

## THE WEEKLY PRINT

*The Czech ambassador's simple influence-winning motto: 'Be interesting'; Blake Masters wants to take back Arizona; The 'many worlds' of Huma Abedin; How Call Your Mother helped end DC's 'bagel desert'; Young leaders' summit builds on seeds of Israeli-Moroccan normalization; and New Bowman challenger says congressman is a no-show in the district*

MARCH 7, 2022

## The Czech ambassador's simple influence-winning motto: 'Be interesting'

*How the Central European nation's eccentric emissary is winning hearts (and stomachs) in Washington*

By Gabby Deutch

In the ornate sitting room of the Czech ambassador's official residence in Washington, D.C., the walls are covered not in Central European art or other local artifacts, but an eclectic assortment of souvenirs from Ambassador Hynek Kmoníček excursions around the world.

From a crimson-and-gold-upholstered armchair, Kmoníček points to a full crocodile skin hanging on the wall and begins to explain its provenance.

"I was negotiating in Sudan, and I needed to prove I am macho enough," Kmoníček said casually. (He killed the crocodile with the permission and under the supervision of the locals. "I was definitely not fighting it. And if I did, I would not be sitting here today. I would be in his stomach," he added with a laugh.)

Kmoníček is a career ambassador who enjoys creature comforts — he cooks elaborate meals for guests, has an extensive personal art collection adorning his walls (and a personal collection of hundreds of bottles of hot sauce in his kitchen) and likes to sit in a meditation room overlooking Rock Creek Park that is inspired by the Dalai

Lama, whom he considers a friend.

Other spoils of his love for hunting are present, including the hide of a kangaroo from Australia and the skin of a snake from India. One wall boasts dozens of antique guns and knives, "what I call [the] Republican room," he explained with a chuckle. He has not gone hunting in the five years he has been in the U.S., where, he jokes, "Congress is my hunting ground."

The unique assortment of objects reflects Kmoníček's idiosyncratic tastes, but it also gets at the key thesis of his diplomacy. "If we want to be heard, we must be interesting," he told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview at his residence. "It's the same challenge all of us who are not big nations with huge armies and big strategic interests face with whatever administration," Democratic or Republican. That challenge, he explained, existed under former President Donald Trump, and it remains under President Joe Biden.

Sometimes, of course, even an ambassador from a small landlocked Central European country finds himself enmeshed in global geopolitical conflicts. The challenge these days for Kmonicek is

not only standing out in Washington but standing up on the international stage for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky as his embattled nation faces an onslaught from Russian forces.

Last year, Russia released a list of "unfriendly countries" that included just two names: the U.S. and the Czech Republic, which blamed Russian agents for a 2014 explosion at an ammunition depot in Vrbětice, in the eastern part of the country. The Czech Republic has aligned itself closely with Zelensky in the wake of Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine, and it has sent ammunition, fuel and medical supplies to the country.

The Czech Republic has also been at the forefront of advocating for a strong Western response to Putin's aggression. Kmoníček called Putin's actions in Ukraine "a danger for all of Europe, and to face it, the key is the absolute unity of all the allies."

"We were absolutely persuaded that Europe, where it started two world wars just in the last century, finally found the recipe [for] how to solve our differences in a peaceful way. And the result is the European Union," said Kmoníček. The Czech Republic

joined the European Union in 2004, and in 1999 was one of the first former socialist countries to join NATO. Ukrainians are the largest ethnic minority in the country.

Even when the Czech Republic does not find itself embroiled in a continental land war, Kmoníček, 59, has a lot to offer that will interest diplomats, politicians and members of the public alike. Born and raised in Pardubice, a city of 90,000 some 60 miles east of Prague that is best known for its chemical factory, Kmoníček plays classical guitar and can speak several languages, including Arabic, Russian, some Hebrew and a bit of Tatar (his wife's native language).

The Hebrew came from a year he spent in Israel in the 1990s, during a "real roller coaster" of self-exploration — he discovered he was Jewish in his mid-20s, and soon after, he went to study at Hebrew University in Jerusalem as part of a program for Jewish leaders in the diaspora.

Kmoníček's mother revealed her Jewish lineage after hiding it from him during the country's socialist years. During the era in which Kmoníček grew up, a good Jew "celebrates his Christmas and never heard about Hanukkah," he said. "The Czech Jews usually felt themselves so much part of the political and cultural life of the mainstream that it was not the only identity they had, being Jewish," Kmoníček explained, and because organized religion was verboten during socialism, many religious traditions were not passed down.

Norm Eisen, who served as U.S. ambassador to the Czech Republic during the Obama administration, told JI that Kmoníček's Jewish identity "is part of the mosaic of experiences that he brings to the job," and said the pair discussed religion together. "Because my American, Czech and Jewish identities were all three such an important part of my ambassadorship and have continued to define work that I do in my post-diplomatic career at [the] Brookings [Institution], Ambassador Kmoníček reflected with me on his own Jewish heritage," Eisen added.

But the main reason Kmoníček went to Israel was to further his proficiency in Arabic — a language he had picked up almost by accident before the Iron Curtain fell — rather than his "suddenly discovered

ethnic roots."

In the late 1980s, Kmoníček was earning a living as a classical guitarist. He called the gig "the perfect job, one of the very good jobs during the communist times," because it provided a rare opportunity to travel. He played classical music in particular because it had "no lyrics, no breathless song. If you stick to Johann Sebastian Bach, you are the safe bet," Kmoníček noted.

He had a degree from the faculty of music, but he wanted to continue his education and study English. At first, he was denied this opportunity because state-affiliated administrators in Czechoslovakia told him a second degree would waste the hard-earned money of the working class. When they eventually relented, "they told me no, solo English you cannot study," recalled Kmoníček. "I was told that it's a capitalist language, but I can study it in combination with some progressive language. The progressive language was Arabic."

When Kmoníček arrived in Israel, he lived first in the Hebrew University dorms on Mt. Scopus, before moving into the center of Jerusalem, where he got to know other Central European Jews who had moved to Israel in the years after communism came to an end. He also met many Czechs who had moved to Israel decades earlier, after the Holocaust.

Today, the Czech Republic is one of the most pro-Israel countries in Europe, a tradition that dates back decades. The first president of Czechoslovakia, Tomáš Masaryk, visited Mandatory Palestine in 1927 and spent time in Jewish settlements there. Decades later, following the fall of the Iron Curtain, Czech President Vaclav Havel visited Israel on one of his first foreign trips, along with a delegation of more than 100 Czech Jews.

Daniel Meron, who served as Israel's ambassador to the Czech Republic until last summer, told *The Jerusalem Post* that "the Czech Republic is probably one of Israel's best friends in Europe," noting that "here in Europe, such support is unheard of."

The country also played a key role in establishing European protocols for the restitution of property stolen from Jews during the Holocaust. The 2009 Terezin Declaration, a nonbinding resolution approved by 47 nations to help correct the

economic crimes perpetrated against Jews during the Holocaust, emerged from a conference hosted in Prague by the Czech prime minister.

Every time a new leader is elected in the Czech Republic, Kmoníček fields calls from friends and officials in Israel questioning the new administration's stance on Israel. "I try to explain [that] because the public mood in Czech Republic is traditionally so much pro-Israeli, that it's suicide for any politician to go against that sentiment," he said.

The Czech government has condemned the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement and adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism. Last year, the country became the second European nation, after Hungary, to open a diplomatic mission in Jerusalem.

"I still consider it as my home ground," Kmoníček said of Israel, while acknowledging that his Hebrew has not quite held up over the years.

On a recent trip to Israel several months ago, "I found I am still able to survive normally on the street," stated Kmoníček. But when "I was talking politics with [Israeli Prime Minister] Naftali Bennett, I wouldn't use Hebrew. I definitely go to English."

Kmoníček's work in his country's foreign service was a second career, when he tired of playing music and being a translator at the same time. Once, he went to a town to play a show at the opening of a new art gallery; the next day, he returned with a delegation from Malaysia as their translator.

"Everybody in the town — it's a small town — said, 'Oh, your twin was here yesterday opening a new gallery,' and I said 'No, that was not, it's still me.' But it could not go on like that," Kmoníček recalled.

The offer from the Czech Foreign Ministry, which was looking for someone with Middle East language skills, came while he was still in Israel. He started as a desk officer focused on Yemen, eventually rising to become director general for Asia, Africa and America and twice serving as deputy foreign minister. His career has also included stints as ambassador to Australia, India and the United Nations in New York.

"That's also the place where I found and met my wife, who to make it to sound a little bit like the Middle East peace process, is

Uzbeki Muslim. And let me tell you, it was never easy with her family when she showed me to them,” said Kmoníček. “It probably helps that neither of us is religious.”

He asked facetiously, “Do I keep kosher most of the time? No. Do I know I should? Yes. Is my wife ever going to the mosque? No. If she went, probably she would find they’re my friends,” he said. “We have both the Torah and Quran here and they sit peacefully next to each other” —Kmoníček pointed to the two sacred texts, placed conspicuously on the mantle above the fireplace — “and we are joking that probably the most complicated life will be for our children, because they will have to decide what they are religiously.” The couple’s first child is due later this year.

In Washington, Kmoníček continues to draw upon his Middle East experience because of a unique arrangement between the Czech and American governments related to Syria. Since the U.S. embassy in Syria suspended operations a decade ago, the Czech Republic has served as the official representative of U.S. interests in the war-torn country. Any Syrian-American dual citizen who needs something from the Syrian government must go through the Czech embassy. (Other countries play a similar role for the U.S. — Sweden does the same in North Korea, and Switzerland operates similarly in Iran.)

This arrangement comes out of the longstanding Czech-Syrian relationship that dates back to the close connection of Syria’s Baathist regime and Europe’s socialist governments. Kmoníček attended the 2000 funeral of former Syrian President

Hafez al-Assad, the father of current Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

“I’m a very known face around Damascus,” Kmoníček said. “We never had a colony. They cannot go, ‘OK, you want to play here your national interest.’ What national interest [do] we have there?”

This role has human rights and strategic implications, and it is especially important for the tens of thousands of Syrian immigrants who live in the U.S. But it also gets to the heart of Kmoníček’s approach to diplomacy — that when you are a relatively peaceful, small country of 10 million people, you need a way to get Washington’s attention.

“Especially in a place like Washington, you have so many countries represented, you have to be somehow interesting, you have to be somehow unique,” said Petr Tůma, a Czech diplomat who previously served as deputy chief of mission in Syria and is currently a visiting fellow at the Atlantic Council think tank. “When you are from a small country without any major problems, from the U.S. point of view, then nobody cares.”

Tůma has also worked at the Czech embassy in Washington, and said that in his experience, “the envelope is more important than what is inside” when it comes to sharing Czech priorities with American officials.

Kmoníček “is a great storyteller,” added Tůma. “This is something the American public and [our] American counterparts, you really like your stories, and you like the movies. That’s what Ambassador Kmonicek is really great about. He comes with an

interesting story.” Kmoníček relishes telling his visitors — the American ones in particular — the many near-unbelievable tales of his time in the diplomatic corps.

“If the American visitor comes here, I want him to see this is not a poor struggling house without a budget, without taste,” Kmoníček reflected. Nor is it “all a dusty museum. It’s nothing supermodern, playing to be Scandinavian. It’s very eclectic.”

To illustrate this point, he offered a sample menu that he might cook at one of his monthly dinners for other ambassadors. Instead of caviar, he offers smoked Amazonian ants; for another dish, he might combine Moroccan and Jamaican cuisine, but cook it in a South African style. He competes annually in the Embassy Chef Challenge, in which he is the only ambassador to go up against the professional chefs employed by foreign embassies in Washington..

This is not to say that Kmoníček shuns the food of his home country. On the contrary, he loves it: Last year during “the famous January troubles,” his diplomatic codeword for the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol, he felt an obligation to help provide for members of the Texas and Nebraska National Guards when they were in Washington. The Czech Republic has an official partnership with the two states’ Air National Guards.

He set aside the outlandish culinary creations for which he is known around Washington whipped up a hearty Czech goulash instead. “We feel them as our own,” he said of the Czech descendants serving in the American military, “and they must be fed.” ♦

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## Blake Masters wants to take back Arizona

*The Thiel Capital COO and self-described ‘anti-progressive’ wants the chance to take on Sen. Mark Kelly*

By Matthew Kassel

Even by the fun-house standards of Republican politics in the swing state of Arizona — which has produced a rather colorful stream

of election denialists, Nazi analogists and other far-right extremists who have gained notoriety in recent years — Blake Masters cuts an unusual profile..

The GOP Senate candidate and Peter Thiel protégé casts himself as a former libertarian who turned to conservatism after establishing what he describes as an

early intellectual and emotional basis for former President Donald Trump's brash neo-populist agenda.

And on many red-meat conservative fixations, Masters comes off as a relatively standard-issue Trump loyalist, warning repeatedly of the dangers of lax immigration policies, the Chinese Communist Party and Big Tech censorship. He has frequently denounced critical race theory as "anti-white racism."

Masters, 35, has turned heads for other reasons, thanks in large part to a series of provocative campaign ads that have drawn national attention. During one notable spot, the chief operating officer of Thiel Capital, speaking over a foreboding soundtrack, brandished a short-barreled rifle "designed to kill people" — a demonstration of his gun-rights bona fides. Elsewhere, he falsely declared that "Trump won in 2020" and has said that Americans "should be able to raise a family on one single income."

"Most politicians, left or right, don't really talk that way," Masters, a self-described "anti-progressive," said in an interview with *Jewish Insider* in late January. "I think I just really stand out," he added, with characteristic bluster. "I'm the only one who's not boring. I'm the only one who really, I think, understands the stakes."

As he sees it, the future is grim. "I look around and I see us losing the country," Masters declared, turning his attention to what he argues President Joe Biden's "far-left, progressive administration has done" over the past year or so. "It's startling: open borders, supply shocks, inflation, you know, all sorts of cultural craziness."

Such criticism isn't reserved exclusively for the opposition. Masters also holds a withering view of Republican leadership, with, as he made sure to note, the "huge exception" of Trump. "Zooming out even further, it's not just the last year — it's the last few decades," Masters argued, voicing disdain for "a bipartisan elite" that, he believes, has compromised American interests at home and abroad. "We've off-shored our middle class, and, I mean, America is just not on track."

Masters, who fits into an emerging category of right-wing activists loosely categorized as "national conservatives," is one of several Republicans now competing

in the wide-open August primary, whose victor will face off against Sen. Mark Kelly (D-AZ) this fall. The former astronaut and retired Navy captain, 58, is now seeking a full term in the upper chamber following his decisive victory over former Sen. Martha McSally (R-AZ) in a 2020 special election, when he helped turn Arizona's two Senate seats blue for the first time in more than six decades.

From a fundraising perspective, Kelly is well-positioned as he runs unopposed in the Democratic primary. He entered the new year with just under \$19 million on hand, far outpacing the well-heeled Republican field. But even with his sizable war chest, elections forecasters have suggested the junior senator is particularly vulnerable this cycle as he heads into an election year that is expected to be favorable for Republican candidates.

Still, the GOP roster remains somewhat in flux, with no clear favorite yet to emerge. Despite overtures from GOP leaders who had tried to recruit him, Arizona's Republican governor, Doug Ducey, confirmed last week that he would not run for Senate, sparing Kelly what would likely have been a competitive general-election matchup. Masters is viewed as one of three top Republican contenders all jockeying for support with outlandish overtures to Trump's base if not the former president himself, who hasn't yet made an endorsement.

Last month, for instance, the energy executive Jim Lamon released a TV ad depicting himself in a Western-style shootout with such high-profile Democrats as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), Biden and Kelly, the latter of whom is a gun-control advocate whose wife, former Rep. Gabby Giffords (D-AZ), survived an assassination attempt in 2012.

Even Mark Brnovich, Arizona's more establishment-minded attorney general — who has led polling on the race and has acknowledged Trump's defeat in 2020 — shared a video in which he enthusiastically twirled a pair of nunchucks while standing on a roof.

Masters, who seems to enjoy prodding at what he views as a tedious status quo, suggested that his opponents are out of touch with the zeitgeist. "I'm 20 or 30 years

younger than all of them, which I think is interesting," he told JI. "It's not itself a qualification, but it means I have a different perspective. I've been around long enough and have been paying attention to, I think, have gotten a beat on what's going wrong."

The first-time candidate claims his campaign is gaining traction among a growing number of voters across the state who, he says, are eager to see a "changing of the guard."

Independent polling suggests otherwise, at least at the moment. But experts speculated that the numbers may shift in the coming months. "He's suffering, like most first-time folks running, especially in a statewide contest, from a lack of name ID," Mike Noble, chief of research at OH Predictive Insights, a nonpartisan polling firm in Phoenix, said of Masters. For now, "he's kind of just in the middle of the pack," Noble added. "However, I think there's a lot of potential."

With a large number of voters still undecided, Noble said that even a wildcard candidate like Masters could still consolidate support, not least because of the strong fundraising numbers he has posted in consecutive quarters.

Since entering the race last July, Masters has pulled in just under \$2.6 million in individual campaign contributions — including some donations that came through the sale of NFTs, or non-fungible tokens. He began the most recent quarter with a cash advantage of \$1.8 million. Most notably, his haul is buoyed by a major super PAC donation of \$10 million from the elusive right-wing tech billionaire Peter Thiel, whom Masters counts as a boss and mentor. Combined, those factors indicate that Masters is, according to Noble, "someone to watch in the race."

Daniel Scarpinato, a partner at Ascent Media Agency who until last fall served as Ducey's chief of staff, expressed a similar view of Masters' prospects. "He entered really as an unknown, and I think that he has impressed a lot of folks with his ability to pull together a campaign that does seem to have a lot of support on the ground," Scarpinato told JI in an interview. "He's been pretty creative in doing some things to cut through and be different."

Not unpredictably, Masters offered



an even more generous assessment of his candidacy in conversation with JI. “I don’t even feel like I’m competing with my primary election opponents,” he said, “because they’re just unable to talk about some of the thornier issues and they’re just dealing in bullet points while I’m actually like, ‘Hey, I’m a real guy with real ideas, and here’s what I think.’”

The political newcomer said his approach is in keeping with the lessons from *Zero to One: Notes on Startups, or How to Build the Future*, a book he co-authored with Thiel in 2014. “That’s sort of what I would say is the Zero to One mentality,” he explained. “You’ve got to do something different and hope it works. Maybe the voters don’t buy it, but I actually think they do because they can tell it’s authentic.”

Notwithstanding such confidence, political observers in the Grand Canyon State suggested in interviews with JI that Masters’ views on some key issues remain somewhat inscrutable, while his values-driven messaging has also obscured what can seem like a lack of depth or clarity on matters of substance, particularly in the foreign policy realm.

Last week, Masters posted a video to his Twitter feed in which he offered his take on the escalating conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Describing the war as “super dangerous,” Masters said it was difficult “to tell what’s going on beyond that” because, he alleged, the U.S. has no “real media” and “so much of what you see is propaganda and emotionalism all the way down.”

While Masters went on to condemn Russia’s invasion as “wrong” — and called for sanctions in a separate post — he also argued that the country “is a nuclear power with its own distinct interests.” There was, he suggested, “no reason to provoke them over NATO expansion and Bush-era regime change mania.”

His approach struck something of a precarious balance between an establishment Republican wing that is highly critical of Russia’s actions and a Trumpian subset of the party that is more sympathetic to Russian President Vladimir Putin, including Fox News host Tucker Carlson, with whom Masters is aligned on a range of issues.

The relative urgency of Masters’ appraisal

was also in tension with comments from late January, when Masters told *Axios* that “the Ukrainian border isn’t even in the top 20” of the issues “our politicians should prioritize,” which he summarized as election integrity, violent crime and failing schools, among other things.

Such remarks point more broadly to what Masters describes as a “non-interventionist” approach to foreign policy matters, which, he acknowledges, has raised some questions among Jewish leaders over his approach to Israel and American aid.

“The Jewish people I’ve spoken with, you know, in these contexts, I think they’re very curious about my candidacy,” Masters told JI. “When they hear that I’m non-interventionist, they ask questions, like, am I more the libertarian that won’t help Israel at all?”

The answer, he says, is no. “My model here is President Trump,” Masters explained. “It’s like, be wise about entangling, never-ending, dumb conflicts, but again, I think there’s a way to do that where you’re actually strong, not weak, where you’re actually assertive, not passive, and where you’re actually pro-Israel, and not just, like, pretending that Israel is just one of many countries in the world, because I think it’s different and special, and we have a special relationship.”

Masters said he visited Israel in 1998 on a week-long business trip with his father, who was then working in the internet telecommunications field. Heading home, he recalled that the airport security officials had, upon learning he had taken a bus tour through the West Bank, asked that Masters boot up his laptop and play a game of solitaire as proof that he was not smuggling a secret weapon onto the plane. The experience, he said, was instructive.

“You’re in a small country, a tough neighborhood, you know, all these other countries are not so sure about Israel, and to see a real concern for security and a respect for the process was very interesting,” he recalled. “That stuck with me.”

Like some other high-profile Republican Senate candidates who are seeking office this cycle, Masters expressed ambivalence about the feasibility and even the necessity of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. “I guess I’m skeptical

the Palestinians would actually agree to it, or as soon as you agree to it,” he said, “all of a sudden, there’s still rocket attacks.”

In theory, Masters said he was open to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel, which had long been a bipartisan tenet of American foreign policy in the Middle East until recent years when the GOP began distancing itself from the concept. “It’s more Israel’s business to sort of tell us, like, is that tolerable?” Masters said. “Will that actually work? I’m not an expert here, but I guess in principle, I’m open to it, and in practice, it’s just like, I feel like I’ve grown up watching Israel try, in good faith, to coexist, and it’s always: Nope.”

Masters said he is in favor of continued U.S. security assistance for Israel, even as he admits that he is “skeptical of aid to basically everywhere else,” including what he criticizes as “State Department NGO gifts” that sap resources back home. “Like, you know, you send \$350 million to Botswana, and it’s just some jobs program for some left-wing bureaucrat,” he said. “But I think it’s healthy to be skeptical in almost all cases, and I think it’s healthy and appropriate to help Israel.”

He expressed support for legislation that would provide Israel with \$1 billion in supplemental funding to replenish its Iron Dome missile-defense system following the May conflict with Hamas. “I think it’s really cool, actually, as a piece of technology. It sucks that you need it. But again, tough neighborhood,” he said. “I mean, the United States and Israel are not the same country, different countries, I think we can all acknowledge that.”

But he was unaware that the funding is currently being blocked in the upper chamber by Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY), a fellow libertarian-leaning Republican for whom Masters expressed admiration in conversation with JI. In a move that has angered pro-Israel advocates, Paul has insisted that the funding should be reallocated from aid for Afghanistan. “Don’t really know about that,” Masters said.

Eager to dispel any notion he would reject such aid, Masters explained his rationale for the funding in a circuitous manner that suggested he was still feeling his way through the issue. “Our countries have a relationship that is unique and

special, and so Israel is not just another country, and we might not fund a similar thing for every other country in the world, but every other country in the world is not Israel, so I support Iron Dome and would want to continue to fund it.”

Masters does not appear to have publicly addressed such issues in much depth. Last summer, *The Washington Free Beacon* wrote that Masters was “less confident in the articulation of his views on foreign policy” than his concerns around “the political issues posed by Big Tech,” after an interview in which he had “offered to follow up with detailed answers” when asked about the Iran nuclear deal.

While Masters said he views China as “the primary geopolitical foe to the U.S.,” he emphasized that Iran remains an abiding concern. In the Middle East, “I think Iran is obviously a terrorist state, basically a hostile actor, and, you know, stuff’s complicated, but to a first approximation, it’s like, no, I’m pro-Israel and anti-Iran, and they could never be allowed to have the bomb. Period.”

He was critical of the Biden administration’s renewed nuclear agreement negotiations with the Iran. “You’re not supposed to negotiate with terrorists,” he elaborated, arguing that the Biden administration has shown it “is willing to cave” on a range of issues as it seeks consensus with Iran. “You’re not supposed to deliver pallets of cash to people who hate you, who hate Israel, who want to wipe it off the face of the map.”

Erika Neuberger, a Jewish community leader in Arizona who serves as an AIPAC national board member, said she had met with Masters at the beginning of his campaign and found his knowledge somewhat lacking in the Middle East foreign policy realm, even as she believes he is sincere in his support for Israel. “My take with him is that I don’t think he had a deep understanding of the Middle East or the history of the area,” she said. “We all have to acknowledge that he’s an unknown.”

She also expressed reservations over Masters’ “interest in compromise” with Senate colleagues from both sides of the aisle. “I come from an AIPAC model, where I’m always seeking that consensus, that sweet spot, and I see him as a little idealistic,” Neuberger said. Still, she praised Masters as a

quick study who is “surrounding himself with decent policy” advisers. “I see him as a piece of clay that’s yet to be molded.”

Months into his campaign, Masters remains something of a cipher to Jewish activists in Arizona, according to Michael Beller, a co-founder of Arizona Teaching the Holocaust and a Republican. “No one knows him either inside or outside of the Jewish community,” Beller told JI in a recent email exchange, characterizing Masters as “an extremist.”

Masters told JI he is planning to expand his outreach to the Jewish community as the race heats up. “We’ll be putting together a coalition, you know, ‘Jewish Voters for Blake,’ or who knows what exactly we’ll call it,” he said. “But I have some good contacts who I want to sort of help organize this.”

Matt Brooks, the executive director of the Republican Jewish Coalition, said he has spoken with Masters and is “in the process of connecting with all the major candidates” in the race. Brooks declined to elaborate on the details of his conversation with Masters but told JI that RJC “will not be making an endorsement in the primary.”

Either way, Masters may find himself at odds with the group over what he describes as his strong support for Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA), the far-right conspiracy theorist whom the RJC has repeatedly denounced for espousing antisemitic tropes before assuming office and during her time in Congress.

“I’d love her endorsement,” Masters said of Greene. “I think she’s just really impressive. Like, I’ve gotten the opportunity to meet with her and chat with her, and I think she’s the real deal.” He criticized Twitter’s decision to ban her personal account in January over what the social media company cited as “repeated violations” of its COVID-19 misinformation policy. “I think a lot of people in the media don’t understand her broad appeal. They don’t understand that normal Americans look to her as a champion of their values and of their issues. I don’t know, man, she takes a lot of heat, but I admire her bravery, and I think she’s quite talented.”

Masters said he was unfamiliar with specific instances in which Greene has been accused of antisemitism, including likening vaccine mandates to Nazi Germany. “I’m

not familiar with the comments,” he said. “I remember there being some scandal, I forget what she said. But the thing that I remember from at least one of these things was, I think after that, she went to the Holocaust Museum and she toured it and she gave a press conference,” he said of Greene’s visit to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., last summer. “How unlike a politician this was. It wasn’t fake. She’s just like, ‘Hey, I said some stuff — and again, I don’t remember what it was — but she was like, ‘It was wrong.’”

Since that visit, Greene has continued to compare the mandates to the Holocaust, which Masters acknowledged as “insensitive” in conversation with JI. But he pushed back against accusations that Greene herself — who drew widespread criticism last month after she spoke at a white nationalist conference hosted by the Holocaust denier Nick Fuentes — holds any personal animus toward the Jewish people. “Do I think she actually is antisemitic?” he said. “No, I don’t. She’s not, like, super close to me. You know, we’ve had a couple conversations, but I was impressed with how she owned whatever that scandal was and apologized.”

In the January interview with JI, Masters drew a contrast between his approach and Greene’s. “I think my role is different,” he said. “I have my own personality and stuff. But I think it’s a mistake to discount the work that she’s doing, and I see a lot of people on the left and in the media elite do that. I don’t think they understand what she’s up to.”

Masters argues that “most” antisemitic rhetoric now comes from the far left. “To the extent some people are doing it on the right, like, obviously, they should not be doing that,” he said.

Aside from Greene, Masters expressed a kinship with Sen. Josh Hawley (R-MO), for his “bold leadership on Big Tech,” Sen. Tom Cotton (R-AR), particularly on “issues of law and order,” and freshman Rep. Madison Cawthorn (R-NC), “a rising star” and the youngest representative in the House.

In January, Cawthorn endorsed Masters’ Senate bid. “We’re no longer interested in electing candidates who say they’re Republicans and then abandon the Americans who trusted them with their vote,” the congressman said in a statement

to JI. “The Republican Party has been reborn — it’s America First from here on out. Blake Masters is that America First candidate. I’ve spent time with Blake, I know his passion for this country, and I know he will not abandon Arizonans. He will advance the MAGA agenda in Washington without hesitation. That’s why I endorsed him in this race.”

“I’m deadly serious about implementing that ‘America first’ agenda,” Masters emphasized. “I think it’s what we needed in 2016. I think it’s what we need now.”

Masters grew up in Tucson and attended Stanford Law School, where he first met Thiel when the venture capitalist spoke at one of his classes. “It really opened my eyes,” said Masters, who wrote up Thiel’s comments when he returned again for a follow-up lecture and, somewhat audaciously, pitched a book idea that would become *Zero to One*. He joined Thiel Capital to handle marketing for the book, and his purview soon expanded into general public relations and speechwriting assignments. Soon enough, Masters was president of the Thiel Foundation and became what he describes as Thiel’s “right-hand man.”

“He’s always having dinner parties with very different kinds of people,” Masters said of Thiel. “You know, it might be Noam Chomsky, it might be a Catholic bishop, it might be some random group that thinks they’ve cracked the nut on how to start some semi-autonomous country in the jungles of Honduras. Or it might be, like, Ted Cruz. I get invited to a lot of this stuff. It’s just a very active environment, and I

think that compounds over many years. I’ve just gotten to be part of so many different conversations. It’s hard to quantify, hard to almost even articulate how that shapes somebody, but I feel like I’ve sort of seen it all at the elite levels of politics and business and intellectual discourse, and so I feel pretty well-grounded in all of this stuff.”

Masters worked on the Trump presidential transition team, of which Thiel was a member, and came to believe he “understood what was happening much better than most of the congressmen and senators” he was meeting at the time. Before Trump, Masters said he had been a libertarian who supported former Rep. Ron Paul’s (R-TX) 2008 presidential bid. By varying degrees, he had always identified as something of a conservative as well, but found himself “jaded” by, among other things, what he described as the Bush administration’s “welfare-warfare” style of governance.

“I thought maybe Republicans just weren’t going to be serious if it’s just about low corporate taxes and to hell with everything else,” he said. “But then Trump came along and was willing to speak plainly and boldly and say things that people knew were true but you weren’t quite allowed to articulate. He busted up the establishment.”

After returning to Arizona, Masters considered mounting a primary challenge against McSally in 2020 but ultimately held off. “Who would have thought that we would lose two Senate seats?” he said. “Who would have thought the opportunity would even

exist? But we did. I think it’s going to take a very different kind of Republican to win them back and to reset things.”

Thiel recently stepped down from the board of Facebook’s parent company, Meta, to support Trump-leaning candidates in the midterms. Masters says they speak once a week. “Our theory of the case has just been, I have a unique set of skills and interests and just do things that no one else is doing,” he said.

Masters says he maintains no illusions about the challenge of unseating a well-funded incumbent in the general election matchup, which will likely be among the most closely watched races in the country as Republicans seek to regain their majority in the Senate. But he expects to find out, and seems largely unconcerned about the primary, despite a lack of momentum that has so far kept him from the front of the pack.

“I think I’m running against some fine guys or whatever, you know, they’re accomplished in different ways,” he told JI. “But I think they are conventional politicians and candidates that you’ve seen before.”

He said he would happily accept an endorsement from Trump, who attended a fundraiser for Masters last November in Palm Beach. But while Masters notes that he and the former president have had “good conversations,” he says he has no special insight into Trump’s plans for the race.

“I think he likes me,” Masters ventured. “I think he can tell that I’m not bullshitting.” ♦

MARCH 4, 2022

## The ‘many worlds’ of Huma Abedin

*Abedin joins JI’s ‘Limited Liability Podcast’*

By JI Staff

Growing up in Saudi Arabia was “one of the greatest gifts” given to Huma Abedin by her parents, she said in the newest episode of *Jewish Insider’s* “Limited Liability Podcast.” The longtime aide to former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recalled her early upbringing in the Gulf nation in

conversation with co-hosts Richard Goldberg and Jarrod Bernstein. Abedin, who was born in Michigan, moved to Saudi Arabia as a toddler in 1977 on her parents’ one-year sabbatical (they were both academics), which they kept extending — her mother still lives in the Gulf nation. “I loved growing up there.”

she said.

“Everybody was an expatriate. I mean, it was sort of flush with oil money. All these institutions were brand new, and they were basically importing foreign talent,” Abedin recalled of the country in 1977. “It was a few years after [the] very popular, moderate King Faisal was murdered by his nephew.

So it was rather a tumultuous time in the Middle East. A lot was happening. Israel and Egypt just negotiated a peace deal.... And the siege of Mecca took place while we were living there. So a lot was happening.”

Abedin said she didn’t mind living in the conservative Saudi society, given her frequent opportunities to visit Europe and the United States. “If that was the only life I had known, it would have been one thing. But I just knew that it was a plane ride away, that freedom, that ability to go anywhere and do anything.”

While she said the killing of columnist Jamal Khashoggi on the order of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman made her “sick to my stomach,” Abedin spoke positively of the reforms enacted under the current Saudi regime. “Every year that I’ve gone back since, what has surprised me is how, yes, things that my friends and family were not able to do, they can now. I go to Saudi Arabia, my sister-in-law now drives me around. There are movie theaters; there were no movie theaters growing up,”

Abedin said. “It’s just a different culture. It’s on a different timeline. But certainly I see things now that were unheard of when I was growing up.”

Abedin, who began her career working in the Clinton White House for the then-first lady, recalled an assignment in 1998 to prepare for the president’s upcoming trip to Israel. “That trip changed my life,” Abedin said, describing, among other experiences, her visit to Masada and her surprised discovery of a Shabbat elevator. At the end of the trip, a member of the Israeli Foreign Ministry told Abedin that, despite the presence of Jewish staffers on the delegation, “we like you because you’re the most like us.”

Though her role as a Clinton had largely placed her behind the scenes, Abedin first garnered significant press coverage when then-Rep. Michele Bachmann (R-MN) questioned her allegiance to the United States, falsely asserting a connection between Abedin’s family and the Muslim Brotherhood.

“It was fake news based on a fake video,” Abedin explained, but the allegation was not without a negative impact. “We went on an official State Department trip and a member of the Coptic Christian community sat across from Hillary and said, ‘We’re not sure we can trust you because of your aide, who is whispering all kinds of things in your ear,’” Abedin recalled.

“What Michele Bachmann did — and the five Republican members of Congress who joined her — was essentially question my patriotism and essentially suggested that I, and not just me, it was other high-ranking Muslims serving in government, that we essentially were not loyal to this government, and that we should be investigated,” Abedin continued.

“All I can do is try as best as I can to just serve my country and to do what I think is right. And I don’t know how to undo all the untruths, but I refute every single accusation.” ♦

MARCH 4, 2022

## How Call Your Mother helped end DC’s ‘bagel desert’

*Founder Andrew Dana on the growing bagel chain’s wacky sandwiches and ‘Boca meets Brooklyn’ vibe*

By Gabby Deutch

At Washington, D.C.’s Call Your Mother Deli, the bagel sandwiches are named after retirement communities in South Florida. But Call Your Mother is not your *zayde*’s deli.

Take the King’s Point sandwich, which is named for an iconic retirement community near Fort Lauderdale but contains fillings that would likely shock many King’s Point residents: nacho jalapeño cream cheese, bacon and crispy shallots on a cheddar bagel. At each of the local chain’s six locations — a major expansion from the lone shop it had at the start of the pandemic — visitors are greeted with a bright pink-and-teal color scheme, which founder Andrew Dana

describes as “Boca meets Brooklyn.”

“We’ve had some people come in expecting chopped liver and a lettuce wrap, and that’s not really what we’re doing,” Dana told *Jewish Insider* in an interview at Call Your Mother’s newest location in Yours Truly DC, a hotel in the District’s Foggy Bottom neighborhood. A seventh location will open this spring in Logan Circle, joining spots in Capitol Hill, Georgetown, the original in Park View and two in Bethesda.

The chain, which has won accolades from food publications and chefs around the country, got the ultimate seal of approval for Beltway types last year: President Joe Biden visited the Georgetown location for a sesame bagel with cream cheese just

days after his inauguration, the first, and one of the only, Washington restaurants he visited since becoming president. Jeff Zients, the White House COVID-19 response coordinator, was an original investor in and co-owner of Call Your Mother, but Dana said he divested from the company when he joined the Biden administration.

Before Call Your Mother existed, Washingtonians had a habit of kvetching about the lack of good bagels in the nation’s capital. When the restaurant opened its first location in the Park View neighborhood in 2018, it became something of a sensation. Lines snaked around the block every weekend morning, all year long.

“We’re sort of always keeping our



ear to the streets and looking for what neighborhoods are 'bagel deserts' and where can we go next," said Dana, 35, who grew up near Park View in Mt. Pleasant. The original location is seven blocks from his childhood home, where his parents still live. He calls his mother almost daily, and he often leaves his dog with her as he runs between the restaurants each day.

"I wanted the name to be something just fun and playful, and so I was sitting around the table with a bunch of my friends, who were saying, like, 'What's something funny your Jewish grandmother would have yelled at you?'" Dana recalled of the process of naming the company. "Somebody said, like, 'You should eat something.' And then my other friend yelled, 'Call your mother,' and I just said, 'Holy s\*\*\*.' It was just, like, the aha moment."

Dana's business partner and then-girlfriend (and now-wife) Daniela Moreira, who is not Jewish, instantly liked the name, too. "It spans other cultures. Dani is from Argentina. And she's like, 'Oh my God, my mom will love this too,'" Dana noted.

Dana and Moreira, 31, met at an early iteration of Dana's first culinary venture — Timber Pizza, another D.C. hotspot. Timber began as a mobile wood-fired pizza oven, and the pair met when both were purchasing eggs at a farmers market where the pizza truck was set up. Timber's brick-and-mortar restaurant is located on the same street as Call Your Mother in Park View.

Baking was not a big part of Dana's childhood, but bagels were. Every weekend, his dad picked up an assortment from a now-closed shop in Cleveland Park. "He would toast bagels on the weekends, and that was about it" for his cooking abilities, said Dana. "My dad is a lawyer, like a lot of dads in D.C. But growing up, he used to always say to me, 'Oh, I should have opened a Jewish deli.'"

Like Call Your Mother, Timber has won plenty of praise in the culinary world, including a spot on Bon Appetit's 50 best new restaurants list in the U.S. in 2017. That recognition comes despite the fact that Dana has no formal baking experience, aside from some bread experiments in college. He has an MBA and spent his years at an advertising technology startup co-opting his dad's mantra — "I should have opened a pizza restaurant," he would say, rather than

his dad's dream of opening a bagel shop.

"When it was good, it was really good," Dana said of Timber's food before Moreira, who was trained at the Culinary Institute of America, joined the team. But, he added, "there were days where we forgot to put the yeast in the dough, or days [where] we put too much yeast in the dough. So there were some consistency issues."

Amid that early buzz about Timber Pizza, Dana and Moreira began looking for another opportunity, although they are still involved at Timber. "After the dust settled, we were ready for the next challenge. Part of it is, we have a deep love for carbohydrates," Dana explained. "My dad, his dream was in my ear. I have a deep, deep love for bagels. I had a bagel almost every day when I was in grad school. I lost 10 pounds when I moved back here just breaking that habit."

Moreira had never had a bagel before, which gave her a blank slate that allowed the pair to begin concocting unique, memorable sandwiches. Yes, patrons can order an everything bagel with all the trappings of Manhattan — cream cheese, lox, capers, tomatoes, cucumbers, red onions — but the menu at this self-described "Jew-ish" deli has much more than that. (This reporter's favorites are the Horizon, with smashed avocado, Fritos, red onion and jalapeños on an everything bagel; and the Gleneagle, with candied salmon cream cheese, cucumbers, crispy shallots and greens on a Za'atar bagel.)

"My true Jewish deli experience was rooted in me visiting my grandparents in Delray and Boca growing up," said Dana of his Jewish grandparents who lived in a community called Gleneagles.

"Gleneagles was, like, the most fun place in the world to visit when you're growing up. There's tennis and golf and buffets and all this stuff. So it was just, like, the memories of that. It's the most fun," Dana explained. "From the get-go, I knew I wanted this brand to be fun and not too serious."

That whimsical approach to Jewish cuisine is not apparent only in the bagels. The deli, which changes its menu frequently and seasonally, used to sell black and white alfajores, combining the Jewish deli staple with a sandwich cookie popular in Argentina. Last year on Passover, Call Your Mother, which is not kosher, offered brisket

pastrami tacos, and it is currently selling dulce de leche hamantaschen for Purim.

Some of those ideas come from Moreira, who is new to Jewish cuisine, but they are also inspired by Dana's own Jew-ish upbringing. His mother is Presbyterian, and while he was raised more in line with his father's faith, he learned from both.

"I would go from having a tongue sandwich on rye with my grandfather to a Honey Baked Ham with my other grandparents," Dana said. "I never felt a connection to my Presbyterian roots. But I certainly grew up in this blended household." High Holidays always involved meals at the home of his next-door neighbor, a "huge hippy" who always served meat, bean and cheese enchiladas on Rosh Hashanah.

One major reason for Call Your Mother's eclectic menu is a simple business calculation (though Dana, who largely works off feel and instinct rather than market research, probably would not use this term): competitive advantage.

"We were like, 'Let's not do super classic stuff,' because even if we make the best matzah ball soup, everybody will always say, 'Oh, my grandmother's was better,' or something like that," explained Dana.

But comfort food is definitely a motivation for Call Your Mother. That specialty has helped the restaurant throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been a boon for the growing chain. "All of our locations, for the most part, are in residential areas, and people were home," said Dana. "It's comfort food that people get and know, and it's perfect for takeout."

The seventh location in Logan Circle will open this spring, depending on permitting, said Dana. And more could be on the way.

"Wherever people need bagels," Dana added, "we'll bring them bagels." ♦

# Young leaders' summit builds on seeds of Israeli-Moroccan normalization

*Sixty young Israelis and Moroccans worked together in Marrakesh last week to build sustainable and cultural bridges between their countries*

By Ruth Marks Eglash

In a simply decorated classroom on the far side of a dusty schoolyard deep inside Marrakesh's bustling Medina, or old town, about a dozen Deaf schoolchildren watched with amusement last week as a small group of well-educated — and usually articulate — young hearing Israelis and Moroccans attempted to communicate with them.

Using very basic sign language, or at least those signs shared by the Hebrew and Moroccan versions of the visual-manual modality language, the children seemed not to know or care that they were a part of something very remarkable, even historic.

As the governments of Israel and Morocco work to normalize relations on a diplomatic level following a December 2020 agreement to establish full and open ties, grassroots movements and civil society organizations are working to build and strengthen the connection between the two countries, already deeply linked via long-standing cultural roots.

The group visiting the École de la Princesse Lalla Amina school and the class for the non-hearing, which is operated by an independent local charity, were participants in the Leaders of Tomorrow Summit and one of four teams competing in a low-tech hackathon challenge to create sustainable and cultural people-to-people projects that aim to build bridges between their countries.

"Our main goal is to leave no one behind," Oumaima Mhijir, 29, a participant from Morocco, later told hackathon judges in a five-minute pitch about Project Ismaani (translated from Moroccan as "listen to me"). "We want to create a fellowship for good that aims to enhance cultural understanding between our two people."

Elad Kakon, 36, an Israeli on the same

team, told *Jewish Insider* that the team's decision to focus on the non-hearing community came about after Mhijir, who helped established, through a local nonprofit, Marrakesh's Sign Language Café, appealed to the Israeli participants for assistance with the charity that runs the school for the Deaf. When Kakon revealed to the group that his Moroccan-born father, who grew up in Casablanca, was also non-hearing, the group hit on the idea of building a bridge between the two tiny and often sidelined communities.

"It's a subject that's very close to my heart," said Kakon, who patched in his father from Israel via FaceTime so he could converse with the schoolchildren in Moroccan sign language. "I think there's a lot Israel's non-hearing community can contribute to the community in Morocco," he added after the visit to the school.

Both Kakon and Mhijir described to *JI* that they decided to participate in the four-day conference in Marrakesh because they wanted to learn more about the other country and connect with real people.

"It's amazing what is happening here, and I think we've formed some true friendships," Kakon, who lives near Ashdod and runs educational projects in Israeli schools, said of his encounters at the conference.

Mhijir, director of development for an NGO that works with children at risk, was pulled into the initiative by a colleague who volunteers with the Mimouna Association, a cultural non-profit created by young Muslim students to promote and preserve Jewish heritage in Morocco.

"I don't know much about Jewish culture or Judaism as a religion, and I know even less about the Israeli people," she told *JI*. "But I was aware of the Moroccan-Jewish relationship, I knew that Jews and Muslims

were once neighbors here, that they lived together in many Moroccan cities, and I also always knew that there were neighborhoods dedicated to the Jews."

She said she was also cognizant of negative perceptions in Morocco of Jews and particularly of Israel because of its conflict with the Palestinians but maintained that "no religion, no human being, no one from any culture should be treated or perceived that way."

Organized by the Tel Aviv-based NGO ISRAEL-is, which educates and trains young Israelis to conduct meaningful encounters with their international peers, in collaboration with Mimouna Association, the summit brought together some 60 highly educated young Israelis and Moroccans, a mix of students and professionals.

The Israeli group was comprised of individuals selected by the Edmond de Rothschild Foundation, Kulna, an NGO that promotes Moroccan Jewish heritage and culture in Israel, and some independent participants, while the 30 Moroccan participants were mostly volunteers involved with Mimouna's activities.

Mimouna's president, El Mehdi Boudra, who established the organization in 2007, said there were some negative views of Jews, and of Israel, in Morocco but the normalization agreement, which is linked to the broader Abraham Accords with an additional three Arab countries, has served to bolster Mimouna's profile and has made working on Jewish-related projects in the country much easier.

"What we are doing in Morocco is not about the Abraham Accords, but it has definitely facilitated things for us," he said, adding, "There are one million Jews of Moroccan descent in Israel and around the world and they are our brothers."

“Even though they have been separated from us for many years, they have kept their Moroccan-ness, people here know that, and we are really proud of Moroccan Israelis,” Boura continued. “This is what makes the connection between us and Israel very special.”

Boura said he was aware of some negative views of Jews and of Israel in Morocco but, he added, “It’s all about education, and many people here never had the chance to meet Jews. We just need to show them that it’s OK.”

And, whenever people challenge him about his work with the Jewish community, Boura told JI that he sends them to talk with their grandparents – “99 percent of the time they come back to me and have changed their perception about Jews,” he said.

Of the meet-up with Israelis last week, Boura said the collaboration with ISRAEL-is was so important.

“It was the first time that young people from Morocco and young people from Israel are coming together on the civil society level,” he said. “We have seen official agreements being signed, which is really great, but in the long run, for sustainability, it is the relation between people that will make this work.”

Eyal Biram, co-founder and CEO of ISRAEL-is, told JI that he created the Leaders of Tomorrow Summit following the Abraham Accords’ signing to harness the new relationships that were forming.

“After 25 years where there wasn’t any kind of peace agreement between Israel and Arab countries, we realized that we needed to find a way to celebrate this historic achievement, but we had zero connections on the other side,” Biram, 30, said, describing how his team set to work sending messages on social media to influencers in the UAE.

“Two days later, we held a Zoom meeting,” he continued. “We understood then that something really special was happening, that there was an Arab country opening its heart to peace and the people there were looking to connect with young people in Israel.”

Since then, ISRAEL-is has forged partnerships with groups of young Bahrainis and Emirates – two of the other Arab countries that recently normalized ties with Israel – and now Moroccans.

“I really hope that we can build similar platforms, not only in Morocco, the Emirates and Bahrain, but also one day with Saudi Arabia and other places in the Middle East,” said Biram, who founded ISRAEL-is in 2017 to train a new generation of informal ambassadors for Israel. “In order to make real peace, you need real action.”

For most of the conference participants, it was their first time meeting someone from the other country, and the discussions were fun but intense, focusing on the place of the Jewish community in Moroccan history, religious and cultural similarities and differences, as well as some politics.

Run mostly in English, with a smattering of Hebrew, Arabic and French, the central activity was developing the ideas from the hackathon, which will be presented to Israeli President Isaac Herzog in May when the Moroccan delegation visits Israel. Projects focused on reciprocal tourism, arts and culture, as well as Project Ismaani for the non-hearing communities, which turned out to be the judge’s favorite.

At the school for the Deaf, where the mixed tongues of English, French, Hebrew, Moroccan, Arabic were inconsequential, volunteer teacher Hafsa Ait Sidi also made clear that the religious and national differences made little difference too.

“When the non-hearing community in one country gets to meet non-hearing people from another country, we do not care about politics or religion, we care about human beings and about the interactions,” she told the hackathon team.

She said she would be delighted to participate in their project and was looking forward to connecting with Deaf and hard-of-hearing Israelis. ♦

*This story is part of a series on the Israel-Moroccan relationship developing following the signing of the normalization agreement in December 2020. Eglash was a guest of the ISRAEL-is at the Leaders of Tomorrow Summit in Marrakesh.*

MARCH 7, 2022

## New Bowman challenger says congressman is a no-show in the district

*Michael Gerald, a pastor and corrections official, enters Democratic primary in NY House race, painting the incumbent as out of touch and too ideological*

By Matthew Kassel

Rep. Jamaal Bowman (D-NY) drew a third Democratic primary challenger last week when Michael Gerald, a senior pastor at Shiloh Church in Tuckahoe and a deputy commissioner at the Westchester County Department of Correction,

officially entered the increasingly crowded race to represent New York’s 16th Congressional District.

In his first interview as a candidate, Gerald said he is running largely because he believes that Bowman, a freshman representative who is among the most high-

profile progressive lawmakers in the House, has been absent from the district during his first term.

“Rather than the congressman focusing his attention on solving the issues of our district, he would rather turn his attention to making a national name for himself,” Gerald,

54, said in a phone conversation with *Jewish Insider* on Friday. “He’s not getting anything done for us.”

Echoing criticism voiced by the two other challengers in the race, Gerald suggested that Bowman’s policy views — including on infrastructure spending, police funding and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict — have been unproductive and out of touch with voters’ priorities.

The argument may resonate somewhat as Bowman seeks reelection in a redrawn district that now includes a sizable new portion of traditionally moderate voters further north in Westchester and Putnam County.

And some experts have speculated that Gerald, a former law enforcement official who identifies as a moderate and, like Bowman, is Black, could become viable if he proves capable of shoring up voter support — and campaign contributions — in the coming weeks.

In conversation with *JJ*, Gerald took particular issue with Bowman’s support for defunding the police as well as his “present” vote last May on a Capitol Police funding bill. “That’s a clever way of skirting your responsibility,” Gerald said of the vote. “But it’s also very telling that he really doesn’t give a darn about the police.”

“The fact of the matter is that we should never abandon our men and women in law enforcement,” said Gerald, who worked as a New Jersey state trooper and as a county undersheriff before he became a full-time pastor in 2007. “I really take issue with folks who indiscriminately say we ought to defund the police.”

Gerald, who opposes such measures, acknowledges that “many police officers have no experience with the population they are policing,” and he draws on his work in the Westchester County Department of Correction as a possible model for reform. If elected, he says he would advocate for police training to include a portion of time “spent in jails,” where he says officers must “use certain tools of de-escalation” in order to “understand how to deal with a particular population.”

In jail, “you have to be good with your reasoning, your verbal commands and all of that,” he explained. “Correction officers just don’t have weapons, so I think that

that would be one of the things that I would introduce as a national standard.”

More broadly, Gerald argues that Bowman’s rhetoric has created unnecessary divisions within the Democratic Party over a policy that he views as ill-defined. “I think that we need to calibrate our language just a little bit and use statements that are more beneficial to what you’re trying to articulate,” he said. “If you really mean that the police need more training or the police need more sensitivity around certain issues in groups, then let’s say that.”

Bowman’s campaign did not respond to a request for comment.

Gerald also criticized Bowman’s decision to vote against the \$1 trillion infrastructure package, which passed the House by an overwhelming margin last November. Bowman, 45, was among a handful of left-leaning “Squad” members who opposed the funding at the time of the vote, arguing that the legislation was inseparable from a broader social safety net and climate bill that remains stalled in the Senate.

For his part, Gerald, who said he would have voted in favor of the infrastructure bill, took issue with Bowman’s position. “All of these ideological wars seem to be sabotaging our efforts at governing,” said Gerald. “I think his inexperience as a politician is coming through.”

“The point is that when you’re elected to Congress, you’re elected to represent the 16th,” he told *JJ*. “We’ve got a congressman who seems to be more concerned about his next interview on CNN.”

Such allegations seem designed to flip the script on a narrative that Bowman successfully used to his advantage in his 2020 primary upset over former longtime Rep. Eliot Engel (D-NY), who had been accused of ignoring the needs of his constituents at the beginning of the pandemic.

“The same thing he accused Eliot of, he’s now doing,” Gerald said of Bowman. “He’s not really bringing home money to this district.”

Citing local concerns such as a crumbling sewer system in Mount Vernon and affordable housing woes in White Plains, the reverend expressed frustration over a list of problems that he says have gone unaddressed throughout Bowman’s brief

tenure in Congress.

“He claims to have gotten stuff done for flood victims in Tuckahoe,” Gerald said of his hometown in southern Westchester, where he has served as a minister for 10 years. “But really, man, nothing has gotten done, not much anyway, not much other than what normally would have been done.”

Gerald accused Bowman of instead proposing “legislation that doesn’t have any chance of making it to the floor,” including a \$1.4 trillion education package, billed as a “Green New Deal for Public Schools,” the former Bronx principal introduced to the House last summer.

The pastor singled out Bowman’s recent announcement that he would pull his support for and vote against bipartisan legislation aimed at strengthening and expanding the Abraham Accords — which established diplomatic ties between Israel and a number of Arab nations — as similarly ineffective if also equally ill-advised.

“I think that’s foolish,” Gerald said of Bowman’s reversal on the Israel Relations Normalization Act, which has 328 House cosponsors. “He said that it somehow further impacted the Palestinian people. I think an agreement that would go on record and have all of these countries participating demonstrates that we can, despite our differences, work together, and become much more civilized in both our politics and our policy. I think it was tragic.”

Gerald characterized the about-face, which angered Jewish constituents in his district, who make up a key constituency, as further proof that Bowman “is fighting an ideological war.”

“He’s pretty much saying ‘I don’t give a F about what you think’ to people who are constituents,” Gerald alleged, “and I think that’s disrespectful. But it also just shows you the brazenness of his group of congresspeople.”

The longtime minister described himself as a strong supporter of Israel. “Part of my appreciation for Israel has to do with my faith,” said Gerald, who visited the Jewish state during his time as a student at the Princeton Theological Seminary in the late ’90s. “I’m a follower of a Jewish young man whose name was Jesus.”

“I admire the fact that Israel, as a young nation-state, is progressing in so many



different ways, technologically and even militarily,” Gerald added, noting that his experience as a state trooper had deepened his “appreciation” for the U.S.-Israel relationship. “We shared intelligence, and that’s really why and how I’ve become so acquainted with Israel.”

Gerald is in favor of continuing U.S. security assistance for Israel and supports supplemental funding for Israel’s Iron Dome missile-defense system.

“I would keep the funding levels where they are, and if need be, increase them,” he said. “I think Israel is one of the most important allies that we have in the Middle East because the information gathering that we have and the intelligence that we share is crucial to maintaining not only peace for America but world peace. I think there’s a shared and collective destiny that we may realize with our Jewish brothers and sisters.”

Gerald is opposed to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement targeting Israel, which he believes can be antisemitic. Bowman also rejects the movement and voted for Iron Dome funding last September in a contentious House vote.

But Gerald argues that the congressman’s affiliation with the Democratic Socialists of America, which supports BDS — and recently voiced support for withdrawing from NATO amid escalating violence between Ukraine and Russia — has put Bowman in a somewhat untenable position, even as the DSA announced in December that it would not endorse him because of disagreements over his approach to Israel. “This is the kind of stuff that’s just mind-boggling,” Gerald said. “I just think that he’s the wrong person for the district.”

“If you really understand politics, if you want something, you have to learn how to give, but you’ve got to work together with other people, and to just be so dogmatic about your resistance,” Gerald said. “That’s not good for New York, that’s not good for the 16th, that’s not good for anything.”

Gerald grew up in Trenton, N.J., and served as a state trooper between 1987 and 2001. After a back injury, he was appointed as an undersheriff in Mercer County, a position he held for five years before heading south, where he worked as a senior pastor at Hill Chapel Baptist Church in Athens, Ga., until 2012.

Gerald filed with the Federal Election Commission last week and said he is currently in the process of gathering signatures so his name will appear on the ballot in the June primary.

In addition to Gerald, the field includes Vedat Gashi, a Westchester County legislator in Yorktown, and Manuel Casanova, a former political strategist and businessman in New Rochelle. Other potential candidates have been rumored to be mulling bids as well.

But the reverend’s candidacy in particular seems to have raised Bowman’s receptors. On Friday afternoon, Gerald said he met with Bowman in the district at the congressman’s request.

“He did most of the talking,” Gerald said of their 40-minute conversation, which he characterized as cordial. “He told me about his platform, his agenda, his passion about working for those marginalized folks on the periphery.”

But the first-time candidate said he left the conversation convinced he had made the right choice by entering the race.

“I know exactly what marginalization looks like, I know exactly what struggle looks like, I know exactly what hard times reflect,” Gerald told JL. “I know those things. I’ve been there, I’ve done it, and I still maintain that there is a way in which you preserve your character and you move forward together, because we ain’t going nowhere if we continue to be extreme in our thoughts and our positions and our policies and our political practices.” ♦