

THE WEEKLY PRINT

Shirin Herzog sings a new tune as ambassador's spouse; Rep. Ted Deutch to succeed David Harris as American Jewish Committee CEO; Batia Ofer combines art with heart; The New York Sun rises again; The Druze emissary 'bringing the complexity' of Israel to American Jews; Just back from Israel, Lamont touts business ties; and How vulnerable is Jamaal Bowman?

MARCH 3, 2022

Shirin Herzog sings a new tune as ambassador's spouse

The Israeli attorney was a trailblazer in the country's legal field. Now, she's charting her own course in Washington

By Gabby Deutch

The story of how Shirin and Michael Herzog met is a fitting meet-cute for Israel's Washington power couple. The tale begins in the heady Oslo days of the mid-1990s, when she was a corporate attorney at Goldfarb Seligman, one of Israel's top law firms, and Mike was serving on the Israeli team that was negotiating with the Palestinians.

One of her friends in the legal field was now-Israeli President Isaac Herzog, who at the time was a practicing lawyer, and he pointed out that both Shirin and Mike — his brother — were spending a significant amount of time in Cairo.

"He told me, 'Oh, by the way, are you single still?' And I said, 'Yes, why are you asking?' And he said, 'Would you like to meet my brother? He's in Cairo negotiating with the Palestinians,'" Herzog recalled. The pair ended up meeting back in Israel, not Cairo, but things moved quickly.

"Three weeks from the day we met, I said yes. It was the third proposal," Herzog told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview at a Washington, D.C., hotel. They got married less than four months after they met, and

27 years later, in November, they arrived in Washington as diplomats: Mike as Israel's ambassador to the United States, and Shirin as his support system, co-diplomat and — still — high-powered attorney.

"She and Mike just have a wonderful partnership," said Karen Davidson, a personal friend of the Herzogs and a member of the board of directors of the William Davidson Foundation.

"We are two individual players in a united team," Herzog said. "I'm here to support my husband, but I haven't given up my career, [with] the full support and encouragement of my husband."

Mike Herzog is the first Israeli ambassador to the U.S. in more than a decade to be selected by someone other than former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who left office last summer. The Herzogs are making a point of reaching out to people of all political persuasions, faiths and backgrounds, following a decade that saw particularly close ties between Israeli officials and many in the Republican Party.

"We would like to engage with everyone. It's an open tent," she said. "Everybody's invited, from all religions, from all

denominations, on both sides of the aisle. Everybody."

Politicians have a habit of referring to their spouses — and in a world where most politicians are men, that's usually their wives — as their "better halves." But Herzog is still a partner in Goldfarb's corporate and technology unit. And while she is eager to engage in diplomacy, she intends to do so on her own terms and with her own skills, with a title that is much longer than "spouse."

"She's what an ambassador's spouse is all about, being in their own right an accomplished person. I think that's very important," U.S. Ambassador to Israel Tom Nides told *JL*. "One of the reasons you get credibility in these jobs is in your own right. She's a business person. She understands the Israeli politics. She understands the corporate world. She understands how to get things done. I'm sure she'd be a gracious host, but she's way more than that."

"I believe the personal touch is important," explained Herzog, who noted that she had lived in the U.S. twice before, including once in Washington, giving her strong relationships to draw upon in these first few months. "It's not just what you're

doing in the formal meeting in the office. You can get much more of a relationship if you expand it, if you bring who you are to the table.”

Born and raised near Tel Aviv, Herzog served as a commissioned officer in Israel's version of the Navy SEALs. After her army service, when deciding what to study, she earned acceptance to both law school and medical school, and chose to study law at Hebrew University. After passing the Israeli bar, Herzog moved stateside.

“I came to New York with \$1,500 and a dream, to try to get to study at NYU,” said Herzog. “This sounds like [what someone would say] in the beauty contest, I'm sorry, but I wanted to do something that requires hard work, but can help make a difference.”

She got her master of laws degree at NYU and went on to work at the law firm Simpson Thatcher, specializing in mergers and acquisitions. She stayed in New York for four and a half years, until “I became a New Yorker. And that's when I said I need to go back,” she recalled. “I had my subscription to the opera. I was playing golf over the weekend on public courses. And I had, I would say, one quarter of a bed in the summer in the Hamptons, like a quarter of a rental, something like that. And I said, ‘If I don't come back now, it will make me stay here.’”

Back in Tel Aviv, Herzog joined Goldfarb, eventually becoming its first female partner. (She signed her partnership agreement while out on maternity leave.) In recent years, she has taken to giving talks about what she calls the “scale-up nation,” an idea that she thinks better encompasses Israel's current business environment than the popular term “startup nation” of years past.

“We are no longer only a startup nation. For years now, maybe 10 years, maybe longer, there is a phenomenon that is growing, that companies become more mature,” Herzog explained, and they are not all eager to sell their companies quickly, as many startups aim to do.

She has negotiated deals around the Middle East and traveled around the region well before the Abraham Accords connected Israel with several more Arab countries. Being married to a senior official in several rounds of peace talks didn't hurt.

Shortly after they got married, Shirin

and Mike were invited to visit Petra, Jordan, now a routine tourism spot for Israelis who can cross the border near Eilat. But at the time, just months before Israel and Jordan signed a peace agreement in 1994, such a trip was almost unheard of. Mike had a relationship with the Jordanians from other negotiations, although at first, “he didn't disclose his name, because his father [Chaim Herzog] was president, and he was in the intelligence corps,” recalled Herzog.

“We were collected in Aqaba [Jordan] by a general. No stamps on the passport, nothing. And we were taken by a jeep, by the general, to Petra,” said Herzog. “It was wonderful. Just wonderful.”

The Herzog family is the closest thing Israelis have to the Kennedys. In addition to Michael and Isaac, there's their father, an early immigrant to Mandatory Palestine who served as Israel's president from 1983 to 1993. Herzog said she views her role in this family as a “*shlichut*,” or mission.

“I tell my children that they should, we should, not take anything for granted. They should know that they are under greater scrutiny and that matters. They should work harder. They should be nicer,” noted Herzog.

The Herzogs' daughter, who is 22, is living with them in Washington at the moment after recently finishing her tour in the IDF. Their son Erel, who is 25, was named to the 2019 *Forbes* 30 under 30 list in Israel for his work leading FutureLabs, which created a virtual reality simulation for soldiers to practice combat skills. “This saves lives. It saves costs,” said Herzog. “Later on, it could be translatable to gaming,” which Erel is working on at a Tel Aviv startup.

Throughout her career, Herzog has at times worked with companies that focus on the environment, including Netafim, the first major drip-irrigation company in Israel. Herzog hopes to bring a focus on climate change to her work in Washington. “Research shows that climate change is a crisis throughout the world, but our region is going to be hit very, very hard,” said Herzog. “You need to get ready to tackle it. And we should join hands in finding a solution with our neighbors and with everybody else.”

Herzog also hopes to get involved with Sela, a Hebrew immersion public charter school in Washington with a diverse student body that will give her an opportunity to

connect with an audience that is not Jewish or Israeli.

“This will be a way for us to show we are meeting everybody,” explained Herzog. “We are open to everybody. We would like to get everybody close to Israel, show Israel's beautiful facets, the diversity of cuisine, the wine, the arts, the culture.”

Herzog said there are two activities that, more than anything else, make her happy. One of them is not an activity Americans can expect to see her take up in a diplomatic capacity, unless they catch her on “diplomatic travel” to the beach: windsurfing.

“I grew up rowing and windsurfing,” said Herzog. As a child who lived on the coast, “I was mostly in the sea. But I was a hard-working student.”

The other passion of hers has already made its way into her diplomacy.

“I told you the two things that make me happy. The second is singing,” said Herzog, who led “Hatikvah” at the embassy's Hanukkah party in December, soon after she and her husband arrived. She said she plans to host a number of evenings this year for singing, “*shira be'tzibur* we say in Hebrew, singalong. We used to do those evenings in our home in Tel Aviv, and I'd like to bring them here. It makes me very happy to sing.”

Her husband is also a music fan — he plays the flute — but “he would say that as far as singing, our average is good,” she said, laughing.

Recently, Herzog was at home walking on the treadmill when “Bohemian Rhapsody,” the 2018 biopic of Queen singer Freddie Mercury, came on the TV. Most of her singing is reserved for Israeli songs, but Queen's music has a habit of sticking in your head.

“I was alone in the entire room and found myself singing at the top of my lungs all the Queen music,” said Herzog. “I said, ‘I hope no one comes in.’” ♦

Rep. Ted Deutch to succeed David Harris as American Jewish Committee CEO

The co-chair of the House Bipartisan Task Force for Combating Antisemitism has represented South Florida since 2010

By Melissa Weiss & Marc Rod

Rep. Ted Deutch (D-FL) will succeed American Jewish Committee (AJC) CEO David Harris when he steps down in October after 32 years of leading the prominent Jewish group, *Jewish Insider* has learned.

The organization announced Harris's departure in July 2021. The original announcement said that Harris would leave the organization in May 2022, but stay on as a consultant through June 2023. Harris will now depart AJC in October, when Deutch assumes the role, and will stay on as a consultant for the next year.

Deutch, one of the most outspoken supporters of Israel in the House, was first elected in 2010, after winning a special election to succeed Rep. Robert Wexler (D-FL) who resigned to head the S. Daniel Abraham Center for Middle East Peace. He sits on the House's judiciary, ethic and foreign affairs committees, and is the chair of the Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa and Global Counterterrorism. There is no formal succession process to replace Deutch as the subcommittee chair this term when he steps down.

The Florida congressman was part of a group of legislators who, along with officials from Canada, the U.K. and Australia, launched a global inter-parliamentary task force to combat digital antisemitism in 2020. He is also a co-chair of the House Bipartisan Task Force for Combating Antisemitism.

In the weeks after last May's conflict between Israel and Hamas, Deutch was critical of far-left legislators who decried Israeli actions to halt rocket fire from Gaza.

"If your position is that there's no place for a Jewish state, there are people in the United States who hear that the entire state of Israel is some unacceptable creation...

and all this is the fault of the Jews, then the antisemites take to the streets in New York and [Los Angeles], and then Boca [Raton] and Bal Harbour," Deutch said at the time. "So of course there is a connection."

"When we have colleagues whose position is 'Palestine from the river to the sea,' which includes no place for a Jewish state, and when our colleagues...wrongly and falsely describe Israel as an apartheid state, there is a context for all of this," Deutch continued.

He also drew attention for accusing Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-MI) of antisemitism on the House floor during the September debate over funding for the Iron Dome missile defense system.

Deutch told *JI* on Monday evening that he had not been planning to leave Congress until the AJC opportunity arose. He is the 31st House Democrat to announce his retirement.

"I didn't make a decision to move on from Congress, I really made a decision to move into this incredible opportunity to spend all of my time focused on the issues that I'm so passionate about — defending the global Jewish community and Israel's rightful place in the world and defending democratic values," he said.

"I'm not running away from Congress, I'm running to the AJC," he continued, "and I'm running to an opportunity to stand up every day, wake up every morning and think about ways to strengthen the Jewish community and defend the Jewish community that's so often under attack."

He pointed to rising antisemitism, Iranian aggression, the Abraham Accords and AJC's Leaders for Tomorrow program — which provides advocacy training to high school students — as key priorities for him at AJC.

"I just got back from Israel, and on the one hand, the threats are ever increasing," he said. "Making sure the world understands those risks is important but so too is building upon the important work of the Abraham Accords and taking advantage of the growing relationships that Israel has... and AJC is uniquely situated to do that work."

Deutch is one of several prominent Democratic voices on Israel and antisemitism in the House to leave office in recent years.

"There are really really good, smart, passionate defenders of the U.S.-Israel relationship in the House in the Democratic Party," he said. "This is not an issue that comes naturally to everyone. But there's so many members for whom this is a priority that they do everything that they need to to ensure that this strong bipartisan support for Israel continues not just next term but well into the future."

He named several Jewish Democrats, including Reps. Brad Schneider (D-IL), Elaine Luria (D-VA), Kathy Manning (D-NC), Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL), Josh Gottheimer (D-NJ) and Dean Phillips (D-MN) as part of that core group.

"There are going to be new members coming in for whom this is a priority as well," he added, mentioning former Rep. Max Rose (D-NY), who announced another bid for the House after losing to Rep. Nicole Malliotakis in 2020.

"I'm really confident that, as we go forward, they're going to continue to elevate their profiles — and so many of them [are] longtime leaders already — but I think we're right to focus on the important work that they do," he said.

Looking back on more than a decade

in Congress, Deutch said that his proudest moment was not a legislative accomplishment but having “stood with my community” following the Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in 2018, the deadliest high school shooting in U.S. history.

“The impact that that had on our community and the opportunity to get to know the families who lost loved ones who have all found so many ways to work to prevent the kinds of tragedies that they’ve experienced, the young people that I’ve been so inspired by coming by — the survivors

coming out of Stoneman Douglas — that whole episode was really painful but I’m proud have stood with my community then and going forward,” he said.

Looking ahead to the next seven months before he steps down, Deutch said that Iran’s nuclear program and its sponsorship of regional terrorist proxies will continue to be a top priority for him.

On the home front, Deutch said he “wants to use this position that I have in Congress to really try to elevate” awareness of “the enormous risk that fentanyl poses and how widespread that risk is and all the

things that we can do to try to keep people safe. The congressman’s nephew died of accidental fentanyl ingestion a year ago.

Deutch’s retirement will trigger a race to succeed Deutch in the blue district that currently encompasses Boca Raton and Ft. Lauderdale. Deutch won reelection in 2020 with 59 percent of the vote. ♦

Disclosure: Deutch is the father of Jewish Insider reporter Gabby Deutch. Gabby Deutch was not involved in the reporting of this story.

MARCH 2, 2022

Batia Ofer combines art with heart

The founder of the Art of Wishes Gala, which benefits Make-A-Wish UK, elevates modern art to benefit critically ill children

By Esther Kustanowitz

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

Fundraising takes artistry. In the case of Batia Ofer, that has included commissioning and curating artworks by underrepresented and emerging artists, which are then auctioned to benefit Make-A-Wish UK, the organization that grants the wishes of critically ill children.

The auctions take place at a biannual London event called the Art of Wishes Gala. The most recent gala, in October 2021, drew 400 guests to London’s Natural History Museum and was hosted by British comedian David Walliams. It featured an exclusive performance by the West End cast of the musical “The Lion King” and raised about \$4.4 million.

“The primary goal of our events is to raise as much money to grant as many wishes as possible,” Ofer, the founder of Art of Wishes and herself a prolific art collector, told *eJewishPhilanthropy*. In 2021, Ofer and her husband Idan, an Israeli billionaire businessman and philanthropist, were listed by ARTnews magazine among the Top 200 art collectors in the world.

“More than 63,000 children in the

U.K. have been diagnosed with a critical condition in the past year, changing their lives and the lives of their families forever,” she said. “For them, the joy of childhood is brought to an abrupt end with treatment plans, hospital visits and sleepless nights taking over. The power of a wish can revive a childhood stolen by a critical illness.”

Ofer’s connection with Make-A-Wish began in Israel, following the death of her sister Sharon at age 26. “I wanted to do more to support those facing critical illnesses,” she said. “My own personal loss made me realize the power of fulfilling a wish for both children and their families. I recall the first Make-A-Wish event I attended shortly after her passing, [when] a 4-year-old boy, who was the same age as my daughter at the time, asked for a computer, and I felt compelled to grant his wish.”

Ofer subsequently became involved with Friends of Make-A-Wish Israel and a few years later became the organization’s honorary president. During her time with Make-A-Wish Israel, she raised approximately \$4.5 million. Upon moving to the U.K. in 2013, she said, “it was a natural transition for me to start helping children in the community I live in.”

She launched Art of Wishes in 2017 and

has raised \$11.1 million to date, bringing together “my global network of artists, gallerists and collectors to host auctions of unique artworks and experiences,” she said. The gala is always held in collaboration with one of the world’s most prestigious auction houses (Phillip’s in 2019, Sotheby’s in 2021 and, she hopes, Christie’s in 2023) and is hosted in some of London’s most famous institutions.

“The event provides a thoughtful moment for guests to engage with the work of Make-A-Wish and for artists to donate works to support Wish Children across the U.K.,” she said. “The auction is not facilitated by blind donations, but [is] instead curated with a finger on the pulse of the modern art world.”

Make-A-Wish asks each artist whose pieces are up for auction to create or donate a piece of work inspired by the wishes of seriously ill children. At last year’s gala, Ofer said, the 19 works of art were “curated in such a way to touch on current social issues and reflect on the world we live in.”

“It was important for me to take a stand against racism and xenophobia and as such, we included works that reflected these issues such as a signed racing suit donated by [British racecar driver] Lewis

Hamilton, who is a prominent figure in the fight for social justice,” she said. Some of the other works reflecting on such issues, she said, included Otis Kweame Kye Quaicoe’s “Rancher,” which features a Black cowgirl, and Rashid Johnson’s “Untitled Anxious Red,” which evokes the chaos of the pandemic. Last year’s auction was also the first to sell an NFT, or non-fungible token, donated by Brendan Dawes, an artist whose work involves data.

“The artists involved felt privileged and deeply moved to be in such a position to help children facing such adversities,” she said. “Some even asked to visit Make-A-Wish’s head office in Reading, together with their families, so they could be more familiar with the work of the charity.”

Although Ofer lives in the U.K., her philanthropy is not limited by geography. In Israel, she and her husband founded The Idan and Batia Ofer Family Foundation to address social issues through projects in the

fields of health, education, welfare, art and culture, with a particular focus on children.

“I believe that every human should feel safe and secure in life, and even more so when it comes to children,” she said, adding that the foundation supports hospitals, has helped support Holocaust survivors in Israel, funded work on behalf of homeless teenagers who are estranged from their families and championed projects that promote scientific education among children.

Through her work and experience, Ofer has come to keenly understand the impact a wish can have on critically ill children. In one case, she said, a 12-year-old named Younas, diagnosed with a rare form of cancer, had originally wished to go to New York. While receiving chemotherapy, he watched a documentary about how people in Africa had to walk many miles to access water; he called the Make-A-Wish team and said he now wished to build a well in Africa.

Together with the Make-A-Wish team, Younas managed to raise enough money to build three wells in the Gambian village of Fala.

In another instance she recalled, a 12-year-old named Jakob was diagnosed with a rare type of bone cancer, resulting in five operations and a titanium-reinforced left arm. Although his movement was restricted, he was passionate about the guitar and determined to continue playing. Jakob’s wish was to have a custom-made guitar, and a second guitar that he could raffle off, donating all the proceeds to the charity.

“The satisfaction of giving is highly enriching and fulfilling,” Ofer said. “Tzedakah is an important value in the Jewish world. I feel it is much more than a financial transaction: it’s a spiritual form of giving, coming from one’s heart.” ♦

FEBRUARY 25, 2022

The New York Sun rises again

The relaunched ‘New York Sun’ is ‘steadfastly committed’ to the Jewish people and Israel, says publisher Dovid Efune

By Matthew Kassel

The *New York Sun*, the long-defunct daily broadsheet, marked its return to the city’s hypercompetitive local media market on Wednesday, launching an updated website featuring dozens of newly hired staffers and an editorial vision highlighting a range of traditionally minded journalistic principles.

“*The Sun* eschews cynicism,” Dovid Efune, the publisher, wrote in a mission statement announcing the paper’s revival. “We prefer the teaching of Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, that darkness is best countered with light, falsehood with truth.”

The hallowed reference to the late Lubavitcher rebbe, who was among the most influential Orthodox Jewish leaders of the 20th century, may seem unusual for a newspaper like the *Sun*, which was first published in 1833 and is probably best

known for its “Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus” editorial.

But Efune suggested that the publication’s emphasis on Jewish values was in keeping both with his own experience as the former top editor and chief executive of a Jewish newspaper in New York City, *The Algemeiner*, as well as a broader conviction — put forth in his announcement — that the *Sun* has been “on the right side of history at most every critical juncture.”

For the new publisher, that includes a fierce dedication to Jewish causes. “The *Sun* is a general-interest paper, but it’s also a Zionist newspaper,” Efune, who is in his mid-30s and still holds a seat on *Algemeiner*’s executive board, explained in an email exchange with *Jewish Insider* this week. “The cause of the Jewish people and the Jewish state,” he said, “is a cause that the *Sun* is steadfastly committed to.”

On such issues, the *Sun* is carving out a unique path for itself among mainstream media companies in the United States, even if it is consonant with a viewpoint that guided its previous run from 2002 to 2008. In Europe, a similar ethos can be found at the German publishing giant Axel Springer, which is committed to a list of core principles including, among other so-called “essentials,” support for “the Jewish people and the right of existence of the State of Israel.”

The Sun, however, possesses what might be characterized as a distinctly *yiddishe kop*, not least because its 76-year-old editor, Seth Lipsky, is a veteran newspaperman with valuable experience at the intersection of Jewish and mainstream journalism.

More than 30 years ago, Lipsky left behind a distinguished run at *The Wall Street Journal* to found the English-

language edition of what was then known as *The Jewish Daily Forward*, where he helped launch the careers of budding luminaries like Ben Smith, Jeffrey Goldberg, Jonathan Mahler and Philip Gourevitch. Lipsky then served for six years as the founding editor of an earlier version of the Sun before its untimely demise in the late aughts. He has since been without a fully staffed newspaper.

Lipsky, an eccentric editor who is remembered by former employees for his unusual if amusingly anachronistic professional advice — such as encouraging reporters to smoke cigarettes and wear fedoras — is now steering a newsroom for the first time in nearly 15 years.

He gave up smoking decades ago and appears hatless in publicly available photos. But Lipsky's long-standing commitment to the old-fashioned art of newspapering — combined with a passion for Jewish issues that has animated much of his work — remains core to a sui generis approach that he likes to describe, somewhat prophetically, as editing “in the light of Sinai.”

But while Lipsky could plausibly count himself among the most quietly influential New York editors of the past three decades or so — his former charges have gone on to lead such publications as *BuzzFeed*, *The Atlantic* and *The Paris Review* — he is now poised to find out if his vision will catch on as he takes another shot at sustaining the Sun.

Efune, who bought the Sun from Lipsky in an undisclosed cash and stock deal last November, expressed confidence that the paper will be capable of navigating an increasingly contracting media ecosystem that has seen many publications come and go in recent years. Perhaps most notably, he has set an ambitious goal of positioning the paper as a serious alternative to *The New York Times*, which recently reached 10 million subscriptions.

“Our sense is that there are many times more Americans who would like to see a meaningful alternative, and are willing to participate in building it,” Efune explained. “That’s a role that the Sun is uniquely positioned to play. It’s a New York broadsheet with a similar focus on politics and culture. It’s won Pulitzer Prizes and shares nearly 200 years of history. In fact, the Sun was founded 18 years before the *Times*.”

As the Sun enters its third act, Efune suggested that the paper would bring a crusading spirit to its news and opinion pages, invoking a description from the late 1800s, when the paper was favorably described as “hard hitting from the shoulder on proper occasions.”

The new paper “will have very much in common with the previous iterations of the Sun, going back to 1833,” Efune said. Its specialty, he added, “has long been in its ability to build a connection with its readers and the American public. It’s that reciprocity that’s now grossly lacking. It’s why we believe that the Sun is a newspaper for this very moment.”

“Today, there are many consequential stories that are ignored or sidelined, and many substantially unimportant stories that dominate headlines,” Efune elaborated. “We’ll be prioritizing stories that are of interest and consequence to everyday Americans, and, on our editorial pages, addressing the questions that most impact our future as a country.”

Among the coverage areas the Sun plans to explore are, according to Efune, issues of “individual liberty,” “equal justice,” “corporate censorship,” “irresponsible fiscal policies,” “prosecutorial abuse,” “government overreach,” “public and private rascality” and “constitutional moments.”

That list is in many ways reminiscent of Lipsky’s editorial template when he launched what was then the second iteration of the Sun following his resignation from the Forward amid mounting tensions over his right-wing political leanings.

Soon after his departure, Lipsky secured funding from a group of conservative backers who were receptive to his plan for reviving the storied print newspaper that had gone out of circulation as a standalone publication after merging with the now-defunct *New York World-Telegram* in 1950.

Under Lipsky’s stewardship, the Sun established a reputation for feisty local reporting, imaginative arts criticism and, somewhat incongruously for devoted readers more interested in, say, Gary Giddins’ DVD reviews — collected in a 2010 book, *Warning Shadows: Home Alone With Classic Cinema* — a staunchly conservative opinion page.

The center-right paper was also known

for its in-depth reporting on antisemitism as well as a fiercely pro-Israel outlook that occasionally drew the ire of left-wing critics. *The Nation*, for instance, accused the Sun of functioning “as a journalistic SWAT team against individuals and institutions seen as hostile to Israel and Jews,” even as it praised the culture pages as a “fabulous read.”

Others appreciated the sense of urgency and attention that the Sun often brought to bear on Jewish community issues. Shortly before the Sun ceased publication, *The New York Jewish Week* praised the broadsheet as “one of the few places in the daily media where Judaism and Christianity were treated fairly, favorably even.”

The Sun shuttered at the height of the Great Recession without having made a profit. In the ensuing years, Lipsky continued to publish a steady trickle of unsigned editorials and other columns on the Sun’s website but otherwise sat alone atop the masthead. He did not respond to an interview request from JI this week.

Efune said he was “actively considering” publishing a print version of the newspaper, but clarified that there were no immediate plans to do so at a daily rate. “Possibly on weekends to start,” he told JI.

The Sun is now offering a few membership plans that will allow for tiered levels of financial commitment, the most affordable option of which is a \$120 annual subscription for unlimited articles and access to the comments section. For \$250 a year, readers receive additional access to podcasts and other exclusive events as well as the Sun’s original crossword puzzles, edited by the ace cruciverbalist Peter Gordon.

The “founder” membership plan, which costs \$2,500, includes a variety of enticements, such as “weekly briefings from senior editorial staff” and “limited-edition signed memorabilia,” according to the website.

The paper now employs approximately 30 staffers, “including some part-timers,” according to Efune. “Of course, the strength of any newspaper is in the hearts and minds of its editors and journalists,” he said, noting that the staff was assembled by Lipsky and Caroline Vik, the paper’s associate editor.

Lipsky isn’t the only familiar face at the relaunched Sun. Ira Stoll, the paper’s former

managing editor, is a columnist, and John Seeley, who worked at the *Sun* as a deputy under Stoll, has returned as a news editor. Benny Avni, the *Sun*'s former U.N. reporter, is now chief foreign correspondent.

The wide-ranging masthead suggests a continuity with the heterodox *Sun* of the

2000s, situating such loudly right-wing columnists as Larry Kudlow and Conrad Black alongside a poetry editor, book and movie critics and correspondents in Berlin and Asia, among other places.

"We're modest and realistic about what it will take, but we have a vision and we're

in it for the long haul," Efune told *JI* on the day of the launch this week, punctuating his assessment with a somewhat idealistic declaration. "We're building a newspaper, but also a movement." ♦

FEBRUARY 28, 2022

The Druze emissary 'bringing the complexity' of Israel to American Jews

Gadeer Kamal-Mreeh, a member of the Druze community, is the first non-Jewish Israeli to serve as a senior shaliach for the Jewish Agency

By Gabby Deutch

Gadeer Kamal-Mreeh's roots were planted the moment she was born in Daliyat al-Karmel. Born into a Druze culture that honors the idea of home, she never considered living anywhere besides the hill town southeast of Haifa.

Throughout her years as the first non-Jewish woman to anchor a Hebrew program on Israeli TV, and then as the first female Druze member of the Knesset, she drove the hour home each night from Jerusalem to the village.

"It's obvious for me as a Druze that when I was born in Daliyat al-Karmel, I will get married in Daliyat al-Karmel, I will bring my kids there, I will raise them there and I will die in my village," she told *Jewish Insider* in a recent Zoom interview.

But during the video call, she was not sitting in her home in Israel. She was thousands of miles away in Washington, D.C., her first time living outside of her village of 17,000.

Kamal-Mreeh, 37, is in the United States as a *shlichah*, or emissary, of The Jewish Agency for Israel, which sends thousands of Israelis to the U.S. each year to serve as representatives of Israel in American Jewish communities. She is the first non-Jewish Israeli to serve as a senior emissary with the Jewish Agency, a quasi-governmental agency that deals with Diaspora affairs, but that was not her motivation.

"You don't wake up in the morning and

say, 'What is next? What is the next glass ceiling that I need to break?'" she explained. "If those are things or stations or places that happened to me during my life, then I'm glad. It is always important to bring diversity, not just to talk about diversity."

Israel has had non-Jewish diplomats before — the first Arab Israeli diplomat was Ali Yahya, a Muslim appointed to be ambassador to Finland in 1995 — but Kamal-Mreeh's position is different. She does not represent the government of Israel, nor is she tasked with advancing Israel's interests in matters of foreign policy. Her goal is more straightforward, but perhaps also more complicated: strengthening the relationship between American Jews and Israel.

She arrived in the U.S. in July of last year, weeks after a period of intense fighting between Israel and Hamas that touched off a wave of anti-Israel rhetoric and antisemitic attacks in the U.S.

The majority of American Jews say they have a connection to Israel. But studies released last year found that American Jews, particularly young Jews, have a wide array of views on Israel.

A survey of Jewish voters released last July found that a quarter of American Jews agreed that "Israel is an apartheid state," including more than a third of Jews younger than 40. Nine percent of young Jews said that Israel does not have a right to exist. A major Pew Research Center poll published in May of 2021 found that 58% of American

Jews feel at least somewhat attached to Israel, but that 48% of Jews between 18 and 29 feel an attachment to Israel.

"We face a pivotal challenge in trying to connect American Jews to Israel," said Dan Elbaum, The Jewish Agency's head of North America. Kamal-Mreeh "is not uncritical of certain Israeli policies or other things like that. They hear about that. From what I've seen and heard, there is [also] such a pride in the Jewish state."

As a member of a minority group who has built a remarkable, if unlikely, high-profile career, Kamal-Mreeh argues that she brings a unique perspective to the conversation plaguing American Jewish leaders about how to better connect young Jews to Israel.

"I believe my uniqueness is that I am bringing the complexity. Our role is not just to highlight the beauty. Our role also is to bring the complexity, to tell people, 'Don't be afraid to say anything. Don't be afraid to ask anything,'" Kamal-Mreeh said. "I don't worry if people criticize me or us as a state. I will worry once they stop [doing] that, because you criticize when you care. And Israel is a complicated state."

From the time she was a child, Kamal-Mreeh was interested in journalism. "I called the manager of a local TV station when I was in the sixth grade, telling him, 'Hi, my name is Gadeer, and I want to broadcast a TV show,'" she recalled. "He just laughed. He didn't know how to react. 'You're a child,'

they said.”

Kamal-Mreeh did not serve in the Israeli army or do national service, a path that is now becoming more common for Druze women. She also did not become a journalist — at least, not initially: First, she studied at Bar-Ilan University to become an ultrasound technician. It was only after an injury made it difficult for her to perform that job that she went back to school, to the University of Haifa, where she studied international relations.

As Kamal-Mreeh advanced in her highly visible career, she worried about how her conservative community would view her successes.

“What surprised me is how much I was accepted in a respectful, fair way in my society,” said Kamal-Mreeh. In 2017, she became the anchor of Channel 1’s Hebrew-language weekend program, making her the first non-Jewish woman to anchor a broadcast in Hebrew. When her community’s spiritual leader called to congratulate her, “I cried,” she recalled. “I said to myself, ‘We did it,’ in terms of the religious leadership in my community is ready to be open-minded.”

Her work as a news anchor came from a childhood belief in “the huge power of screens when we are seeking to shape public opinion.” But then, Kamal-Mreeh explained, “I realized that my power is limited as a journalist.” When now-Defense Minister Benny Gantz asked her to join his party, she agreed. In 2019, as a member of the Blue and White party’s slate, she became the first Druze woman elected to the Knesset.

“For her, Israel isn’t only a home, but a mission and a calling for both Israeli society at large, and Druze society in particular,” Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid told JI in a statement. “I see the great work she’s doing and I’m sure she’ll make changes both big and small.”

The 2018 passage of controversial legislation led Kamal-Mreeh to consider a career in politics for the first time. “The Nation-State Law,” she said, “is a basic law that the Knesset legislated in 2018 to ensure that Israel is the historic homeland of the Jewish people, which is good, but with refusal of mentioning or adding the equality, the value of equality, the civil equality for all of our citizens, which is the problematic part.” The bill also downgraded the Arabic

language, Kamal-Mreeh’s native tongue, to a “special status.”

As a journalist, she had covered Druze protests against the bill. “When I was in Rabin Square, people were chanting, ‘*Shivyon, shivyon, shivyon.*’ Shivyon, which means equality. Those are their demands, just to be equal citizens,” said Kamal-Mreeh.

“We are talking about the sense of belonging, about the refusal of my country to consider me as an A-class citizen. Once a democratic country categorized its citizens to A-class and B-class, to Jews and non-Jews, it is strong. And history taught us what happened to countries who create those divisions, and suddenly [I’m] seeing my country doing that for me.”

The law remains on the books, and she struggles with it publicly — which she says is something that makes her proud to be Israeli. That public acknowledgment that Israel is far from perfect, and that it struggles with thorny identity questions in the same way that other democracies do, is why she was chosen to go to America.

“We love our country. The fact that we cherish and we are enjoying freedom in our country, it doesn’t mean that I need to be grateful each day for being born in Israel. I am the eighth generation living in Israel,” she added.

In conversations with American Jews, Kamal-Mreeh says she has found a population that is eager to engage on complicated matters and aware that old-school styles of Israel advocacy no longer work.

“Bringing the superficial propaganda of, ‘We are good, trust us, we are wise, we are good, we are the absolute’ — [that] advocacy, I don’t believe it works anymore. What worked in the ‘80s or in the ‘90s, it doesn’t work anymore,” she explained.

Based in Washington, Kamal-Mreeh has a national portfolio. She has not yet engaged much with Washington’s political class — a meeting with a few members of Congress is in the works — although political types tend to populate the region’s synagogues. She recently spent several days in Florida visiting college campuses, and she has spoken to Jewish communities around the country.

“She’s probably been to more Shabbat dinners and spoken in more synagogues

than many of our other *shlichim*,” said Elbaum. “She certainly is becoming part of our Jewish life also, even though she’s not Jewish.”

Kamal-Mreeh plans to spend up to three years in the U.S. with her husband and their children (and a dog, who interrupted her frequently during the interview). She doesn’t know what may come next, but hasn’t ruled out a return to politics. “Maybe one day I will decide to go back to politics. It enriches me, enriches my ability to read reality. It broadens my perspectives, deepens the way that I think, how I think, my stance, my opinions,” she explained.

By the time that she leaves, she and Elbaum have at least one metric of measuring her success.

“When she and I spoke about the role, within our first or second conversation,” recalled Elbaum, “what I said to her is that we both need to set a personal goal that when she leaves she will not be the only non-Jewish *shaliach*.” ♦

Just back from Israel, Lamont touts business ties

The Connecticut governor said his team is continuing conversations with nearly two dozen Israeli companies about future investments

By Marc Rod

Following a long-delayed trip to Israel to promote business development, Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont is optimistic about the future of potential business relationships between Israel and his state.

The trip, Lamont's first to Israel, was originally set to take place two years ago, but was pushed back due to COVID-19. His trip, organized by the United States-Israel Business Alliance, marked the first time in 25 years that a governor of Connecticut has visited Israel.

"It's the most innovative country in the world," Lamont, a Democrat, told *Jewish Insider* on Monday, a few days after returning from the weeklong trip. "I just thought it was very simpatico for Connecticut to be there," noting that both the Jewish state and the Constitution State have robust industries in defense manufacturing, fintech innovation, cryptocurrency, healthcare and venture capital.

His delegation included representatives from Raytheon, Hartford HealthCare, the Digital Currency Group, the Jewish Federation Association of Connecticut, University of Connecticut, the Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development and Connecticut Innovations, the state's venture capital firm.

"They really rolled out the red carpet for us. On behalf of Connecticut, I was really proud," he said.

During the trip, the group met with businesses including food manufacturer Strauss Group, VC firm Vintage Investment Partners, tech investment group Viola Ventures, investment platform OurCrowd and biotech firm Future Meat Technologies. It also participated in a program at Google's campus in Tel Aviv and hosted a venture

capital competition. The University of Connecticut signed a memorandum of understanding with Technion, Israel's technology institute.

"[Business leaders] were very blunt — they said, 'We thought there were only two ways to come to the United States.' That was generally New York or New Jersey," he said. "I'd like to think at the end of our week there it's New York, New Jersey and Connecticut."

He said the state is now following up with around 20 companies about potential opportunities. Officials on the trip said in a Monday press conference that three companies — hydrogen fuel company H2Pro and cultured meat firms Aleph Farms and Future Meat — are close to making investments in the U.S.

One moment that Lamont said stood out was sampling "really delicious" lab-grown chicken.

"That's the type of company that we're thinking about [for] Connecticut because it's getting all of the preliminary regulatory approvals," Lamont continued. "They want to come."

Lamont said he was surprised by "the dynamism, the optimism, the growth [in Israel] — cranes everywhere, incredibly modern buildings."

"Tel Aviv is just the most compelling city in the world, certainly in the region... Jerusalem's got a lot of growth going on there as well," he said. "It sort of defies the sort of traditional Middle Eastern stereotypes... this is one of the most dynamic, modern, contemporary economies in the world and you've got to see it to believe it."

Lamont's group also met with Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, President Isaac Herzog and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid.

While the Connecticut delegation was in

Israel, Google CEO Ruth Porat announced the company's plans to launch a \$25 million program to train Palestinians in coding, a project Lamont said he mentioned to Bennett during their meeting.

"We were just saying, maybe when it comes to the West Bank, we think too much about just political solutions and one state, two states, the walls," he said. "Coding is a way that a lot of folks, wherever they may be, for example in the West Bank, can have a really decent, good-paying job and they don't have to go back and forth every day. Sort of changes the dynamic [and] helps stop some age-old problems."

With Bennett and Herzog, the group also discussed workforce development projects, Israel's security situation, America's role in the Middle East, and Israel's new governing coalition.

The Connecticut governor said he heard concerns from Israelis about antisemitic comments from the progressive 'Squad' in Congress, as well as growing anti-Israel sentiment on college campuses, but told *J* he sees the concerns as unwarranted.

"I think the Jewish/Israel/American relationship is as strong as it's been in my lifetime. I go to a lot of college campuses. I think that's true, even there. I think it's even more true than it was five years ago," he said. "Under Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, we're not ever going to let Israel be a partisan issue in the United States, and he's very conscious of the fact that we're going to have strong bipartisan support for Israel."

The student council at Yale, in New Haven, approved a statement last year accusing Israel of genocide, ethnic cleansing and apartheid. In 2015, a Connecticut College professor faced harassment and death threats in response to a Facebook post about Gaza that some students said was

racist.

Lamont said that Herzog drew parallels between Connecticut — the third smallest state in the Union — and Israel.

“President Herzog said, ‘Hey, you’re just

like [Israel], sort of innovative and punching above your weight class. We have more in common than I thought about before,’” he said. “I come out of the business world, where there’s nothing more important than

personal relationships. You can argue these things on paper until you’re blue in the face, but a personal relationship really matters. And I like to think that was a big takeaway from the week.” ♦

MARCH 3, 2022

How vulnerable is Jamaal Bowman?

Two moderate Democrats sense that the Bronx progressive’s positions on Israel may put him at risk in a redrawn district

By Matthew Kassel

Suddenly, it seems, Rep. Jamaal Bowman’s (D-NY) road to reelection has gotten rockier.

Last month, the freshman congressman drew widespread condemnation from Jewish leaders when, in an unexpected reversal, he reneged on his support for bipartisan legislation aimed at boosting the Abraham Accords, the historic series of diplomatic agreements that established ties between Israel and four Arab nations during the latter half of 2020.

His announcement that he would vote against the Israel Relations Normalization Act, which currently has 328 House cosponsors, was “lamentable, and will surely be received with bewilderment and disapproval by many voters,” a group of local rabbis wrote in a joint letter, expressing surprise and dismay over the about-face “on an important policy matter.”

Now, as Bowman begins his campaign for another term representing New York’s redrawn 16th District, the Bronx progressive is facing opposition from a growing number of Democratic primary challengers who are eager to cast his decision not only as misguided but indicative of what they criticize as a broader resistance to compromise that is out of sync with voter sentiment.

“I almost fell off my chair when I heard that he was not going to support the normalization of relationships,” Manuel Casanova, a former political strategist and sales manager in New Rochelle who entered the race last October, said in a recent interview with *Jewish Insider*. “It’s basically

saying, ‘If you don’t agree with me 100%, then you’re on the other side and I don’t talk to you.’”

Vedat Gashi, a real estate attorney and Westchester County legislator in Yorktown who filed to run with the Federal Election Commission just a few weeks ago, also took issue with Bowman’s maneuver. “I don’t know how you oppose that,” Gashi said last week in his first interview on the race. “It feels more like an appeasement of, I think, the most extreme elements than it does the best interest of this country and our national security.”

Speaking more generally, Gashi said that Bowman’s turnaround is emblematic of his approach “in other areas” of major consequence to the Democratic agenda, including the \$1 trillion infrastructure bill that cleared the House last November by a narrow margin of 228-206 votes.

The congressman was among just six Democrats who had vowed to oppose the funding until the Senate passed a larger social safety net and climate package — blocked by Sens. Kyrsten Sinema (D-AZ) and Joe Manchin (D-WV) — that Bowman and his fellow “Squad” members had viewed as inseparable from the infrastructure package.

But Gashi rejected that logic. “I’ve been frustrated that the Democrats control the House, the Senate and the presidency, and we’re not able to get as much done as we can because of two senators and a handful of congresspeople who are furthering a more extremist agenda,” said the Westchester Democrat, including Bowman in his appraisal. “This is a historic bill, and he

voted against it.”

Casanova, for his part, suggested that the 45-year-old congressman had put himself in something of an untenable position because of his vote. “Bowman cannot even talk about infrastructure,” he scoffed. “You don’t see him going around talking about all the money that he’s bringing because of the infrastructure deal.”

A spokesperson for Bowman’s campaign declined to comment when reached by *JJ*.

Still, such criticism hints at the range of issues that Bowman may find difficult to ignore as he courts a significant new subset of traditionally moderate voters who now live within the updated House boundaries — including previously uncharted territory comprising at least a third if not 40% of the redesigned district, according to the estimate of one Democratic strategist — that extend further north into Westchester as well as Putnam County.

“I am eager to meet all of your families and I’m excited to get to know more about the history and needs of these towns,” Bowman said in an early February email to constituents shortly after the new House map had been signed into law, asking voters to inform him of “the greatest needs” of their communities.

Gashi, 43, and Casanova, 50 — both of whom lean toward the moderate end of the Democratic spectrum and serve as district leaders in their respective communities — are so far the only challengers to have publicly launched campaigns ahead of an early April filing deadline. But experts suggested that the field remains fluid, and

at least one other candidate is expected to enter the race.

In the interview with JI, Gashi said he had not been planning to jump in until he found himself drawn into Bowman's district and saw an opportunity. "This is a district that I know well," said the county legislator, who chairs the budget and appropriations committee. "The part of Westchester where I'm from, Republicans are a real thing. We have to be concerned about how we present to them."

"I'm a liberal who wants to get things done," he said, describing his priorities, in broad strokes, as addressing what he characterized as the country's "failing infrastructure" in addition to a "looming environmental catastrophe" that can no longer be ignored.

Born in Kosovo, Gashi is an ethnic Albanian who moved to the Bronx in 1982, when he was four years old. His family later settled in Westchester. After receiving his law degree from Seton Hall University, he clerked with Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, at the time a judge on the Second Circuit Court of Appeals. Later, Gashi returned to Kosovo, where, with a grant from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, he helped draft laws for the fledgling nation.

One major trademark law that gained "some attention," he said, led to a position as chief legal advisor to Kosovo's prime minister following a nomination from the United Nations. He returned to the U.S. after Kosovo declared its independence in 2008.

Gashi expressed an affinity for the Jewish community that he said is rooted in his connection to Kosovo as well as his identification as a non-observant Muslim. "We celebrate Christmas the same, you know," he joked. "It's this feeling that you're part of America, you're a proud American, and patriotic, but also recognize where you came from."

"Their ethnic identity is something that a lot of Albanians hold dear," Gashi added. "The practice of their religion as they saw fit and, frankly, their very existence in what Serbia declared its territory, was a problem, so because they existed, Albanians were forced to flee," he said of the persecution that culminated in the atrocities of the Kosovo War between 1998 and 1999. "They were kicked out of jobs. They weren't allowed to

participate."

While Serbia still does not recognize Kosovo as an independent state, Gashi said he was unsurprised but nevertheless pleased when the Muslim-majority country established diplomatic relations with Israel last February. "Israeli support of Kosovo before it was a state, before it declared independence," he said, "was significant."

In 2016, Gashi visited Israel with his family for the first time, and he describes himself as a strong supporter of the Jewish state. He said he is in favor of continued U.S. security assistance to Israel, guaranteed in a memorandum of understanding between the two countries, and expressed opposition to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement targeting Israel, suggesting that the movement is at times antisemitic because it singles out the Jewish state for censure.

He also says he would have voted for supplemental funding for Israel's Iron Dome missile-defense system, as Bowman did last September when he broke with some far-left House members who were against the legislation. But Gashi questions Bowman's approach to the funding, arguing that the congressman is inconsistent because he has also said he supports conditioning aid to Israel. "It's hard to have it both ways," he told JI. "It's hard to say that you are in favor of things like the Iron Dome but also at the same time try to condition security assistance."

For his part, Casanova made clear that he shared the same views as Gashi on Israel, which are featured in a section of his campaign site. "In me, you're going to have somebody who's going to be a very strong Israel supporter," he said in the interview with JI. "Why? Israel is a democracy. They have their own way of working as a democracy, they have their own system, but we share the same values."

Casanova was born in Belgium but was raised and spent a portion of his early adulthood in Santiago, Chile, where he said he benefited from a unique view of the often tense relationship between Jews and Palestinians that gives him hope for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. "I come from that background where they could work together," he said, recalling that Jewish and Palestinian Chileans "would not marry

each other" but would still "do business together" and "could be friends."

In 1997, Casanova moved to Miami to complete his bachelor's degree and then settled in New York. He worked on political campaigns in the late aughts and received his master's degree in a now-defunct elections strategy program at Fordham University — like the school, Casanova identifies as Jesuit — and found work as a Democratic consultant. Most recently, he worked as a sales manager for Finnair but was laid off during the pandemic. He is now entirely focused on his campaign.

He said is running for Congress because he wants to instill a sense of civility and bipartisan cooperation in Washington following the violent Capitol riot that took place last year. "That prompted me to say, 'Manuel, it's time for you to jump in,'" he said. "As somebody who comes from a country like Chile that broke down into pieces because people stopped talking to one another, and somebody also who lived under dictatorship, I know what it means."

"The main thing that I wanted to accomplish," he explained, "is that those people who don't agree with me can still say, 'You know what, Manuel and I, we think differently, but I know he's trying to represent me, and he's listening to what I have to say. That doesn't mean that he's going to do what I have to say.'"

Casanova, who has raised just over \$65,000 since last October, according to the Federal Election Commission, argued that Bowman's decision to withdraw his cosponsorship of the Abraham Accords bill was a prime example of what he credits with contributing to rising tensions on the Hill. He also simply believes it is a mistake to oppose the agreements, in part because of what he described as the geopolitical significance of aligning Israel with its Arab neighbors "in order to deal with" Iran, "the biggest problem we have" in the region.

While Bowman explained in a recent letter to constituents that he had viewed the bill "as an opportunity to make progress toward justice and healing in the Middle East," the congressman changed his mind after a trip to Israel with J Street last November and said he now believes that the Abraham Accords have "unhelpfully" alienated the Palestinians.

Echoing the sentiments of far-left critics who have opposed the agreements, Bowman also raised concerns that, as a result of the deals, the U.S. had discussed a weapons sale to the United Arab Emirates and recognized Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. Such “actions,” he wrote, “will only escalate violence in the Middle East and make already vulnerable communities less safe.”

Even as his opponents acknowledge that no deal is perfect, they argue that Bowman’s reservations are unconvincing and in no way justify the wholesale abandonment of legislation that has garnered overwhelming support from members of both parties. “There may well be things in a chosen bill that you disagree with,” Gashi said. “The greater good probably would dictate some progress.”

Aside from Gashi and Casanova, at least one other candidate has already begun gathering petitions in the district and is expected to file as soon as this week, according to a well-placed source familiar with the campaign who spoke with JI on Wednesday.

Michael Gerald, a senior pastor at Shiloh Church in Tuckahoe who serves as deputy commissioner at the Westchester County Department of Correction, is likely to draw added contrasts with Bowman, not least because of a background in law enforcement — including positions as a state trooper and undersheriff in New Jersey — that informs his views on police funding, the source told JI.

While Bowman has called for defunding the police, Gerald — who, like the incumbent, is Black — acknowledges a need for law enforcement reform but is not in favor of cutting spending for cops, the source said. Gerald is also a strong supporter of Israel, the source told JI, and is likely to make inroads among Black clergy members in the district. He did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Wednesday.

Other candidates rumored to have been mulling bids include Yonkers Mayor Mike Spano, who stirred controversy when he said in a radio interview last month that Bowman should have been arrested for opposing the infrastructure bill, arguing that the congressman is “just not in line” with voters who live in the district. Spano’s office did not respond to a request for comment

from JI.

Tom Meier, who chairs the Yonkers Democratic Committee, had also reportedly been expected to mount a challenge, but he told JI in a text exchange last week that he was “no longer considering a run for Congress in the 16th” and was instead throwing his support behind Gashi, whom “many Democrats in Westchester consider” to be a “frontrunning contender.”

Though Bowman — who entered the most recent fundraising quarter with nearly \$310,000 in cash on hand — now finds himself in a somewhat unfamiliar district, he remains an imposing figure following his primary upset over former longtime Rep. Eliot Engel (D-NY) in the 2020 cycle. In recent weeks, he has earned endorsements from a range of high-profile elected officials, including Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY), Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) and Rep. Ayanna Pressley (D-MA). There is no publicly available polling on the race.

But while he has gained establishment support, Bowman recently lost backing from the Democratic Socialists of America, a major grassroots ally on the far left that had endorsed his 2020 bid. The group has drawn scrutiny over the past few months for its fringe foreign policy positions, including a hardline approach to Israel as well as a suggestion that the U.S. should withdraw from NATO amid mounting violence between Russia and Ukraine.

In December, the organization said it would not be endorsing Bowman in the 2022 midterms, citing disagreements over his trip to Israel with J Street as well as his Iron Dome vote. The DSA supports the BDS movement, which Bowman has said he opposes.

The DSA’s BDS and Palestine Solidarity Working Group recently praised his decision to vote against the Israel relations bill, but the group criticized the timing of his reversal, which took place shortly after the heavily Jewish Bronx neighborhood of Riverdale had been removed from his district. In a social media post, the working group suggested that Bowman had “only finally came through on” removing his name from the bill after his new “district borders” excluded “an area with a heavy Zionist constituency.”

While Bowman’s move was met with disappointment by a number of Jewish community leaders in Riverdale, other voters have been broadly receptive to his Middle East foreign policy approach, even as he has struggled to navigate such issues during his first year in office, according to a Democratic strategist who is familiar with the district.

The new district boundaries, however, have likely altered that dynamic. “The pro-Israel Democratic voters who were satisfied or even happy with” Bowman “going to Israel with J Street predominantly live in Riverdale and North Riverdale, which are no longer in his district,” the strategist told JI. “And pro-Israel voters in the Westchester” portions of his “new district are far less likely to register as Democrats, since Republican primaries count a lot more in Westchester than the Bronx.”

Either way, Bowman’s opponents emphasized that his reversal was one issue they would work to ensure voters do not soon forget.

“He supported and, all of a sudden, did he just discover these elements of the bill now?” Gashi said. “Presumably, he would have been aware of them at some point earlier. I don’t want to parse and put words in his mouth. I’ll take him at his word, and maybe it’ll be an indicator of wider things.”

Casanova drew a somewhat more pointed distinction. “The biggest difference between Jamaal and me,” he told JI, “is that you can take my word to the bank.” ♦