

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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APRIL 11, 2022

This year in Orlando

For one week a year, the theme park capital of America becomes the country's Passover hotspot

By Gabby Deutch

Janet Zuckerman will not be spending Passover at home, but she has already thoroughly cleaned and *kashered* her kitchen, and done her cooking for the weeklong holiday.

"I am cooking all the mains, and I'm gonna vacuum-seal and freeze them," said Zuckerman, who later this week will drive with her husband from their home in Potomac, Md., to Orlando, Fla., where they will celebrate Passover with their children and grandchildren. They will pack up their car with enough frozen, home-cooked food to feed 13 people at two Seders and during several days of festive lunches.

Zuckerman has no relatives in Orlando or any particular connection to the city. But this year, she will join tens of thousands of Orthodox Jews making the pilgrimage to Central Florida for Passover, which begins Friday at sundown.

"It's become a real destination," said Menachem Lubinsky, who operates a website called *Kosher Today* that reports on kosher food around the U.S. He estimates that some 55,000 Orthodox Jews will visit Orlando during Passover this year, which is more than Orlando's year-round Jewish population of 51,000. (Messages circulating in WhatsApp groups for people going to

Orlando have estimated the numbers will be even higher, somewhere between 60,000 and 80,000 people.)

In recent years, Orlando's popularity as a Passover destination has exploded, even as there have been a number of highly publicized incidents of scams and double-bookings. Some families with young children or grandchildren will visit Disney World over the holiday, but the theme parks alone do not explain the massive growth of the city's Passover scene. Orlando does not have a large Orthodox community; most of the people who go will form pop-up communities of their own, with makeshift minyans meeting in people's rental homes.

"Because these communities are all these residential areas, it's almost become mini Jewish towns, but only for a short period of time," said Dani Klein, a marketing professional who runs the website *Yeah That's Kosher*.

Unlike more established "Passover programs," which are generally all-inclusive affairs at resorts, Orlando is more of a do-it-yourself experience. Central Florida is less built up and thus less expensive than cities further south like Boca Raton and Miami, so visitors can rent large homes ("villas," as renters call them) for their entire extended family — villas with up to a dozen bedrooms,

game rooms, swimming pools and other warm-weather amenities like grills and hot tubs. But that doesn't mean Passover in Orlando is cheap.

"We've done a couple of programs before, but I had never seen anything like this in my life. It is such a racket," said Zuckerman. She's in a WhatsApp group with several hundred other people who are heading to Orlando for Passover, and the group is bombarded with ads for different culinary options, such as caterers bringing food down from New York or personal chefs for hire.

Travel agents with names like "Vacation Shadchan" — *shadchan* is Yiddish for matchmaker — help families find houses for the holiday, which often amounts to nine or even 10 days of lodging, due to the lead time for prepping food and making sure the home is kosher.

Orlando's Orthodox infrastructure pales in comparison to the places where most Passover attendees live year round. One message circulating in Orlando WhatsApp groups informed women of nearby mikvehs, or ritual baths; the closest ones are 40 minutes to an hour from the neighborhoods popular with Passover guests.

"It's a very small mikvah that gets swamped on Pesach," one woman said of a Maitland, Fla.-based mikveh.

“Appointments went till around 2 in the morning” last year, she wrote, so women should call in advance to schedule.

Local Jewish institutions in Orlando help out where they can. Orlando Torah Academy, a local Orthodox day school, is offering kashering as a school fundraiser: For a minimum of \$800, someone will come to inspect and deep-clean your refrigerator, stovetops and ovens, according to a message posted on WhatsApp on Sunday.

The origin of the Passover-in-Orlando phenomenon is grassroots and relatively modest: Before it became the scene that it is now, rentals were cheap. Finding a large home in sprawling Central Florida during a non-spring break week, when Jewish visitors did not have to compete with families flocking to Disney World, was easy. Over the last two years, during the COVID-19 pandemic, private rental homes presented an appealing option to people who wanted to get away during the holiday without being around strangers.

But as Orlando has become more of a destination during Passover, prices have risen, leading to frustration and, at times, chaos. Last year, hundreds of people showed up to rental homes to find that they had been double-booked, leaving many without a place to spend the holiday. Other guests were evicted from some villas in 2019 after the villas’ owner failed to pay all necessary operating expenses.

Owners or brokers would rent out the homes “let’s say six months in advance, because they could. And then as it got closer to the holiday, they recognized that they could probably make a lot more money,” said Klein. The brokers would then cancel the original reservation and re-list the home at a much higher price, realizing they could “make 50% or 100% more than they were making on the previous reservation.”

It wasn’t clear who was responsible for the mix-ups — the homeowners or rental agents — and whether renters had simply not seen cancellation notices or if there really was a scam afoot. But given the number of people expected in Orlando this year, last year’s mayhem clearly did not have a lasting impact.

Steve Cohn, a retiree who lives in Delray Beach, has been going to Orlando for years, rather than having his children and

grandchildren come to his home in Palm Beach County.

“We have a big Jewish population down here and the Orthodox [community] — it’s pretty good,” Cohn said of the Jewish community in Palm Beach County. “But it’s good in Orlando. Let’s go there instead. They have a lot more to do with children up there. Remember, these Orthodox families have a lot of little kids.”

Cohn’s son-in-law is a kosher caterer on Long Island, and he cooks the family’s Passover meals ahead of time and transports them with him. He “puts that on the truck with the dishes and the silverware and the glasses, and the wine and everything,” said Cohn.

For those who are not blessed with a caterer in the family, or those who do not want to transport crates of food on long car rides, many Jewish caterers and kosher markets transport their food to Orlando. The food comes south from the New York tri-state area and north from Boca Raton and Miami. People order in advance and choose a pick-up time, saving themselves from the hectic, crowded kosher supermarkets in the days before the holiday.

“It becomes, like, this really easy place to go, almost easier than Miami or Boca in some ways, because they have these huge delivery services,” said Danielle Wild, who lives in Cleveland and will be at an Orlando hotel during Passover. “If you were going to go to Boca, you’d have to go to the Grove and Aroma” — the two main kosher supermarkets in Boca Raton — “and make your order. Even if you place your order in advance, you’ve got to go pick it up with the hordes of people.”

The Rebbe’s Choice, a direct-to-consumer kosher herring company based in Queens, is arranging a pick-up spot in Orlando this year for the first time.

“We shipped many orders down there last year, and because of that volume, we decided it would be worthwhile for our customers to put together a pallet of goods that would be going down to Orlando, and have a central pickup point,” said Naftali Engel, who founded the company eight years ago while studying at a yeshiva in Israel.

Engel, who will be spending the holiday at home in New York, pointed out the irony

of going away for the holiday but still having to plan and cook for several festive meals. “It is funny to see that it’s become so popular because there is a level of hard work that still needs to be put in,” he said. “But I think people enjoy it because it’s a change of scenery and there’s a lot more space than you would have in New York,” not to mention the weather — it was 50 degrees and raining in New York that day, he pointed out. ♦

Doug Emhoff's Passover prep

The Second Gentleman made matzah, discussed Torah and spoke about his own Passover experiences at a pre-Passover visit to a Jewish day school in Washington, D.C.

By Gabby Deutch

It was an hour before school let out for spring break, and the students at Milton Gottesman Jewish Day School in Washington, D.C., had that contagious last-day-of-school energy. Passover celebrations were taking place throughout the large building in Northwest Washington, and a special guest would soon be joining some of them.

Students erupted in cheers when Deborah Skolnick-Einhorn, Milton's head of school, introduced Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff at the Passover assembly, held Wednesday afternoon. Emhoff stepped on stage after students sang a dynamic version of the Passover song "Echad Mi Yodea," or "Who Knows One," complete with hand motions.

"Passover is actually my favorite holiday," Emhoff said, earning more cheers and applause from the students, who ranged from pre-K to eighth grade. He recounted his childhood Passovers, first in Brooklyn with his grandmother and her "really dry brisket," then at his family's home in New Jersey before they moved to California. "It was just a great way to be with other people and share our shared history," said Emhoff.

As the first Jewish spouse of a president or vice president, Emhoff has leaned into his Jewish identity since he and Vice President Kamala Harris moved into the Naval Observatory last year. He hung a mezuzah on the Vice President's residence in the fall, and he and Harris participated in several Hanukkah events in December. But yesterday's festivities marked his first in-person public celebration of Passover since before the COVID-19 pandemic.

"During COVID, we had our own, like, little COVID Seder, just me and her," Emhoff said of the vice president in an interview

with *Jewish Insider* following the event. Passover is a holiday they enjoy together: "She loves tradition, and she loves history, and she just loves the celebration and the joy that it brings." (Harris does not have a favorite Passover dish, but she is "very much a good cook," Emhoff told *JI*, adding, "she just makes up what she believes is traditional Jewish food, and she does a great job at it.")

Emhoff presided over last year's White House virtual Seder, which brought together thousands of attendees. He plans to make it a tradition; another virtual Seder will take place this evening. (Emhoff said he could not yet share the details of his in-person Passover plans.)

"Still to this day, a year later, [it's] one of the most impactful things I've done, especially as it relates to the Jewish community," Emhoff said of last year's virtual ceremony. "People still just come up to me: 'Are you going to do it again this year? It was so amazing.'"

Emhoff's afternoon kicked off outside the school, where fourth-grade students were making matzah over a small grill.

"What stage are we at?" Emhoff asked, taking off his jacket on a sunny April day that reached above 80 degrees. "Nonexistent," one boy said, earning a laugh. Then the students began explaining what went into matzah — how to mix the water and flour so it did not become chametz, or the leavened bread forbidden on Passover — and showing Emhoff how to knead it.

"This is the bread of affliction," said Etan Weiss, the school's director of Jewish life. "You have to work for it." When Emhoff's matzah was finished baking, he led the students in saying the *Motzi* blessing, and deemed the matzah "awesome."

It was Emhoff's first time making

matzah — doing so is not a common Passover activity, he pointed out — but he quickly listed his favorite ways to enjoy matzah. "Horseradish guy. Gefilte fish on the side. Matzah brei," said Emhoff.

The next stop on the Milton Passover tour was the school's *beit midrash*, where Emhoff participated in a discussion with eighth-grade Talmud students. "I remember so well, going to public middle school, getting on the bus going to Hebrew school twice a week," recalled Emhoff, "and doing the things that you're also doing here."

He sat in front of the class with a seating chart, calling on each of the 15 students to speak about the *divrei* Torah they had written connecting the themes of Passover to democracy. The first pair of students spoke about the notion of asking questions as central to the Seder experience.

"We were talking about how, like, in democracy it's really important to ask questions, and each person has to ask questions, because everyone's involved in the democratic process," a student named Maya explained.

One exchange really stuck with Emhoff — so much so, he told *JI* after the discussion, that he plans to bring it up at the White House virtual Seder.

A student named Isaac explained that he and his partner researched falling asleep at the Seder table. "That doesn't seem like it has much to do with democracy," Isaac said. But he learned from Jewish teachings that if you fall asleep, you could miss your opportunity to eat from the paschal lamb, "and I think that actually has a lot to do with democracy," he explained. "Everyone's voice is heard, I think you have experience with that, but if you fall asleep, you might miss your opportunity so you have to stand up for what you think is right."

Throughout the discussion, Emhoff drew his own conclusions between the students' analyses, the Passover story and the Biden administration's political goals. He condemned the rollback of voting protections and reproductive rights in some states. "People want more rights, not less. And rights are being taken away in certain areas and that's not — it's not OK. And it's on all of us in a democracy to push back," Emhoff told the students.

The school does not get involved in political matters, and students whose parents work for officials in both political parties are represented in the student body. In late 2020, Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner moved their kids from Milton to the more religious Melvin J. Berman Hebrew Academy after a spat over the school's COVID-19 guidelines. (Their names still appear on a wall naming major donors at the school's entrance.) "We are a pluralistic day school, and because we're in Washington, D.C., you can imagine that that means all kinds of pluralism," said Ronit Greenstein, the school's director of communications.

Later, Emhoff reflected on the eighth-

grade discussion in an interview with JI. "When they said, you can't fall asleep, you can't even doze, you need to be wide awake to be a participant at the Seder table, but also as a participant in our democracy...It's just so impactful," he reflected. "And again, I'm hearing that from an eighth grader."

As Second Gentleman, Emhoff has traveled the country promoting the priorities of the Biden-Harris administration. But much of his work is not specifically focused on political goals. Food insecurity is a personal interest; he has volunteered with several food kitchens, both in the Washington area and elsewhere.

Working with children also appears to be a particular focus of the Second Gentleman's. In February, a trip to a Washington high school to learn about a Black history program went awry when a bomb threat required a quick evacuation. Last month, he visited a children's hospital to speak about youth mental health.

"I've learned so much from kids, I really have. It's just almost the unfiltered truth in a lot of ways," he told JI, "because they haven't been exposed to the real life part

yet as much, and also they've been through COVID, and they've almost suffered as much as anybody just from being inside and school and the lack of being with their friends. So it's a great, almost, focus group, to hear what's really going on and how they're feeling."

He has his own focus group of sorts in his two twentysomething children, Ella and Cole. They both appeared often at campaign events in 2020 and at last year's Inauguration, but neither has taken a public role related to the administration. Talking to them, Emhoff said, is a way to find out what they care about, but also if they and their friends are even paying attention.

"Unfortunately, with a lot of people who are in their 20s and starting their lives, sometimes they feel, 'Well, I'll focus on this when I'm older,'" Emhoff noted. "But I keep saying, No, you gotta — that's what I said to the eighth graders — you've gotta start now. Because you can't just sit there and complain about things that are happening or let them happen to you if you're not engaged and you're not involved." ♦

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In Napa Valley, a kosher wine revolution

OneHope Winery is looking to shake-up the kosher wine industry

By Sam Zieve Cohen

OneHope Winery sits on a picturesque plot of land along Northern California's Highway 128, between the Napa Valley towns of Oakville and Rutherford. Its immediate neighbors include some of the most regal of Napa Valley wine royalty, including Opus One and Robert Mondavi. Surrounded by rows of grapevines, the winery's new main building is a long, dark wood-paneled modern barn, with large windows overlooking the surrounding Mayacama Mountains. The entire property has the clean, refined look of a luxury travel or furniture brochure produced by Restoration Hardware.

But inside, a revolution has begun. More precisely, a revolution for kosher wine in the

U.S.

Two years after announcing its entry into the world of kosher wine, OneHope has become one of only a few California wineries to produce kosher wines with the release of three wines made from St. Helena Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon grapes.

Producing kosher wine presents added challenges generally avoided by wineries. From the time the grape skin splits until bottling, the winemaking can only be undertaken by Shabbat-observant Jews overseen by a rabbi or rabbi-appointed *mashgiach*. Any yeast or other additive must be kosher-certified, with even stricter regulations for kosher for Passover wine. Wineries can also employ the *mevushal* method, in which the wine is heated to at least 185 degrees fahrenheit before botting

— a process that can harm the subtleties of the finished product.

Demand for kosher wine has increased dramatically over the past two decades. Despite accounting for 40% of the world's Jewish population and the fourth largest percentage of the global wine production, few kosher wineries exist in the United States and its California wine capital. The high demand and small production has made quality kosher wine generally more expensive than its non-kosher counterparts.

OneHope Winery has built itself in the nexus between affordability and high-end quality. Founded in 2007 by Jake Kloberdanz with a direct-to-consumer model, OneHope originally focused on producing wines at what Kloberdanz calls an "approachable price-point."

The company steadily grew in popularity not only for the affordable quality of the wine, but because of its emphasis on promoting communal activities. OneHope encourages purchasing wines in groups and organizing tasting sessions among friends — a feature that saw increased popularity during the pandemic. The company's Cause Entrepreneur program also allows individuals to become sellers of the wine, with a portion donated to a cause of the seller's choice.

In the wine production, OneHope also found success in its efforts to cover the full spectrum of wine — from small production luxury wines to wines produced at scale — that can appeal to any consumer. The winery's website currently lists bottles ranging from \$25 to \$125, ranging in style from sparkling prosecco to bold California cabernet sauvignon. This approach has made OneHope one of the top 250 largest wine producers by volume.

Still, despite the diversity of styles, venturing into kosher winemaking was not the obvious choice.

Kloberdanz was convinced to enter into the kosher market by kosher wine aficionado Isaac "Yitz" Applbaum (who is also a weekly wine columnist at *Jewish Insider*).

For years, Applbaum tried to convince established Napa wineries to produce kosher wine. But top wineries tightly control the quantity of wine produced and sold per year, and were unwilling or unable to introduce a separate kosher production or reserve additional barrels for kosher use.

"I've had many frustrations," Applbaum told JI. "I would say it starts with a lack of understanding of what the process is. The perception is that it's really difficult and complicated and intrusive work in order to get this done, and, of course, that's really not true."

Given that OneHope was looking to build a new production facility on its Napa Valley property, Applbaum's pitch to Kloberdanz was simple: Include space for kosher winemaking in the construction design.

"It wasn't like something where we're up and running a certain way in the winery and then we tried to add this," Kloberdanz explained, the day after an event with JI marking the launch of the kosher wine. "It was like, 'We're opening the winery and

from day one, we're opening with this in mind' and so it made it pretty smooth from the very beginning."

From the outset, OneHope looked to innovate on the traditional model of high-end kosher winemaking. According to Applbaum, most kosher wine is custom-crush, in which a label uses an existing facility without owning a winery.

"I always believed that that was how the real growth was going to come," Applbaum said.

While custom-crush cuts overhead costs, it limits the quantity of barrels since the producer does not own the facility outright. But OneHope's existing capacity for producing wines in scale meant that it could sell more affordable kosher wine than generally available. While the OneHope kosher wines currently available retail for \$100 a bottle — towards the higher end of OneHope's price scale, future wines are expected to be offered as low as \$25 a bottle.

Above all, Applbaum and Kloberdanz want the OneHope bottles to sell and distribute alongside non-kosher wine. "Our idea was, 'Let's have kosher wines that are amongst the greatest wines in our portfolio, first of all, and regardless of whether they're kosher or not, they stand on their own,'" Kloberdanz.

"It's the perfect marriage, in my opinion, of all possible solutions," Applbaum said, adding that while wineries like Herzog and Covenant already own facilities in California, they tend to sell exclusively through kosher-only distribution lines. "I think that's where you're going to see the real growth here; Napa high-end kosher wines made on premise with a great distribution channel."

Applbaum and Kloberdanz recruited kosher wine guru Dan Levin as a *mashgiach* and consultant to work with OneHope head winemaker Mari Wells Coyle. Levin not only brought in the necessary staff to oversee the kosher wine process, he helped translate the rules.

Together, Levin and Coyle created a process for producing kosher wine that differed from its non-kosher counterparts only in its observance of kashrut.

"We've actually sourced some of the best grapes that we have access to, in fact, the best grapes from the St. Helena [American Viticultural Area]," Coyle added. "We're able

to achieve everything that we wanted in the non-mevushal process. There isn't anything process wise that diverts from what we wanted to achieve."

"It does take a lot of correspondence and work to have somebody new, like Dan, as part of your team and a very integral part of making every single part of the process happen," Coyle said of working with Levin. "That's just not a normal way of working for us, but we've been really happy to be able to work with him and he's been very flexible with his time and schedule because he's so experienced in doing this throughout Napa Valley."

"We started with such a high bar relative to where I think most people get when they try something new," Kloberdanz raved.

But Levin and Coyle are hardly resting on their laurels. The OneHope team is already working on perfecting a kosher fumé blanc — something they believe has never been done before. When released, the fumé blanc — a white wine usually aged in oak barrels and on the richer end of the sauvignon blanc scale — will introduce a distinctively Napa wine (fumé blanc was invented by Robert Mondavi, across the road from OneHope) to the kosher world.

"Anytime you have barrel fermentations you've got more added complexity. It's a white wine that you really do need to be checking on regularly, and that requires a lot of time and attention from Dan, specifically," Coyle explained. "It's gonna be a great wine. There are very few kosher whites, for whatever reason, available. And I just love the final result. It tastes delicious. It's very consistent with our fumé blanc program, which is one of our leading, iconic white wines."

"I think that it's also always fun to learn new things and we're a very entrepreneurial company by nature," Kloberdanz remarked of incorporating a new winemaking process. "Our winemaking teams learned an entirely new way of winemaking, which has been really fun for them."

By introducing additional types of wine (Coyle teased sparkling wine) to the kosher line, OneHope hopes to further standout from the bold, red wine-dominated kosher market.

The team also hopes the kosher line benefits from inclusion in OneHope's 20/20

Collective. The collective, which Kloberdanz calls “a combination of a wine club meets social club,” offers members both shipments of new and exclusive wines and access to social events at the OneHope winery.

Already the collective, pricing for which ranges from \$2,500 to \$10,000 annually, includes several hundred members and has attracted the likes of Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers, according to

the company’s website. A special kosher version of the collective, termed the “kosher collective,” has begun accepting applications.

According to Kloberdanz, the collective helps fulfill OneHope’s mission to build a community alongside the wine sales.

“[The kosher-observant community] is underserved by the Napa Valley. It’s not only people who are Orthodox or keep kosher. It’s

friends of people like that who now can buy a really nice bottle of [kosher] wine.”

Applbaum, the impetus behind the kosher line, described the impact in even more transformational terms. “I think there’ll be other people who will start to come in and do these things... based on our success and the success of many other wineries in Napa,” he mused. ♦

APRIL 13, 2022

Eliot Cohen says U.S. should reopen embassy in Kyiv

Appearing on JT’s ‘Limited Liability Podcast,’ Cohen said the U.S. was failing ‘on the symbolic side of things’

By Sam Zieve Cohen

Former Counselor to the State Department Eliot Cohen called on the Biden administration to reopen the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv, during an appearance on *Jewish Insider’s* “Limited Liability Podcast.” Cohen, dean of the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, criticized the initial decision to evacuate the embassy, arguing the U.S. was failing “on the symbolic side of things.”

“We should not have taken our embassy out of Kyiv... There would have been plenty of State Department volunteers to stick it out,” Cohen said. “We should certainly be there now. Our embassy should be there now. We should have senior officials visiting Kyiv. If [U.K. Prime Minister] Boris Johnson can go there, so can [Vice President] Kamala Harris.”

“Symbolism is important in wartime leadership,” Cohen said. “I think [the Biden administration has] been way too unwilling to consider other steps.”

“We allowed ourselves to be self-deterred, on things like supplying fixed-wing aircraft and tanks. And they were making silly distinctions between offensive and defensive weapons,” he said of the Biden administration, cautioning, “I am not sure that they have the resolve to deal with what

may be, unfortunately, the next big step: and that’s Russian use of chemical weapons.”

According to Cohen, the confirmed use of chemical weapons — reports of which the U.S. and allies are investigating — would require a greater response from the U.S. “Although I was not initially in favor of a no-fly zone, that would be the thing that, for me, would trigger it,” he said. “We just tell the Russians, ‘You’re not allowed to fly over Ukraine. And if you do, we’ll shoot you down.’”

We don’t want to be in a nuclear war with Russia. But they don’t want to be in a nuclear war with us,” Cohen continued. “A shooting war with us: They lose, because they’ve got a crummy military and we know it. And they know it. When I say ‘lose,’ I mean, they really lose.”

Cohen, who served in the State Department under President George W. Bush and later became a fervent opponent of former President Donald Trump, described the recent decade as “a period of...weak or bizarre presidential leadership.”

“Leadership, as we see in Ukraine, makes a difference,” Cohen added. “Biden actually is innately a much tougher guy than Obama was. And I think his instincts in many cases are OK. Like when he said, ‘Putin’s a war criminal.’ He shouldn’t let his staff walk him back. He is a war criminal.”

Cohen went on to criticize the Biden administration for ignoring and failing to prepare for the broader implication of the Ukraine invasion, including the aggressiveness of the Chinese and the impact on global markets.

“We have to see the problems holistically, understanding that what we do in Europe will have an effect in China,” Cohen explained.

Looking at the tepid response to the invasion by U.S. allies in the Gulf, Cohen criticized the U.S. for previously failing to keep up the alliances in the face of their own struggles. “The big mistake that we made... is the UAE, which had really been quite a reliable ally. The fundamental problem is we had allies — and Saudi Arabia is really problematic; UAE, much less so — which were directly attacked. They had missiles raining down on their territory and, basically, we did nothing. I think in the case of UAE, it took like 37 days for the CENTCOM commander to show up and say, ‘Can we help?’ They’re not going to forget that.”

Bonus: *Favorite Yiddish word or phrase?* “Megulgl zol er vern in a henglaykhter: bay tog zol er hengen un bay nakht zol er brenen.” (“You should die and be reincarnated as a chandelier to hang by day and burn by night.”) *Favorite Passover Seder tradition?*

"We read a letter that my father wrote to my mother. My dad was in the occupation army. He was a psychiatrist who shipped over just as the war was ending. He was in love with my mother... He's describing going to a Seder with displaced persons. And he's astounded by the stories he's hearing and

he says, You know, I couldn't help but think 'there but for the grace of God...' so we read that every Pesach." *Favorite Scottish song?* "Killiecrankie." *On wearing bow ties?* "Early on in my career, I was running the Air Force's study of the first Gulf War and I was wearing a necktie. And I had to shred some classified

waste. I was fitting it into the shredder, and I looked down and I realized that I was about a half an inch away from being turned into a pile of bloody mulch. And so after that, I decided on bow ties, and then afterwards, it just became kind of a gesture of defiance towards the Washington establishment." ♦

APRIL 11, 2022

John Fetterman says he'll 'lean in' on U.S.-Israel relationship as senator

The Democratic lieutenant governor of Pennsylvania emphasized that he is forging his own path in one of the most high-profile races of the midterms

By Matthew Kassel

John Fetterman, the lieutenant governor of Pennsylvania and the Democratic frontrunner in next month's high-profile Senate primary, said he was "eager to affirm" his "unwavering" commitment to bolstering ties between the United States and Israel in an interview with *Jewish Insider* on Thursday, emphasizing that he will "lean in" on such efforts if he is elected to the upper chamber this November.

"Whenever I'm in a situation to be called on to take up the cause of strengthening and enhancing the security of Israel or deepening our relationship between the United States and Israel, I'm going to lean in," Fetterman declared in his first conversation with a Jewish publication since he launched his campaign more than a year ago. "The relationship is a special one that needs to be safeguarded, protected, supported and nurtured through legislation and all available diplomatic efforts in the region."

Fetterman, 52, has established himself as an outspoken progressive voice on such domestic issues as universal healthcare, income inequality, criminal justice reform and the legalization of recreational marijuana.

But until now, the first-term lieutenant governor had not publicly clarified his views on a range of Middle East foreign policy matters, including Israel, which has become a source of intense intra-party conflict in recent election cycles as well as a litmus test

of sorts for far-left activists who have grown increasingly critical of American support for the Jewish state.

With just over a month remaining until the May 17 primary, Fetterman's long silence on such matters has fueled curiosity among Jewish leaders in the commonwealth who have wondered where, if at all, he might place himself in that debate.

"He's never come out and said that he's not a supporter of Israel, but the perception is that he aligns with the Squad more than anything else," said Democratic activist Brett Goldman, referring to the group of progressive lawmakers who are among the most outspoken Israel critics in the House. "That may not be true, but that's what the perception is."

Speaking with *JI*, however, Fetterman said he has "not encountered" such concerns during his campaign, noting that he has been "very clear about" his views on Israel in conversations with a number of advocacy groups in recent months.

"I would also respectfully say that I'm not really a progressive in that sense," he added. "Our campaign is based on core Democratic values and principles, and always has been, and there is no daylight between myself and these kinds of unwavering commitments to Israel's security."

Still, Fetterman said he was "eager to affirm" his positions on the record, lest there be any uncertainty among supporters of Israel who have similar questions. "I want

to go out of my way to make sure that it's absolutely clear," he told *JI*, "that the views that I hold in no way go along the lines of some of the more fringe or extreme wings of our party."

During the interview, Fetterman took special pains, it seemed, to do just that, at one point anticipating a question about U.S. funding for Israel before it had been posed to him. "Let me just say this, even if I'm asked or not, I was dismayed by the Iron Dome vote," Fetterman said, alluding to a small cohort of far-left House members who, last September, opposed legislation that would provide \$1 billion to replenish Israel's missile-defense system following the conflict last May with Hamas in Gaza. "I would never vote in that regard."

"Israel has the supreme right to defend itself, especially when there are thousands of rockets being indiscriminately fired at innocent civilians," he argued. "I believe that the vote was misguided, and that is something that I would never be a part of."

Fetterman said he is "equally passionate" in his opposition to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement targeting Israel. "It's just wrong," he said. "Israel is our closest ally and friend in the region, and I do not believe that is anything productive that enhances not only Israel's security but the region's security through that process."

The lieutenant governor backed legislation at the state level, signed into law six years ago by Pennsylvania's

Democratic governor, Tom Wolf, barring the commonwealth from pursuing contracts with companies that participate in boycotts of Israel.

More broadly, Fetterman said he is in favor of continued U.S. security assistance for Israel — “without *any* additional conditions,” he stressed — that is guaranteed in a 10-year memorandum of understanding between the two countries. “We have to be committed to strengthening Israel’s security and reject any attempts to delegitimize Israel’s right to exist. That’s non-negotiable,” Fetterman insisted. “We have a special relationship, we always have, and we have a shared set of democratic values that are really essential to securing a lasting peace in the region. I’m strongly, strongly supportive of that.”

Fetterman, who endorsed a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, also voiced support for efforts to expand on the Abraham Accords, a series of historic agreements, brokered by the Trump administration, establishing diplomatic relations between Israel and a number of Arab nations.

On the other hand, Fetterman criticized former President Donald Trump’s decision to abandon the Iran nuclear deal as a “mistake.” The lieutenant governor said he is aligned with the Biden administration as it seeks to negotiate a new agreement with Iran. “If I’m ever in a position to vote in that area,” Fetterman told JI, “a non-nuclear Iran is a priority for the region and, of course, for Israel’s security.”

While Fetterman said he has “always followed” developments in the Middle East, which he described as “one of the most crucial regions out there,” he confirmed that he has also sought counsel from a variety of advocacy groups, including J Street, AIPAC and Democratic Majority for Israel, to ensure he is “properly educated” on such matters.

Mark Mellman, DMFI’s president, told JI that he reached out to Fetterman’s campaign some months ago to request an Israel position paper. He was told that Fetterman was still fleshing out his views, owing to a lack of experience in the foreign policy realm as a state official. Before he became lieutenant governor, Fetterman had been focused on even more local concerns as the longtime mayor of Braddock, a post-

industrial steel town just outside Pittsburgh in western Pennsylvania.

Fetterman ran a longshot campaign for Senate in 2016 but does not appear to have publicly addressed such issues as a candidate. Philadelphia’s *Jewish Exponent* noted at the time that it had “received no response” from Fetterman after reaching out with “questions of interest to the Jewish community.” His Democratic primary opponents, for their part, both submitted statements to the newspaper in which they detailed their support for Israel.

This time around, Fetterman seems to have taken a more proactive approach. After speaking with DMFI, his campaign agreed to an initial briefing and “came with an interest in learning about the issues,” Mellman recalled. “Then they sent us a position paper, which we thought was very strong,” he added, noting that DMFI made some comments via email that Fetterman was receptive to addressing in a second draft. “He took clear positions across the board on the issues that matter,” Mellman said, citing a number of the same views that Fetterman expressed in conversation with JI.

“People identify him with the left, with the far left, even,” Mellman said of Fetterman, whose populist image has been compared to that of Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT). “I don’t think he necessarily identifies himself with the far left, but the reality is, whatever his positions may be on other issues,” Mellman told JI, when it comes to the Middle East, “he is very much a down-the-line, pro-Israel Democrat.”

DMFI’s political arm, which has butted heads with the progressive left in several elections over the past few cycles, is not planning to make an endorsement in the Pennsylvania Senate primary. “We’re fortunate to have at least two candidates in that race that are very strong supporters of the U.S.-Israel relationship,” Mellman said, including Fetterman as well as Rep. Conor Lamb (D-PA) in his assessment.

Lamb, a moderate lawmaker who includes a section on Israel on his campaign site, has built strong connections with Jewish voters since his election in 2018. But the congressman, who launched his Senate campaign last August, has struggled to keep pace with Fetterman’s robust fundraising and strong polling, even as he has recently

gone on the offensive with a series of attacks targeting his opponent.

J Street, for its part, is not making an official endorsement either, according to the group’s national political director, Laura Birnbaum. Instead, J Street has “primary approved” three Democratic candidates in the race, including Fetterman, Lamb and state Rep. Malcolm Kenyatta — all of whom are jockeying to succeed outgoing Sen. Pat Toomey (R-PA) in what is expected to be among the most competitive general election matchups of the midterms.

AIPAC declined to comment when reached by JI.

“I’m not here to contrast any views,” Fetterman said, noting that he had not “studied” his opponent’s positions on Israel. “It wouldn’t have any impact no matter what their views are because this is what I believe,” he told JI. “This is what I’ve always believed and will absolutely commit to if I’m the next senator here in Pennsylvania.”

Clocking in at 6-feet-8, with a bald head, tattooed arms and a typical uniform of cargo shorts and a Dickies work shirt, Fetterman is hard to miss at any campaign stop. But despite his imposing presence, he has drawn scrutiny for a lack of substantive public engagement since he entered the Senate race in February of 2021.

The lieutenant governor, for instance, skipped a Democratic Senate debate last month, opening himself up to a series of increasingly hostile criticism from his opponents. Fetterman, who has said he will commit to “no fewer than three network televised debates,” has also been a no-show at a number of recent candidate forums, including a January meeting with Black clergy members in Philadelphia. His absence has stirred speculation that he is avoiding potential confrontations over an incident, as mayor of Braddock, when he held an unarmed Black jogger at gunpoint while responding to what he believed to be the sound of gunfire in the neighborhood.

Fetterman, who says he was unaware of the man’s race when he first approached him, has long defended his actions. “When I ran for mayor, I made a commitment to do whatever I could to confront this gun

violence,” he said in a video released at the beginning of his campaign, “and that’s exactly what I’ve done.”

Though he has taken some time to address his views on the Middle East, Fetterman has indicated that he is finally ready to engage more deeply on such matters. On Thursday, for example, he is expected to appear alongside Lamb and Kenyatta at a virtual candidate forum hosted by the Jewish Democratic Council of America in partnership with Democratic Jewish Outreach of Pennsylvania.

But when it has come to local engagement as an elected official, some Jewish leaders in Pennsylvania argue that Fetterman’s elusiveness as a candidate is consistent with their own experiences — or lack thereof — with the lieutenant governor.

“My experience during a virtual lobby day was that he didn’t show up,” Goldman told JI. “Most of the attempts to formally engage have either been put off for some reason or really surface level.”

“If he’s going to be the U.S. senator,” said Goldman, who supports Lamb’s campaign but is open to backing Fetterman in the general election, “he’s got to have a stronger relationship with the Jewish community than he does now.”

Ari Mittleman, a Jewish activist who co-moderated the recent debate at which Fetterman was absent, echoed that view. “Now, more than ever before in my lifetime, candidates for public office need to be vocal and visible allies of our community,” he said, expressing hope that Fetterman will come through as a senator. But, he told JI, “Jewish community leaders have not seen instances yet.”

Others, however, cast their encounters with Fetterman in a more positive light. “I like him personally a lot,” said Robin Schatz, the director of government affairs at the nonpartisan Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia, noting that she has met with Fetterman on several occasions throughout his tenure as an elected official.

The first time, Schatz recalled, was a casual run-in at a Pennsylvania Society gathering in New York, when she found Fetterman, who was at that time the mayor of Braddock, somewhat awkwardly seated in the opulent lobby of the Waldorf Astoria. “He was wearing a T-shirt that had the front

of a tuxedo, which I thought was hilarious,” she said. “I sat in the lobby and talked to him for a while.”

“He’s very much his own man,” Schatz said, expressing admiration for, among other things, Fetterman’s longstanding dedication to immigration reform, a cause the lieutenant governor takes personally as the husband of a former undocumented immigrant from Brazil. “He looks like this biker or bouncer, and people are sometimes surprised by how erudite he is,” she said of the lieutenant governor, who received a master’s degree in public policy from Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government before his career in public service. “He’s very, very smart, and I think he cares passionately about community.”

Schatz had been planning to invite Fetterman on a legislative mission to Israel last year, she said, but decided against it after he declared his Senate candidacy. “I look forward to having a conversation with him if he wins,” she told JI.

Jared Solomon, a Jewish state representative in Philadelphia, said he was “heartened and encouraged” when Fetterman, nearing the end of his campaign for lieutenant governor, “dropped everything and went to grieve with families” in the immediate aftermath of the Tree of Life synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh four years ago. “Presence is really important.”

After the election, Fetterman joined a group of state lawmakers from both parties, including Solomon, on a visit to the synagogue, where a lone gunman killed 11 people and wounded six in the worst antisemitic attack in American history. “I know John made remarks that expressed his willingness to stand shoulder to shoulder with the Jewish community in Pittsburgh,” Solomon recalled, “and do whatever he could to be of assistance.”

In conversation with JI, Fetterman said the Tree of Life attack had “struck particularly close to home,” given its close proximity to Braddock, where he has lived since the early aughts. “I remember I got the call from a friend of mine who lives across the street and said there’s a shooting.”

“To actually have seen the bullet holes in the plaster and to have known victims of the shooting,” Fetterman recalled, was a stark reminder “that we can never go down this

road and we can never allow ourselves even the slightest deviation.”

“After something as horrific as that,” he said, “it’s incumbent on all of us to make sure that we are very vocal and we are bipartisan in affirming that as well.”

Fetterman said he has developed a “strong relationship” with Jeff Bartos, a real estate developer in Pennsylvania and a Republican candidate for lieutenant governor at the time of the shooting, in his efforts to “reach across the aisle.” Bartos, who is Jewish, was “the first person” Fetterman “thought of” when he learned of the attack in October 2018, as he told his opponent when he called to inform him of the shooting. Their friendship has been described as a “rare political bromance,” but neither Fetterman nor Bartos — who is now running for Senate — was willing to elaborate on the relationship.

Bartos, whose campaign did not respond to a request for comment from JI, is among more than a half-dozen GOP candidates now competing in Pennsylvania’s Senate primary, including such leading contenders as the hedge fund executive David McCormick and the TV personality Dr. Mehmet Oz, who notched a coveted endorsement from Trump on Saturday.

“This is all about winning elections in order to stop the Radical Left maniacs from destroying our Country,” the former president said in a statement.

As the primary enters its final stretch, Fetterman has faced an onslaught of denunciations from Lamb and Kenyatta, who have warned that the lieutenant governor is vulnerable to Republican attacks in the general election, not least because of the incident with the jogger nearly 10 years ago. Lamb has also called Fetterman a “flip-flopper” because he now opposes a moratorium on fracking in Pennsylvania, which has put the lieutenant governor at odds with progressives who support the Green New Deal.

Some of the criticism has backfired, though, including one recent TV ad from a pro-Lamb super PAC that was quickly removed from Philadelphia’s media market after Fetterman’s campaign claimed it had

inaccurately cast him as a “self-described Democratic socialist.”

While Fetterman unsuccessfully sought an endorsement from the Democratic Socialists of America’s Pittsburgh chapter when he ran for lieutenant governor, he said in his candidate questionnaire that he did not “consider” himself “a socialist.” Fetterman sought backing from the DSA the same year the organization had formally endorsed the BDS movement at its national convention in 2017. The Pittsburgh chapter, however, only passed a resolution affirming its support for boycotting Israel last month.

Fetterman, who has sought inroads with working-class voters in rural Pennsylvania who gravitated to Trump, argues that his “views are consistent and will remain as such.”

“We’re running the race that we’ve always run,” said the lieutenant governor, who has pulled in a formidable \$15 million in donations since he launched his campaign, including more than \$3 million in the first quarter of 2022. “We’re humbled by the support that we’ve received, we’re grounded in the belief that we’re going to run a clean, issue-oriented campaign, and we are always, *always* going to uplift the mission.”

“That mission is to flip the seat blue, and our campaign and our values are going to be reflected in how important that is,” he added. “We are going to be transparent to a fault, and what we say is what we actually believe.”

Tonya Markiewicz, who worked for Fetterman’s nonprofit, Braddock Redux, for three years beginning in 2009, said “what you see is what you get” when it comes to the lieutenant governor. “He’s always going to be John, and I think that helps people trust him, that he doesn’t have anything to hide,” she said in an interview with JI. “He’s living the life he wants to lead. He’s not trying to be someone else.”

When Fetterman officiated at her wedding, for example, “he did not dress up” for the occasion, Markiewicz recalled somewhat affectionately, “and that was OK.”

Markiewicz, who lives in Pittsburgh, said Fetterman had worn shorts and a button-down during the ceremony.

Fetterman, who once claimed he did not own “a suit or a tie,” suggested that he would prefer to continue wearing shorts in the

Senate. “If the dress code permitted them, probably, but I get the sense that I wouldn’t be able to,” he told JI. “Whether I get there, we’ll work it out. I believe in being casual but also being serious when you have to be, too, of course.”

Kristen Coopie, the director of pre-law at Duquesne University and an expert on local elections in Pennsylvania, described Fetterman as “an incredibly interesting” candidate “who prides himself on not looking or acting like a typical politician.”

If the polling is accurate, Fetterman, who has maintained a consistent lead over his opponents throughout the race, “will be the likely candidate on the Democratic ballot this fall,” Coopie told JI. “We still haven’t seen an endorsement of any candidate by the Democratic Party, so the coming weeks will be interesting in this already contentious and highly important race.”

In a statement to JI, Patrick Burgwinkle, a senior communications strategist for the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, suggested the organization is keeping its options open as it maintains “open lines of communications with all of the candidates” in the race. “We haven’t issued endorsements in any challenger races — yet — but we are not taking anything off the table.”

Joseph Corrigan, a Democratic strategist in Pennsylvania, believes that Fetterman’s messaging and outreach have strongly positioned him for the primary as well as the general election. “He speaks to people who feel like politicians have condescended to them, have lied to them,” said Corrigan. “The common factor,” he explained, is Braddock, “a forgotten town” that became a national symbol of small-scale Rust Belt revival over the course of Fetterman’s mayorship.

Fetterman had previously been employed in the insurance industry when he arrived in Braddock in 2001 to work for a youth program. He ran for mayor four years later, winning by one vote, and went on to promote such initiatives as green architecture, urban farms and a variety of artistic endeavors that would attract new investments to the beleaguered town. As lieutenant governor, Fetterman has maintained his residence in Braddock, where he lives with his wife, Gisele, and three children in a former Chevrolet car

dealership.

The Senate hopeful said he is now seeking federal office because he believes that “control of” the chamber “could very well rest on” the swing state of Pennsylvania, which President Joe Biden only carried by a small margin in 2020, as Democrats prepare to defend their tenuous majority in the upper chamber.

“There’s a real sense of urgency that our party meet the moment and get some important things accomplished for this country, and I’m troubled by the direction that it took over the last four years, given the willingness to lie about the electoral integrity, the willingness to really spread misinformation as a strategy,” Fetterman explained. “I just think it’s so critical that we respond with a united front.”

He expressed confidence that he would prevail, touting, among other things, a “comprehensive digital outreach program,” a statewide TV advertising campaign and an influx of small-dollar donations from supporters across the commonwealth. “We are hitting all the counties, doing events nonstop, forums, debates,” he said. “We are just stomping on the gas and finishing the way we started.”

His campaign, he reiterated, “is firmly rooted in good, solid, Democratic values and principles and policies,” adding: “We are very clear about how we feel about Israel and how critical it is, and we are always open and eager to have that conversation.”

Fetterman, who has never been to Israel, vowed to visit as soon as possible should he advance past the primary election.

“I am committing, if I’m the nominee in this race, to visit as rapidly as possible and make sure I see firsthand the dynamic on the ground and meet with as many stakeholders as possible,” he said. “That’s my commitment, as the nominee, to do that, because it is so critical to make sure that, if I’m going to represent the Senate in Pennsylvania, we have that kind of on-the-ground understanding of what’s going on.”

While Fetterman voiced admiration for a range of potential future colleagues, including Sens. Bob Casey (D-PA) and Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), he said there was no particular lawmaker on whom he would model himself in the Senate.

The lieutenant governor emphasized

that he is forging his own unique path as he seeks to hold true to his personal convictions.

"It's about putting down a marker," he told JI. "If you trust me with your vote in May and November, you'll always have my

vote in Washington, D.C., on these critical issues, and that especially holds true for Israel." ♦

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The senator's son striving to be a Congress man

Robert Menendez, Jr. is hoping there's room for another Menendez in the Garden State

By Matthew Kassel

It isn't too often that a first-time candidate will, in quick succession, notch high-profile endorsements from a governor, a U.S. senator and a chorus of local political bosses — all before entering the race.

But when Robert Menendez Jr. announced his bid for an open House seat in northern New Jersey this past January, he had done just that. In the weeks leading up to his campaign launch, the Garden State political scion had all but officially been crowned as the heir apparent to longtime Rep. Albio Sires (D-NJ), who is retiring from New Jersey's 8th Congressional District at the end of the year.

Of course, it was no surprise that Menendez had drawn early and enthusiastic support from such leading establishment Democrats as Gov. Phil Murphy and Sen. Cory Booker (D-NJ) as well as multiple officials connected with Hudson County's Democratic machine. Though Menendez, 36, has never previously run for elected office, his family name has long been revered in the district, where his father — the formidable senior Sen. Bob Menendez (D-NJ) — once presided for more than a decade.

It seems inevitable, then, that the senator's son would now stake his claim to the soon-to-be vacated seat. But Menendez Jr., a practicing attorney who goes by Rob, insists that such aspirations had, at least until recently, never held particular favor over a competing interest in carrying on as a private citizen.

"The truth of it is that I could have seen a life where I never ran for public office and a life, now, where I am," Menendez told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview. "The ultimate question was: Are we on a good trajectory or are we not, and if we're not, are there things

that I can do, bring to the table, advocate for that would correct a lot of the struggles and issues that we're facing?"

"The answer," he declared, "is yes."

Menendez said he jumped into the race motivated by a personal conviction that it is time to "turn the page" on an era of increasing polarization that has come largely at the expense of everyday voters.

"We can't wait any longer for people to do the work for us," he told JI. "If we want to see a different course, a different trajectory, we have to do the work ourselves."

Menendez, a moderate Democrat who speaks positively of the Biden administration's domestic agenda, described an urgent need to address the "pain and frustration" of "working families" in the majority-Hispanic district, which sits mostly within Hudson County and is home to a sizable immigrant population. Menendez, whose father is the son of Cuban immigrants, said the "disruption" of the pandemic had left voters "looking for their leaders to provide a clear vision" for the future.

Describing his platform mostly in broad strokes, he argued in favor of increasing access to affordable housing and healthcare, extending child tax credits and launching workforce development initiatives with community colleges and trade schools, among other initiatives. "There's a lot of work to do," he said.

If Menendez prevails in the June primary and then the general election, he and his father — or, as some wags have noted, Rob and Bob — would be the only parent-child duo in Congress next year.

"I do believe that's been mentioned," the younger Menendez said, albeit somewhat sheepishly, noting that he is now "solely

focused" on his campaign. Still, he hastened to add, "it would be an honor to serve with my father."

While Menendez emphasized that he is taking nothing for granted as he prepares to go up against two lesser-known rivals in the primary, he was equally quick to confirm he aligns with his father on a range of issues, not least in the Middle East foreign policy realm. As chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the elder Menendez is widely viewed as a leading expert on such matters, and his son was eager to convey that he has been taking careful notes for some time now.

"I think he brings that New Jersey common sense to his role to try to be a good steward of our foreign policy, being a reliable voice for our allies," Menendez said admiringly of his father. "That's something that is an important quality that he brings to his job that I value and would love to advocate for as well."

Among the senator's most noteworthy causes is his fierce and longstanding opposition to the Iran nuclear deal. Menendez was the second Democratic senator to come out against the agreement as it was brokered by the Obama administration in 2015. If Iran were "to acquire a nuclear bomb," he objected at the time, "it will not have my name on it." Menendez has continued to express strong and occasionally strident reservations over the Biden administration's efforts to negotiate a new deal with Iran, which remain ongoing.

For his part, Menendez Jr. said he "agreed" with his father's approach in 2015 and is skeptical of the current discussions. "I remember sitting there in 2015 when he made his speech about his opposition to the JCPOA, and it was never about not pursuing

diplomatic efforts,” he recalled of his father’s reasoning. “It was about coming to a real solution that would hold up to the test of time.”

Menendez suggested that he is now taking a wait-and-see approach, largely because he is not privy to details of the negotiations beyond what has been publicly reported. But he makes clear in a lengthy position paper that his conditions — including the imposition of sanctions, which had been lifted in 2015, “that limit Iran’s economic ability to financially support terrorist organizations” — would almost certainly put him at odds with the terms of any future agreement.

“The only way that we can hope to bring Iran to the table and dismantle their nuclear program,” he writes, “is to put heavy pressure on the Iranian economy and for the Iranian people to demand its leaders correct the country’s course.”

It is unclear whether he will be in the House if or when an agreement comes up for a vote, but Menendez said he remains confident in his father’s continued scrutiny of the emerging deal.

“I, for one, think that New Jersey has a really strong voice in the U.S. Senate, Bob Menendez, in ensuring that, if there is an agreement, if there is something in place,” he declared, “that it serves our strategic goals and ensures that Iran is no longer on a path toward obtaining nuclear weapons.”

Few people, if any, are in a position to make such a claim, JI suggested. He laughed. “It is what it is, right?”

Like his father, who is among the most outspoken supporters of Israel in the Senate, Menendez said he is committed to strengthening ties with the Jewish state, which he described as a “vital ally.”

“There’s been somewhat of a — how should I phrase it? — inconsistent approach to foreign policy through the last several administrations, and I think that’s left our allies in an uncomfortable position,” he explained. “You have to start by being very clear in your support for your allies, and I think being supportive of Israel is one of the most important actions any member of Congress can take.”

For Menendez, that includes voting for legislation to bolster the Abraham Accords — the series of agreements that established

diplomatic relations between Israel and several Arab nations — while continuing to provide U.S. security assistance, with no conditions. Menendez, who has never visited Israel but said it “would be a priority” if he is elected, also endorsed additional funding for Israel’s Iron Dome missile-defense system that passed the House last September, despite opposition from an outspoken cohort of far-left critics.

“When you look at the action that Congress has taken, both in a bipartisan manner and also Democratic support, I think you continue to see that the majority of the party believes in a strong relationship with Israel,” he told JI. “Just because folks may be louder than other people, or they may be a loud segment of the party, does not mean that they are the majority of the party, and I think it’s not focusing on what’s in the U.S. interest and what we need to do to support our allies.”

Menendez expressed support for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, even as he calls for a somewhat hands-off approach. In a lengthy Israel position paper, for example, he stresses that negotiations should be “brokered directly and in good faith between leaders on both sides,” rather than a third party. “America’s role,” he says, “should be to start the conversation and assist any way we can.”

Within his own district, which includes Jersey City, Hoboken and Union City (where his father once served as mayor), among other places, Menendez said he is interested in fostering economic ties between New Jersey and Israel, through partnerships with local universities as well as startups and innovation labs. “I think creating that dynamic could be something that would bring new voices, a younger generation,” he said, “into the U.S.-Israel relationship.”

The pro-Israel organizations that have endorsed his campaign in recent months — including the political arms of Democratic Majority for Israel and Pro-Israel America, a bipartisan advocacy group — seem to think that Menendez himself is such a voice. “Like his predecessor, Congressman Albio Sires, and his father, Senator Bob Menendez, Rob is a staunch supporter of the Democratic agenda, including strengthening the U.S.-Israel relationship,” Rachel Rosen, a spokesperson for DMFT’s political action

committee, said in a statement to JI.

Phil Goldschmeidt, a pro-Israel activist in northern New Jersey who says he is close with Menendez Sr., agreed. After Menendez Jr. announced his candidacy, Goldschmeidt — a member of AIPAC’s national council and a local leader with NORPAC, a bipartisan pro-Israel group — reached out to the campaign to request a position paper.

He liked what he read. “I’m a big fan of his father, particularly on the Iran deal, and I know his son, looking at his paper, is in line with that,” Goldschmeidt told JI. “My feeling is, to have two Menendezes in Congress would be a big win for the U.S.-Israel relationship.”

“It’s a little difficult because it’s ‘Rob and Bob,’ — so, ‘R and B,’ rhythm and blues,” Goldschmeidt joked. “The Congress could use some of that stuff.”

According to Goldschmeidt, NORPAC is hosting a local fundraiser for the Menendez campaign on May 19, during which Rep. Josh Gottheimer (D-NJ) is expected to speak. The congressman, a leading pro-Israel Democrat in the House, is supporting Menendez but has not made an official endorsement.

“It’s great to have Rob running here in New Jersey,” Gottheimer said in a statement to JI. “fighting for families and local communities, and standing up for the historic U.S.-Israel relationship, which is critical to America’s national security and the global fight against terror.”

Menendez received his undergraduate degree from the University of North Carolina in 2008 and attended Rutgers Law School, his father’s alma mater. He has worked at the corporate law firm Lowenstein Sandler LLP since 2011, specializing in mergers and acquisitions and regulatory compliance, among other things.

Last summer, Menendez was named a commissioner of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. Before that, Menendez had reportedly been weighing a mayoral bid in Jersey City, where he lives with his wife and daughter.

Menendez is one of three Democratic primary candidates who are jockeying for the seat, including progressive activist David Ocampo Grajales and public school teacher Ane Roseborough-Eberhard. Two other candidates dropped out of the race this week because they had not gathered

the required number of signatures to qualify for the ballot. The victor is all but assured a smooth ride in the general election owing to the partisan makeup of the district, which was only slightly redrawn after New Jersey's House maps were approved.

By most accounts, Menendez is heavily favored to win the congressional seat that had been occupied by his father between 1993 and 2006. The senator is a "hallowed name in that district," said Alan Steinberg, a political columnist for Insider NJ, adding that Menendez Sr. had "fully regained his popularity" following a corruption scandal that nearly ended his political career some years ago.

A spokesperson for the senator's office told JI that Menendez was unavailable to comment for this article.

Menendez Jr., meanwhile, "seems to have the level of competence in terms of communication skills that you would expect of a candidate for Congress," Steinberg told JI. "I don't see any issues that will be used against him."

But Dan Cassino, a professor of political science at Fairleigh Dickinson University, believes it is too soon to draw any

conclusions. "In New Jersey, a political party can certainly give enormous advantage to a primary candidate through preferential ballot placement, and, in the past, that was generally enough to scare off serious challengers," he told JI in a recent email exchange. "However, the post-Trump progressive movement in North Jersey has been very strong, and they've been able to mount serious challenges to establishment candidates like Menendez."

"Whether it's a valid criticism or not, Menendez is going to be seen as a moderate establishment candidate, and the energy in the Democratic Party is very much on the side of liberal progressive insurgents," Cassino argued. "He needs to either convince progressives that he's one of them — which may not be possible — or be ready to take on challengers. The era of coronations, rather than competitive races, for new candidates in Jersey primaries is very much over."

Still, Menendez is no doubt well-poised, thanks in part to a sizable campaign war chest. He has raised nearly \$840,000 in the first quarter of 2022, with approximately \$690,000 on hand, according to a spokesperson.

No matter how recognizable his name may be, Menendez said he is "working hard at it every day" as he engages with voters throughout the district, including Jewish residents who remain on edge amid a recent uptick in antisemitic hate crimes. Northern New Jersey has by no means been exempt from such incidents, Menendez notes, referring to the deadly shooting at a kosher grocery store in Jersey City three years ago, where six people were killed.

"You have to be vocal and out front in opposition whenever there are any incidents of hate or antisemitism," Menendez told JI.

Menendez believes voters have been receptive to his campaign, which is less "about a platform," he notes, than "common-sense solutions for the issues that families, that workers, that small businesses are facing."

"People still feel uncertain about the future," he said, "and I think the conversations need to be focused around what the Democratic Party is going to do to assure that we get our footing back and have a strong foundation moving forward." ♦

APRIL 11, 2022

Incoming UAE envoy to the Vatican says warming ties with Israel is the real deal

Signing the Abraham Accords was 'breaking with the biggest taboo we've ever had in our history,' Amb. Omar Ghobash told Jewish Insider

By Ruth Marks Eglash

This article first appeared in The Circuit.

Israelis should feel confident about their newfound ties with the United Arab Emirates and be assured that the normalization process ignited by the Abraham Accords is based on core Emirati values that do not stem from any special or fleeting transaction with the United States, the newly appointed UAE ambassador to the Vatican, Omar Ghobash, told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview.

"It's something that comes up a lot,"

said Ghobash, who is currently assistant minister for culture and public diplomacy, referencing some cynical voices that still question the genuineness of the 18-month-old Accords. "It's actually a principled decision that comes right from the core of the royal family."

Speaking to JI on the sidelines of the recent Jewish Funders Network Conference in Palm Beach, Fla., Ghobash, 50, who is a well-known diplomat, businessman and author in his own country, will soon be at the forefront of interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance in the Vatican as his

country leads a historic process in the Arab world to encourage peaceful relations with the world's only Jewish state.

Ghobash explained that because the UAE is a "leadership organized society," everyone looks to the royals for guidance, and his fellow countrymen have chosen to embrace the historic steps taken over the past two years by Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, better known by his initials, MBZ.

While clandestine relations between Israel and several Arab countries — mainly based on security cooperation — were a

badly kept secret for more than a decade, the public declarations by the UAE and Bahrain in September 2020 to recognize Israel were seen as bold moves.

The Accords paved the way for Sudan and Morocco to normalize ties with Israel months later and, over the past year, the so-called cold peace agreements Israel has held for decades with Egypt and Jordan have begun to thaw. There is now speculation that the process could draw in other Middle East and Muslim states, including Saudi Arabia and Indonesia — and maybe even the Palestinians.

“We know that life is short, and we have a remarkable opportunity in the Emirates to take the country to the next stage, we’ve got an ambitious leadership and a whole bunch of great kids,” said Ghobash, author of the 2018 acclaimed book, *Letters to a Young Muslim*, which reflects on challenges of faith, culture and society through a series of letters.

“The way I see it is that we’re allying and aligning ourselves with other nations that actually want to build and prosper,” the ambassador continued. “While on the other side are negative players who are manipulative and destructive.”

Ghobash also said that those who have been critical of the Abraham Accords or downplayed their significance do not understand that the Gulf nation was

“breaking with the biggest taboo we’ve ever had in our history – to recognize Israel, to recognize the Jew, to recognize this country and to want to work with them publicly. It is a massive thing for us.”

“The lack of seriousness that is attributed to the Abraham Accords by certain parties and groups has really surprised me; it’s almost offensive for us,” he emphasized.

The son of the UAE’s first minister of state for foreign affairs, Saif Ghobash, who was assassinated in a 1977 terrorist attack, the younger Ghobash – who himself is now a seasoned diplomat after serving for more than a decade as the UAE’s envoy in Russia and Paris, respectively – said his country could learn a great deal from Israelis, especially “how to get things done.”

“We are also getting things done in the Emirates, but there are certain areas such as education, government and the private sector where Israelis can offer us examples of how to better involve young people,” he observed.

However, Ghobash cautioned, Israelis need to slow down and have more confidence in the emerging ties. After decades of regional isolation, Israelis have welcomed the Accords with a rush of activities, and there is an unspoken pressure to cement the relationship as fast as possible, in case the window of opportunity closes — as it has with other Arab states. In less than

a year, most of Israel’s top leaders have already paid official visits to the Gulf state, while tens of thousands of Israeli tourists and businesspeople have flocked to Dubai and Abu Dhabi seeking shopping and new opportunities.

While Emiratis are also curious about Israel, with many expressing a desire to visit the Jewish state and a handful of senior officials making the trip, overall they appear more cautious. Ghobash suggested the differing approaches were because “Israelis were totally ready for peace,” while the Arab world was less prepared for the process happening when it did.

“Now, all of a sudden, we are at peace and there are expectations... it’s all a bit mind-boggling. What exactly are we supposed to do now?” he mused.

Ghobash also said that the “thrusting” character of many Israelis makes some of his fellow countrymen uncomfortable. “When faced with people pushing us, we feel like we’re being managed, and we don’t like to feel that way,” he said.

“We like to feel that we have all the time in the world to make a decision,” explained Ghobash. “Just because you’re in a hurry doesn’t mean that we’re in a hurry, so this process is there, it will just take a little more time for us.” ♦

APRIL 11, 2022

From actress to activist, Noa Tishby is Israel’s first special envoy to fight antisemitism

Tishby spoke exclusively to Jewish Insider about her appointment as Israel’s first-ever special envoy for combating antisemitism and delegitimization

By Ruth Marks Eglash

As Israel’s first special envoy for combating antisemitism and delegitimization, Israeli actress and author Noa Tishby knows she has her work cut out for her. Antisemitic attacks – both online and in-person – are on the rise, and Israel is the rare country whose right to exist is regularly challenged, Tishby told *Jewish Insider*

this week in an exclusive interview, her first since being appointed.

“I know we have a lot of work to do,” said Tishby, who over the past decade has become an icon in the world of Jewish advocacy and whose 2021 book, *Israel: A Simple Guide to the Most Misunderstood Country on Earth*, received broad praise. “No one individual will ever eliminate antisemitism — this is a

fight that must be done collectively by Jews and non-Jews alike, and I will work tirelessly to help lead that effort.”

In her new role, Tishby, 44, who splits her time between Los Angeles and Israel, plans to use her celebrity status and her large social media presence, as well as her unique voice on the subject, to take on the fight and, she said, work to serve as a bridge

between the country of her birth and her new home.

"I like to say that I am 100% Israeli and 100% American, and I believe I can be a bridge between the sides," said the actress, recognizing that just as Israel struggles to explain itself and its actions, Americans often view the Jewish state, and its conflict with the Palestinians, through an incorrect and narrow paradigm.

"Framing this situation as a pro-[Palestinian] or pro-Israel issue is problematic at the core," said Tishby. "This is a very American framing, which I see a lot on college campuses in the United States, but in Israel, there are Arab judges in the Supreme Court and Arab doctors and nurses working in the hospitals."

"In Israel, there is coexistence, and we are all in favor of Palestinians having rights and having a great life," she continued. "We look forward to seeing a responsible Palestinian leadership that will negotiate peace with us."

Tishby said she is aware of the more extreme voices that often dominate the debate on Israel in the U.S., but said she planned to focus on what she calls "the silent majority" of Americans — those "with common sense, not those on the fringes of society who have been brainwashed."

"I will educate whoever is willing to listen," she stated.

As an official envoy — though not an employee of the Israeli government, as the role is unpaid — Tishby said she would work to create alliances with groups who "might not be aware of the rise in antisemitism" and share with them that the increase in

antisemitism is bad for an entire society. She also said she would work to raise awareness in international forums such as the United Nations to push more governments and organizations to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Association (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism as a legal baseline.

In addition, Tishby said she would utilize her own social media networks, with hundreds of thousands of followers, to engage with people online and work closely with antisemitism envoys in other countries, including with Deborah Lipstadt, who was finally confirmed by the Senate last month as the State Department's special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism.

"I am a huge fan of Lipstadt and have been waiting eagerly for her appointment," Tishby told JI, adding that they will hopefully meet soon.

Tishby, who received a drama scholarship from the Tel Aviv Museum of Arts, first found fame in the 1990s as an actress in the popular Israeli TV show "Ramat Aviv Gimmel." She later moved to Hollywood and worked as a producer and writer, working alongside Mark Wahlberg and Stephen Levinson in the award-winning show "In Treatment." She also appeared in the Showtime drama, "The Affair," created by Israeli director Hagai Levi and had her own talk show, "Life By Noa Tishby."

In 2011, she founded Act for Israel and has since become a leading voice in the U.S. and abroad on issues involving antisemitism and efforts to delegitimize Israel

"What drew me into the world of

advocacy was the inability to sit quietly and watch what was happening all around me," Tishby recalled to JI. "I have seen and heard so much misinformation and skewed information about Israel since coming here."

Tishby said that she has watched as perceptions of Israel have changed from a "cute hasbara [public relations] problem, where people didn't know that Israel was a modern or safe country to a problem where Israel's very right to exist is being questioned."

"Israel is the only country that has its right to exist questioned, and I have realized that this is an existential threat," she concluded. "But this is not only a Jewish issue, it is not only an Israeli issue, it is also an issue of security for the U.S. and everyone."

Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid said in a statement on Monday that Tishby's appointment was "another step that will strengthen Israel internationally at a moment when Jews around the world once again face an alarming and dramatic resurgence in antisemitism."

"She is a gifted author and thinker who has long been a powerful voice on issues of antisemitism and the delegitimization of the State of Israel," he continued. "In this fight, it's critically important to tell the Israeli story well, influence decision-makers and world opinion, and to be quick and powerful in our response to acts of hate and violence directed against Jews."

Lapid said that few people were "better prepared to do that on the world stage than Special Envoy Tishby." ♦