly toward a yeshiva. In those days, America was not as tolerant as it is today."

Today, under the leadership of Rabbi Aharon Kotler's grandsons, the yeshiva — Beth Medrash Govoha, or BMG — has grown from a dozen students in its first year to more than 7,000 this academic year, making it the largest yeshiva outside of Israel. The result has been not just an explosion in Jewish education, but also enormous economic and demographic changes that have transformed this once-sleepy town.

It's one of the most significant Jewish communities in the United States, but to people outside of the Orthodox world, it's

largely invisible. For those who do observe Jewish law, Lakewood has become a must-visit spot. Its elaborate yet affordable wedding halls make the spot perfect for something of a destination wedding for religious Jews from around the country.

People who used to schlep to Brooklyn to do their shopping now go to Lakewood for wedding dresses, sheitels (wigs for religious women), modest clothing, fine china, Jewish books and ritual objects. In most American cities, you can find a church on any street corner. In Lakewood, the neighborhood church is a synagogue.

Over the last decade, the majority-Orthodox Lakewood was the second-fastest growing city in New Jersey. Its population increased by more than 45%, or some 42,000 people, between 2010 and 2020, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. And that doesn't even count the corresponding growth in nearby Toms River and Jackson, two towns whose Orthodox populations have increased as Lakewood has become expensive and crowded.

All of that growth is not an accident: Business is booming in Lakewood, whose population is majority Orthodox. Hundreds of thousands of square feet of premium

office space have been built in recent years to accommodate new companies and old ones that are growing. Luxury shopping developments keep popping up. More than 13,000 people work at the city's industrial park, the second-largest in the state.

One small building on the outskirts of town carries the hopes and ambitions of Lakewood's increasingly influential business community.

If you leave the yeshiva, and start driving southeast, you can be at the Lakewood Township Municipal Airport in 10 minutes if there's no traffic — a relative rarity in Lakewood, where a three-mile drive can take close to an hour during rush hour. (Rush hour, in Lakewood, is when thousands of young married men depart BMG yeshiva for their afternoon lunch break)

You'll pass a Minor League Baseball stadium, the gleaming new corporate park and several Jewish primary schools that appear to be bursting at the seams. A mile after you pass Chai Urgent Care ("chai" is Hebrew for "life"), turn right at the small sign that says Lakewood Airport: "The sky's the limit!"

It's not much to look at — a couple of small portable buildings that resemble a general contractor's makeshift office on a construction site, behind a chain-link fence. A few picnic tables sit out front for kids to watch the prop planes take off.

But now the airport is set to undergo a transformation into a new, state-of-the-art terminal building with a high-end kosher restaurant and a large conference center. The project aims to inspire more businesses to set up shop in Lakewood and satisfy a legion of increasingly wealthy professionals already in town.

With charter flights and helicopter rides taking people to New York City and other economic hubs on the East Coast, why not come to Lakewood, the city asks — Lakewood, where you can have the best of both worlds, learning Torah and generating income?

Steven Reinman, the man tasked with

making all of this happen, met me at the Lakewood Airport on a blustery Thursday morning in late December. He pulled into the small parking lot 15 minutes late, the result of a bad car accident that stopped traffic on Route 9, the perpetually crowded road that serves as a major thoroughfare for this town of 135,000 people.

Reinman is a lapsed venture capitalist who now serves as the city's economic development director and airport manager. Dressed sparsely in a white button-down with a pen in the breast pocket and a baseball hat atop his yarmulke, his payos tucked behind his ears, he looked like he could have come straight from a BMG study hall. Instead, he had arrived from his grandson's brit milah. Stepping out of his car, he offered apologies and a box of pastries he had brought from the celebration.

He guided me into his office in the small terminal building, through a conference room where another worker sat at a desk running air-traffic control. No planes landed or took off in the course of our hour-long meeting.

"In small airports like this, the terminals serve as both a place to conduct business and for the social aspect, for the pilots that kind of hang out together and share war stories," said Reinman. A video taken at the airport went viral late last year, when a helicopter that took off from a Crown Heights parking lot landed in Lakewood after being trailed by an NYPD helicopter, who did not know the pilots had permission to land in Brooklyn.

The airport, like Lakewood itself, has a history of changing with the times. What began as a small dirt runway in the town's resort days became a launchpad for parachuters and thrill-seekers in the 1970s. The Lakewood municipality acquired the airport from private owners in the 1990s, and it now houses several dozen private single-engine planes, a couple of banner-towing companies and multiple flying clubs for people who want to learn to fly without investing in their own aircraft.

If a proposed public-private partnership is approved to direct the airport renovation, the all-glass modern terminal will be ready in two years. The airport is located within the town limits, so its facility is meant to also appeal to business owners who want

to organize events that may draw attendees from around the tri-state area and beyond.

This next phase will put Lakewood on the map as a business destination, and not just a landing pad for small-time pilots interested in exploring historic airports. "People have woken up to the idea that you don't have to have your corporate headquarters in New York City. You can have it down here," said Reinman. "There's economies of scale, things that you couldn't necessarily afford to do in New York, you can afford to do here."

Luring people to Lakewood has, until recently, largely been the purview of the BMG yeshiva. Reinman compared the situation to Hershey, Pa.: "Somebody could come and open up a business years ago in Hershey town, and Hershey town still remained centered around the chocolate factory."

Similarly, in Lakewood, industrious BMG graduates could set up, say, an e-commerce warehouse to sell goods on Amazon, but their business wouldn't exist if the yeshiva hadn't brought them to Lakewood in the first place — just like a law office or family business in Hershey could thrive because of the people who come to Hershey to work for the chocolate giant, or visit the theme park. (Lakewood, it should be said, has a kosher chocolate factory.)

"One of the drivers [for the business growth] was the level of skill from the alumni of the yeshiva, who, thank God, are very capable people," Kotler told me. "If they choose to go into business, they have a lot of skill sets to do that. And they're successful in general."

The students' skills may have contributed to the staying power of the economic success, but BMG itself has not been a passive observer to the changes. The yeshiva has been perhaps the largest single force behind the town's massive growth.

In his 26 years as president of BMG, Kotler, who stepped down from the post late last year, attracted thousands more students to the yeshiva. But Kotler also actively invested in Lakewood real estate. The Cedarbridge Corporate Park, with nearly a million square feet of premium office space, was developed by the yeshiva's real estate affiliate — a development company also run, until recently, by Kotler. BMG invested \$15 million in developing the corporate park,

according to the school's 2019 economic impact report.

The thinking behind the corporate park borrowed from that famous line in "Field of Dreams:" "If you build it, they will come." That theory appears to have been borne out.

"That was why we built the park," said Kotler. "That was then attractive for companies to want to locate here, knowing that there was a highly educated workforce. The men are educated here. The women are educated here. They go into business."

As a result of all this growth, "the lifestyle has changed," said one prominent Lakewood businessperson who requested anonymity because of his connection to major local economic dealings. "There are quite a few people that are making a lot of money, and they're living very affluent lifestyles."

The new airport will be designed to appeal to these Lakewood residents, although there are limitations to just how luxurious the Lakewood airport can get. Its runway is 3,200 feet, which is not long enough for higher-end private jets of the Gulfstream or Bombardier variety to land there. Those planes can land just 10 miles away at the Monmouth Executive Airport, one of the largest private airports available for public use in the country.

So what will the new Lakewood Airport be able to offer higher-end flyers? The redesign will feature a new helicopter landing pad, so that helicopters don't have to land on the same runway as planes. Certainly its conference center with a gourmet kosher restaurant will be unique for a municipal airport. Mostly, the airport's pitch to the business community is about Lakewood itself.

"I like to think that we have a nice community here," Reinman noted. "We have a nice mix of people and activities, and so on. If your planes are the right kind of planes, this is a great place to be."

The airport redesign is not meant to only attract Lakewood's wealthiest residents. In recent years, recreational activities centered at the airport have become more popular.

"The airport is situated right in the middle of the industrial park," said Matt Applegate, a Lakewood native who owns Aerial Sign North, a banner-towing company. "From manufacturing to computers to bakeries,

you have everything right there. You have the baseball stadium. Since we're in the center of that hub of all this activity, there's just so much room to grow."

In the summer, parents and young children come and picnic at the tables set up outside the airport fencing, a result of overcrowding in city parks. Kids can stand against the fence and watch planes take off and land.

"There's no amount of things that you can put up that's going to be too much," said Reinman. "People need entertainment options. And this is clean, good, fun. Interesting. Educational. And it's local."

Some summers, the airport brings in a helicopter operator to take people on short aerial tours of the nearby Jersey Shore at a cost of more than \$200 a head. "There was a time when that would have been out of reach for many people," Reinman noted, "but not lately."

Many of the growing industries in Lakewood are in the information services field, things like accounting and back-end healthcare support and financial services. "People joke that it's the healthcare back office capital of the United States," said Kotler.

The town's thriving economy is "a boon for the airport," said Applegate. "Everybody's business is increasing. You have so many more people."

Aaron Kotler no longer has an official day-to-day role at the yeshiva, but he still holds court in Lakewood like no one else. His home sits at the end of a cul-de-sac just steps from one of BMG's main buildings. When I pulled up, cars belonging to Kotler's visitors were crammed so tightly along the curb that I had to park blocks away.

He brought me into his study after sending off a young man who was seeking counsel over whether to accept a pulpit at a synagogue in Texas, far from his family. Kotler sat in an armchair in front of floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. Behind him were black-and-white photos of students learning, along with a tallit and three shofars. By the time our meeting ended an hour later, more than a dozen young men had gathered around a large dining table for lunch with

Kotler.

Last summer, the stipends given to the Kollel students increased for the first time in decades, from \$4,200 annually to \$13,500 annually. The effort will cost some \$50,000,000 — an extraordinary sum that was raised almost entirely in Lakewood, a person with knowledge of the fundraising efforts told JI.

In the past, that money would mostly have come from wealthy BMG graduates who live in places like New York, Los Angeles or Baltimore. The fact that the donations came mostly from people who have stayed in Lakewood represents a major shift.

Lakewood's nouveau riche may be giving back to their town's central institution, but questions remain about the long-term impact of the influx of wealth on a place that began as a quiet, serious monument to learning.

"Throughout modern Jewish history, economic growth has been the harbinger of cultural change," noted Ferziger. Lakewood is "a society that's stratified, it's a society that has very strong social controls, that are getting harder and harder for those social controls to be sustained."

When I was meeting with Kotler, he pulled up a photo on his iPhone of a sign he saw at a local liquor store. "Because of our values, we are no longer selling wine over \$99.99 or whiskey over \$249.99."

"I'm still old school, because I thought \$249 for a bottle of whiskey was still a lot," said Kotler. "Poverty is a challenge. Wealth is a challenge. And having neither is a challenge. Life is always a set of opportunities. So with greater wealth comes interesting opportunities, and some challenges."

One challenge Lakewood does not worry about is maintaining robust Jewish life. The entrepreneurial spirit of the town extends to its synagogues, too. Herskovitz described the communal vibe of people joining together to build a new synagogue in her Toms River community.

"Everyone's pitching in to help," she said. "The shul where I am, the Aron Kodesh [Torah ark] was made by one of the first people who moved into the community. He was a plumber. He was really good with his hands, and he built it out of wood and spray-painted it."

Philip Roth wrote novels that preserved a particular postwar Jewish aspiration — the move to the suburbs, to respectability, to having manicured green lawns — in amber. Roth's New Jersey feels thousands of miles away from the New Jersey of Rabbi Aharon Kotler, though they were there at the same time.

In *Goodbye, Columbus*, Roth's debut short story collection, one story tells the tale of a group of secular Jews in a bucolic New Jersey suburb who seek to shut down a yeshiva run by a Holocaust survivor. A Jewish lawyer named Eli is appointed by his friends to confront the man who wears only dark suits and speaks a Yiddish-tinged English. Eli is tasked with getting the rabbi to, at the very least, wear normal clothes — nu, he's not in the shtetl anymore, can't he

blend in with the Protestant neighbors?

The attorney goes to meet with the rabbi, who is often surrounded by weary children, orphans who came to the U.S. as refugees at the end of the war. He begins to soften when he hears the rabbi tell his story.

By the end, Eli sheds his own clothes and runs around town in the rabbi's heavy black suit. His secular friends have him committed to an insane asylum. But through it all, the yeshiva remains open.

Lakewood is not a community where elders fear that young people will stop keeping Shabbat to keep up with business needs, or to make neighbors less uncomfortable. This, Kotler argues, is the ultimate vindication of his grandfather's vision.

"My grandfather was completely

countercultural. He was a cultural revolutionary to say that traditional Judaism can thrive and flourish here, and we can build Torah, build yeshivas, and we can do it here in America," said Kotler.

Marshall Sklare, an influential Jewish sociologist, famously wrote in 1955 that the history of Orthodox Judaism in the U.S. "can be written in terms of a case study of institutional decay." That prediction turned out to be incorrect.

"The models that sought to minimize their Judaism failed or are failing, which is tragic," Kotler explained. "Tragic for them, for us, for everybody. Tragic for the world because the Jews are a great asset for the world." ♦

FEBRUARY 14, 2022

AOC heckled by pro-Palestinian protestors at two Austin events

'Palestine is basically a banned word. It's censored,' the New York congresswoman responded to a protestor at a weekend rally

By Marc Rod

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) was heckled by pro-Palestinian demonstrators at two separate events in Austin, Texas, on Sunday, while she was in the area to rally support for progressive congressional candidates Greg Casar and Jessica Cisneros.

Interrupted by a pro-Palestinian heckler at an Austin Democratic Socialists of America event promoting the Green New Deal, Ocasio-Cortez claimed that supporters of Palestinians are silenced and ignored by the media.

"With media, with all this stuff, Palestine is basically a banned word. It's censored. We don't talk about it. No one knows about it," she said. "Thank you for bringing it up, honestly, because we shouldn't have to tiptoe around these things. We should be able to talk about it. And we shouldn't allow people's humanity to be censored."

A Twitter user who identified himself

as the heckler and who posted video of a portion of the encounter is a contributor to Press TV, the state-owned Iranian English-language television network. *Jewish Insider* could not independently corroborate the heckler's identity.

Ocasio-Cortez was also confronted by pro-Palestinian protesters at a separate campaign rally for Casar, the frontrunner in Texas' 35th Congressional District, on Sunday.

Last month, Casar said in a letter to a prominent local rabbi that he supports "continued federal aid for the self-defense of Israel" and opposes the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement. Following *JJ*'s publication of that letter in early February, the Austin DSA announced that it would "no longer be working on" Casar's campaign and that he had withdrawn his request for an endorsement from the group.

When a heckler interrupted Ocasio-Cortez's speech in support of Casar, the

congresswoman responded, "I want to be unequivocal, we are here to stand up for the rights of Palestinians and Palestinian children. One hundred percent. Don't get it twisted. Because disinformation is not the vibe." That demonstrator was escorted out of the event, according to Austonia.

During both events, many in the crowd shouted down the hecklers.

A small group of demonstrators picketed the Casar event with signs reading, "AOC and Greg Casar support the genocide of Palestinians" and "from Texas to Palestine fight US imperialism," according to photos posted by local reporters.

Casar has not spoken publicly about his Israel policy and was not on stage when the heckler interrupted Ocasio-Cortez.

In a video taken at the DSA event, Ocasio-Cortez appeared to reject the charges of antisemitism that have been leveled at the House's most outspoken critics of Israel.

"Believing in the basic human dignity

and the ability for a person to not be jailed or beaten for who they are, it does not mean that you are bigoted against any other community," she said. "And we gotta call that for what it is."

Ocasio-Cortez added, "We need to remember that the people who are taking those tough votes are disproportionately Black, brown and women members of Congress carrying the fire."

She compared the situation of Palestinians to undocumented immigrants detained on the U.S.'s southern border, saying, "I don't believe that a child should be in a cage on our border and I don't believe a child should be in a cage in the West Bank." Ocasio-Cortez's office did not respond when asked on Monday to provide examples of children being imprisoned in cages in the West Bank.

The New York representative also argued that Palestinian advocacy must "reflect the community's understanding and building of the issue."

"If you want to make that reality happen, it's not going to happen on the internet,

y'all," she said. "We need to educate people on what's going on because a lot of us didn't grow up in households where the issue is discussed... Let's knock [on] the doors and make it work and raise the consciousness so that we can take those votes not against the will of our community but with the will of our community."

She also decried those highlighting divisions within the progressive movement.

"We can't get distracted with this internal fighting against one another... It has always been one of the leading threats to us being able to accomplish those goals," Ocasio-Cortez said to loud applause from the crowd. She added that such discord "has been intentionally sowed throughout U.S. history... to make sure we slow down in the fight. So I will not run away from accountability, but I will not allow us to get distracted either."

In a New Yorker interview published on Monday morning, Ocasio-Cortez also defended Marc Lamont Hill, who was let go as a CNN commentator after comments made at a United Nations conference in

which he called for a "free Palestine from the river to the sea," a rallying cry widely seen as a call for Israel's destruction.

In the interview, the congresswoman called Lamont Hill a victim of "cancel culture."

"You talk about cancel culture," Ocasio-Cortez said. "But notice that those discussions only go one way. We don't talk about all the people who were fired. You just kind of talk about, like, right-leaning podcast bros and more conservative figures. But, for example, Marc Lamont Hill was fired [from CNN] for discussing an issue with respect to Palestinians, pretty summarily. There was no discussion about it, no engagement, no thoughtful discourse over it, just pure accusation."

The New York representative drew the ire of Israel critics last year when she changed her vote from "no" to "present" on a bill to provide \$1 billion in supplemental funding for Israel's Iron Dome missile-defense system. ♦

FEBRUARY 15, 2022

Jamaal Bowman pulls support for Abraham Accords bill

Bowman told constituents in a letter his decision was driven partly by a recent J Street trip to Israel and the Palestinian territories

By Marc Rod and Matthew Kassel

Rep. Jamaal Bowman (D-NY) plans to withdraw his support for and vote against bipartisan legislation aimed at strengthening and expanding the Abraham Accords, the congressman announced in a letter sent to constituents on Tuesday evening and obtained by *Jewish Insider*.

The Israel Relations Normalization Act has 328 House cosponsors, not including Bowman — 162 Democrats and 166 Republicans — and 72 in the Senate. The Abraham Accords, originally signed in September 2020, normalized relations between Israel, the United Arab Emirates

and Bahrain, with Morocco and Sudan joining later. Bowman signed onto the bill in September 2021, following its introduction in April.

Bowman traveled to Israel and the Palestinian territories in late 2021 on a J Street-sponsored trip, meeting with both Israeli and Palestinian leadership. He explained in the letter that the trip contributed to his decision to pull his support of the bill.

"On this visit, I continued to dig deep and engage people directly on the ground, including high level Palestinian and Israeli government officials," Bowman wrote in

the letter. "While I originally co-sponsored the Israel Relations Normalization Act seeing it as an opportunity to make progress toward justice and healing in the Middle East as well as a path to a two state solution, my experience on the ground and further conversation with constituents led me to see that it is not the right step to fulfill these goals."

Bowman added that he "became aware" that, in connection with the Abraham Accords, the U.S. agreed to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara and discuss the sale of advanced weaponry, including F-35 fighter jets, to the United

Arab Emirates. The F-35 deal is currently on hold.

"In the end, it is my estimation that these actions will only escalate violence in the Middle East and make already vulnerable communities less safe," Bowman said. "This agreement to normalize relations unhelpfully isolates Palestine and Western Sahara when what we need is a process that engages them."

Marcus Frias, a spokesperson for Bowman, added in a statement to JI that the congressman "takes the thoughts and suggestions of his constituents very seriously and values their engagement with the legislative process."

Bowman's Israel trip, in addition to his vote in favor of \$1 billion in supplemental funding for Israel's Iron Dome missile-defense system last September, raised the ire of some on the far left. The Democratic Socialists of America announced in December that it would not endorse Bowman in the 2022 midterms, following calls from some in the organization to expel him.

By contrast, some Jewish leaders in Bowman's district had been encouraged by the congressman's recent House vote as well as his visit to Israel, but his latest move seems to have erased much of that goodwill.

On Tuesday evening, a group of local rabbis expressed their dismay over Bowman's reversal in a joint letter shared with JI. "Throughout 2021, culminating in a meeting in September, a number of the undersigned met with Rep. Bowman and his chief of staff to encourage his support for the Israel Relations Normalization Act," the rabbis wrote. "We were pleased with the consideration given to the issue and felt encouraged by Rep. Bowman's commitment to learning more about the complex dynamics of the Middle East. We were further heartened by the Congressman's visit to Israel and the West Bank in November 2021."

"With these commitments and conversations as background, Rep. Bowman's reversal on normalization is especially surprising and disappointing," the authors added. "His withdrawal of support for this important piece of legislation, which is poised to improve Mideast stability, economic opportunity,

and which will disincentivize some of the region's most egregious sponsors of terror, is lamentable, and will surely be received with bewilderment and disapproval by many voters in Rep. Bowman's district."

The letter was signed by Rabbi Jonathan E. Blake of the Westchester Reform Temple; Rabbi Howard Goldsmith of Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester, who is president of the Westchester Board of Rabbis; Rabbi Daniel Gropper of the Community Synagogue of Rye; Rabbi Steven Exler of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale – The Bayit; and Rabbi Binyamin Krauss of SAR Academy, a Modern Orthodox day school in Riverdale.

"We remain committed to our ongoing dialogue with Rep. Bowman and his staff and urge him to reconsider this turnaround on an important policy matter," the rabbis said.

In an interview with JI, Krauss, who said he has appreciated Bowman's engagement on Israel issues during the congressman's first year in office, reiterated that commitment. "I hope we can have conversations which will either change his mind or give us some clarity on this," he said, "but right now it's just disappointing."

Harry Feder, a former president of the Riverdale Jewish Center who lives in Bowman's district, told JI that he was not surprised by the congressman's about-face.

"How can you trust somebody who changes his mind and goes with the winds? It's a problem," said Feder, who has previously been critical of Bowman's approach to Middle East foreign policy matters, which includes support for conditioning U.S. military assistance to Israel. "His true colors are coming out. I hope it has a negative impact in his new district."

Bowman, who currently represents portions of the Bronx and Westchester County, is poised to pick up new territory in Westchester as well as Putnam County following the codification of a new redistricting plan signed into law by New York Gov. Kathy Hochul earlier this month that will go into effect for the June 28 congressional primary elections. He will no longer represent the heavily Jewish neighborhood of Riverdale, which will be added to New York's 15th District, currently represented by Rep. Ritchie Torres (D-NY).

A Democratic strategist in New York City who is familiar with Bowman's district said the congressman had been "walking a fine line on Israel" as the pro-Israel Democratic primary voters most likely to approve of his Middle East foreign policy positions were in Riverdale.

"There used to be three kinds of pro-Israel voters in his district: the ones he could get, the ones he can never get and the ones who don't vote in the Democratic primary," the strategist told JI. "Moving forward, the first group isn't in his district anymore."

Bowman, who unseated longtime pro-Israel stalwart Eliot Engel (D-NY) last cycle with backing from Justice Democrats, is expected to face Democratic challengers in the primary this summer.

In an email to supporters on Tuesday, Jewish Voice for Peace, which opposes the legislation, said that the normalization agreements were a cover for "weapons sales," "political favors between authoritarian regimes" and Israeli "apartheid [and] ethnic cleansing."

The bill has not yet been scheduled for a vote on the House floor, but it passed the House Foreign Affairs Committee with bipartisan support in October. Bowman will not be able to formally withdraw his sponsorship until the House returns at the end of February.

J Street, which supports the normalization bill and has endorsed Bowman, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The group's president, Jeremy Ben-Ami, expressed support for Bowman in an interview with JI in early February.

"When it comes to Israel, [Bowman] is under assault from the left, and yet people lump him in" with legislators who are more critical of Israel, Ben-Ami said, adding that Bowman is "fundamentally supportive of the State of Israel" and "that type of candidate needs to be encouraged, not attacked."

Rep. Brad Schneider (D-IL), the bill's lead sponsor, did not respond to a request for comment. ♦

Jewish Insider's Gabby Deutch contributed reporting.

Tzipi Livni opens up about her Gulf visits before the Abraham Accords

The former Israeli lawmaker, who retired from politics in 2019, held a variety of positions in the government between 2001-2014

By Ruth Marks Eglash

Long before “Hatikvah,” Israel’s national anthem, played openly in Abu Dhabi or Manama, long before Israeli military jets took part in training exercises with Gulf countries, and long before normalization agreements were signed at the White House, there was one Israeli leader engaging in quiet, and very secret, diplomacy with the Arab world: Tzipi Livni.

Livni, 63, who served in a variety of Israeli government positions, including deputy prime minister, foreign minister and justice minister, between 2001 and 2014, also led the country through several rounds of peace negotiations with the Palestinians. It was this role – where she worked opposite the Palestinian Authority’s chief negotiator, the late Saeb Erekat – that led her to forge warm ties with multiple Arab leaders, some of whom are now at the forefront of the Abraham Accords, the U.S.-mediated normalization agreements between Israel and four Arab countries.

In a recent interview with *Jewish Insider*, the former Israeli lawmaker downplayed more than a decade of covert meetings and conversations with country leaders, foreign ministers and other representatives of the Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, even Saudi Arabia. And while former President Donald Trump’s son-in-law and senior advisor Jared Kushner has twice been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize as one of the architects of the Abraham Accords, it is possible that this entire process might not have happened if not for the groundwork laid by Livni.

“Truthfully, I didn’t think that Kushner could do this; it’s really a huge achievement. I mean, to have these agreements without the Palestinians, it really surprised me when I saw the news. It is a real game-changer,”

Livni said during the interview at her Tel Aviv home. “[Kushner] deserves all the credit he is getting.”

Today, relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco are out in the open, even flourishing. Just this week, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett made history as the first Israeli premier to travel to the Gulf state of Bahrain. In January, Israeli President Isaac Herzog proudly met with Abu Dhabi’s Crown Prince Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, following similar visits by Bennett and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid to the United Arab Emirates.

Livni said that she was as surprised as anyone when the White House announced the agreements in August 2020, although, she noted, there were some signs of a regional sea change. She recalled two key incidents several months before that momentous announcement, and the subsequent signing of the Accords on the White House lawn in September 2020, that made her realize attitudes were shifting.

“In 2019, not long after I quit politics, I was invited to attend a conference in Bahrain,” Livni said. “It was an international conference, but the event was sponsored by Bahraini officials, and I arrived there openly with an Israeli passport.”

“For the first time ever, I held a public meeting with [Bahrain’s Foreign Minister Khalid bin Ahmed] Al Khalifa, and we even took a photo together,” she continued. “It felt very normal and that was something I was not used to.”

Livni stepped back from the Israeli political scene three years ago, heading shortly after to teach a course in diplomacy at the Harvard Kennedy School in Cambridge, Mass. It was there, at the tail end of 2019, that she once again noticed a

shift in attitudes toward Israel in the Arab world. Former Norwegian peace negotiator Terje Larson reached out to her just prior to her return to Israel asking her to join him at an international conference in Abu Dhabi. As Livni waited for a direct flight to the UAE, ground staff called ahead to Abu Dhabi making sure officials there would accept an Israeli passport. The message was that they would.

“At the conference, there were leaders from all over the region, not only those who have now normalized relations with Israel, and we discussed all different matters, including the Israeli-Palestinian peace process,” said Livni, who was invited to join a public panel for the first time ever.

“That was before the Abraham Accords, when the Arab world was still saying it would not normalize ties without Israel first achieving peace with the Palestinians,” she said. “But the atmosphere was different. I was accepted and I sat openly with those whom I had met with in secret before.”

Livni traces her covert meetings back to the period of the Annapolis Conference more than a decade earlier. It was her Palestinian peace partner, Erekat, who first lobbied Arab leaders on her behalf, urging them to meet with the Israeli leader.

Later, said Livni, Larsen stepped in, inviting her and other regional leaders to gather under the guise of his International Peace Institute (IPI). “The meetings were not public but there were others in the room from Arab countries,” she said, describing how she soon had the phone numbers of numerous Arab ministers and their assistants and began meeting with them regularly, informally, on the sidelines of international gatherings such as the U.N. General Assembly in New York and the Munich Security Conference in Germany.

“For many years I had these discreet meetings,” Livni mused. “And it was clear that if anything was leaked to the media then it would have been the end of these kinds of meetings, so I kept it completely secret.”

Among the meetings and relationships forged, Livni describes a 2008 visit to Qatar, for the Doha Forum on Democracy, Development, and Free Trade. Her appearance at the conference was made public, but while in Qatar she attended a more private dinner at the home of the country’s emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani. There she met with the foreign ministers of Oman and other Arab states, as well and held a heated exchange with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

“We discussed Gaza, Hamas and what needs to be done,” said Livni of her meeting with the Turkish leader, whose attitude toward Israel shifted in the subsequent years. Two years later, Erdogan would expel Israeli diplomats following the Mavi Marmara flotilla incident. With the other Arab leaders at the Doha dinner, Livni said, “we discussed the situation in the region, the mutual threats, what was happening in Israel, with the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and I was really impressed with how familiar they all were with Israel and

Israeli politics.”

“It’s clear that this opened the door, it was the first understanding that we have mutual regional interests and there was the possibility to have a direct line, discreetly, to speak about these issues,” she continued. “There were also other lines [between the countries] but they were mostly on security. I was speaking with them on broader challenges.”

Throughout a decade of such meetings, Livni told JI that it was always made clear to her that normalization with the wider Middle East region – 55 Muslim and Arab states – would only come after Israelis and Palestinians made peace. For the Palestinians, she said, this backing was their main leverage.

However, she described a conversation with Erekat in 2014, during the last serious round of peace negotiations facilitated by then-Secretary of State John Kerry, after Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas refused to respond to the deal being offered. “I told him, ‘Listen, this is the time to make a decision because the Arab world cannot just stay waiting for you like this,’” Livni said she warned him. Six years later, the normalization agreements were signed between Israel, the UAE and Bahrain, catching the Palestinians off-guard.

“Frankly, I was really happy when the Abraham Accords were signed and I am hoping that more countries will join, but when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we are now on a slippery slope towards a one-state reality,” she theorized.

While there is a possibility that the normalization agreements could make peace with the Palestinians more likely, Livni cautioned that the Accords are more likely to cause apathy on both sides. The process, she explained, has been used to sell the concept of “peace for peace” to the Israeli people. Now, she explained, that some will say, “‘What is the use of having peace with the Palestinians? We don’t need it.’ I am really worried about that.”

And Livni added, she believes it is unlikely that a U.S. administration will initiate another attempt to bring about peace or even that Israeli or Palestinian leaders would respond to such a gesture.

“In Israel, we have a government whose guidelines are not to touch this sensitive issue,” she pointed out. Even though her days as the country’s peace negotiator are now over and attitudes have clearly changed in the region, Livni said she has not given up on her vision for peace with the Palestinians.

“I believe peace is crucial for the future of Israel,” she said. ♦

FEBRUARY 14, 2022

After Abraham Accords, growing Gulf Jewish community finds cohesion

The Association of Gulf Jewish Community’s Rabbi Abadie says many countries now realize they made a ‘historical mistake’ and want to ‘welcome the Jews back’

By Ruth Marks Eglash

The article first appeared in The Circuit.

When Rafael Schwartz moved to Kuwait three years ago for work, he was hoping he’d be able to make quick trips to the fledgling Jewish community in the nearby United Arab Emirates every few weeks if he needed Jewish company or kosher food.

But when COVID-19 struck two years ago, he found himself unable to travel.

“My intention was to leave once a month and go to Dubai, where there was a small Jewish community, but the pandemic changed all that and I never left Kuwait,” Schwartz, who is originally from the U.K., recently told *The Circuit* over Zoom.

Once the virus hit, traveling in and out of Kuwait, which sits at the tip of the

Persian Gulf, bordering Iraq and Saudi Arabia, became difficult — and sometimes impossible, when the country closed its borders — and Schwartz soon found himself trying to keep up with his Jewish traditions in a country that does not officially recognize Israel and is known for its institutionalized, often pervasive, antisemitism. An engineer by trade, Schwartz told JI that while he has lived and worked in multiple countries

with small or nonexistent Jewish residents, he still found himself yearning for Jewish community.

Then, in February 2021, something like a miracle happened. Spurred by the fall 2020 signing of the Abraham Accords, a set of normalization agreements between Israel and four Muslim-majority countries, the Association of Gulf Jewish Communities (AGJC) was born, connecting Jews in six Persian Gulf countries and providing a Jewish lifeline for people like Schwartz.

In that short time, the AGJC has become the backbone of Jewish life in the Gulf, primarily in the UAE and Bahrain — two of the signatories to the Abraham Accords — and has connected the sprinkling of Jews living and working in Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

The association estimates there are roughly 1,200 Jews residing in the Gulf, not including a further 1,000 serving there as part of the U.S. military. Among its activities, the organization has played a hand in the growing number of Jewish life-cycle events, helping to organize the region's first bar mitzvah in 16 years and its first Jewish wedding in 52 years. It has also launched a Jewish dating website, a Beth Din of Arabia (Jewish religious court), and is currently in the process of creating an Arabian Kosher Certification Agency, which will set standards for kashrut throughout all six Gulf countries. The AGJC also offers weekly in-person and virtual programming, including a Friday pre-Shabbat Zoom and events around the holidays.

"There was a big Pesach turnout," said Schwartz, who logged into the Zoom event from Kuwait. "One of the people who also joined was a Jewish lady from Kuwait City who has lived here for 40 years. She was curious about where to find matzah and the rabbi connected us so that we could meet."

For indigenous Gulf Jews, such as Ebrahim Daoud Nonoo, AGJC's president and the chairman of the board of trustees of the House of Ten Commandments, the Jewish community in Bahrain, the growing Jewish life is a welcome change.

"It is lovely," Nonoo, whose family has lived in Manama, Bahrain's capital, for more than 100 years, told JI. "The community is a very ancient one but until now we had to send our kids abroad to study, and the

problem with that is that they don't come back. So now we have a community that is growing older and older and there are no children."

"We are a tiny community and the good thing we are seeing now is that we have a workable way to make Jewish life flourish in the country," he continued. "The AGJC is a fantastic support for all the communities in the Gulf, allowing us to enjoy Jewish life not just from the point of view of kosher food or religious books, but we also have the input of a rabbi and we have used him for bar mitzvahs and weddings."

Nonoo, who served as a member of Bahrain's Shura Council (Upper House of Parliament) from 2001 to 2006, added, "We are in a much better place than before because we no longer need to go to Europe or the United States to find Jewish support, we can now get it from Dubai or we have it here in Bahrain."

The more the Jewish community grows, said Nonoo, the more it will attract Jews from all over the world to live and work comfortably in the Gulf. And, he added, the presence of a Jewish community in countries where they were absent or invisible for so many decades is essential for outreach to local Muslim populations.

"It is really sad to see a Jewish community die, and we are bringing them back to life," he said, adding that the synagogue often invites local Muslims to participate in services and events to learn about Judaism.

"When I arrived here a year ago, Jewish life in the Gulf was almost unknown," Rabbi Dr. Elie Abadie, the AGJC's rabbi, said in an interview with JI. "It was barren land, but I could see that we could create an orchard and connect Jewish communities and individuals in all of the countries."

Abadie, who was born in Lebanon and speaks fluent Arabic, said that the UAE and Bahrain are now "fully open" and embracing their Jewish communities, and he is hopeful that "Saudi Arabia will follow suit sooner rather than later, then Oman, Qatar, Kuwait — which will probably be the last the one to open, although there are some rumblings that people want to open up to Jews and Israel."

Abadie said that the AGJC had connected with individual American Jewish soldiers stationed in Kuwait who have lived there for

decades and are married to locals, as well as a few descendants of Jews who now live as Muslims.

"It feels really good watching this and, in a way, it makes you feel vindicated that finally Arab countries have come to realize that either persecuting or expelling their Jews was a historical mistake and now they want to correct that and welcome the Jews back," he said. "I hope and pray that we will see even more events for the Jewish community in these countries and that more Jews will either go to settle there or come out of the closet, so to speak." ♦

Art to bring dreamers together in space

Sharonna Karni Cohen's ambitious project of collecting people's visions for the future will soon be knocking on heaven's door

By Tamara Zieve

Sharonna Karni Cohen isn't afraid to dream big — so big that her vision will soon travel to space.

Nearly a decade ago, the social impact entrepreneur founded a collective of artists and “dreamers” that transforms visions and aspirations into works of art. Karni Cohen founded Dreame in 2014 with the aim of empowering people to be creators. The initiative provides a platform for people to submit their ideas, visions and dreams to an artist of their choice who then transforms them into digital art, which can either be displayed as a framed picture, or printed on a range of items such as a phone case, cushion or yoga mat.

Karni Cohen's latest project — projecting video art inspired by thousands of submitted visions for the future onto famous landmarks around the world — will culminate when a mosaic of 500 digital pieces of art will be carried into space in April on a mission that will also launch the second Israeli astronaut ever to venture into the cosmos.

Karni Cohen describes herself as “the opposite of an artist,” a factor that helped drive her vision to enable anyone, regardless of their artistic skills — or lack thereof — to play a role in the artistic process. She views art as a medium that can help transform visions into something more tangible.

“One of the main reasons I started Dreame is because of the fact that I'm definitely not an artist, but I believe that everyone has the ability to create something, and I think that because of technology and social media and us being in front of our screens the whole time, we're actually using our imaginations less. So the whole mission behind Dreame is to empower people to utilize their imagination and to also feel like a creator,” she told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview. “You can commission an artwork at a really affordable price, hang it on your

wall and then feel like you were as much the artist as the artist who created it with you.”

“The Big Dream” was born three years after Dreame's founding, when Karni Cohen asked her friends how they imagined Israel in 30 years. Discouraged by the pessimism of her friends' responses, she reframed the question, asking them instead to imagine the utopian version of the Jewish state. When she extended the question to a group of 1,000 people, she identified several recurring themes: peace, coexistence, culture, environment and freedom.

One dream many expressed back in 2017 was the desire to travel directly to Gulf nations — a dream that began to be realized some three years later after Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain signed normalization agreements that led to direct flights and increased travel between the countries.

The “First Big Dream” — which took the form of 1,500 yoga mats puzzled together in Tel Aviv's Rabin Square — was built out of images spawned by those 1,000 visions of the future, a giant collective dream made into an artwork by Israeli illustrator Amit Trainin.

The artwork included giant teapots generating rain clouds, representing a dream for more water (apparently it rained that day in late June on a date that Israel hadn't seen rain in decades), Venetian-inspired water tunnels in Jerusalem and a direct train line to India traveling through the Middle East.

The displayed artwork — stretched over roughly 1,400 square meters — invited people in to meditate and practice yoga. Participants could leave with a yoga mat, if they so chose. “The whole essence is that everyone contributes to the future and then everyone also takes a piece home with them,” Karni Cohen explained.

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asked her friends how they imagined Israel in 30 years. Discouraged by the pessimism of her friends' responses, she reframed the question, asking them instead to imagine the utopian version of the Jewish state. When she extended the question to a group of 1,000 people, she identified several recurring themes: peace, coexistence, culture, environment and freedom.

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Asked about his own dream, Karni told *JI* that the Auschwitz survivor envisions a world in which people are more compassionate, and believes this requires people to be more optimistic. This sentiment echoes Karni Cohen's own opinion that

despite any cynicism one might have, “it’s important to hold on to any optimism that we have and value it.”

The encounter with Landau, Karni Cohen said, “gave me goosebumps in that moment, as we were also in Rabin Square where the whole project was born.”

Embassies from around the world, with the help of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, have been involved in the effort.

Various foundations and organizations have also helped collect dreams for the project; members of the Mars Society, for instance, submitted visions of human life on the Red Planet.

Mental health, the environment, family welfare and peace are among recurring themes of submitted dreams. Children and adults alike have participated in the project; a number of children from around the world dreamed of opening an ice cream store to make people happy.

“The pieces created do justice to the

dreams we receive, and range from funny, to deeply moving, to completely crazy. An interactive heat map made by Sagi Gafni will link similar dreams and show an artwork every time the ISS flies over a location where a dream was turned into art. Literally connecting the dreamers of the world through art!”, said Jæn, the project’s art director, in an announcement about the initiative.

The 50 artists are of 36 nationalities, including Israeli, Russian, Chinese, Indian, Filipino and Iranian. The artists work in different styles ranging from clay to collage, from 3D to illustration. “It’s just so nice to have a dream from Japan turned into art by an artist in Mexico,” Karni Cohen said. “There are so many global layers.”

One dreamer in Israel had their vision of people “understanding the other” made into art by a French artist. Another dreamer in Portugal, a lung cancer patient, dreamed of a cure for cancer. Lily Ben Ami, the sister

of Michal Sela, who was murdered by her partner, dreamed of an end to domestic violence.

Glimpses of the art have already been exhibited in New York’s Times Square, the Leopold Museum in Vienna, Chengdu, China and Mount Manaslu, Nepal.

During the space mission, the artwork will travel for eight days and be projected as a hologram that people will be able to see online and know above which part of the world it is at that moment. “The idea is to create correlations between the dreams and remind people around the world that we have quite similar dreams to each other,” said Karni Cohen.

The grassroots project will offer its final pieces in an NFT auction with Nifty Gateway, a digital auction platform. A portion of the proceeds will be donated to NGOs whose work reflect the different dreams submitted. ♦