

## THE WEEKLY PRINT

*Behind the scenes at Yad Vashem; Widespread Passover celebrations highlight a changing Gulf; Israeli defense chief hosts Iftar for Arab ambassadors; A seat at the vice president's Seder; How Israeli philanthropy is changing in the COVID era; The VC who believes investing in women is good business; and Blake Masters' provocations reach back to his college days.*

APRIL 27, 2022

## Behind the scenes at Yad Vashem

*'Gathering artifacts is only one element of what needs to be done, we also need to tell the stories behind them too,' a museum official says. 'That's what makes an ordinary object so impactful, so priceless'*

By Ruth Marks Eglash

A moth-eaten teddy bear, a mangled silver spoon, a well-worn headscarf – all inanimate objects, yet each tells a story, in a powerful and sensitive way, of one of the darkest periods of human suffering, shedding light on both the trials and triumphs of individuals during the Holocaust.

As Israel prepares for Yom Hashoah, its annual Holocaust Remembrance Day this week, *Jewish Insider* was given a unique look inside the vast archives and storage vaults at Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem, catching a haunting glimpse into the horrifying experiences of the millions who perished and those who survived.

The archive building stands alone in the Yad Vashem complex, facing the grand Hall of Remembrance with its eternal flame, where visiting foreign dignitaries lay wreaths to commemorate the millions who were murdered. Beside it is the cobblestone plaza where on Wednesday evening Israeli officials will gather to hear the testimonies of six survivors, each of whom will light a torch to remember and collectively call for "Never Again."

Inside the archive itself, the temperature is kept low, in an attempt to preserve the aging artifacts for future generations. Michael Tal, curator and director of the archives division, keeps careful watch over each item stored in the archive and catalogs new arrivals – a handful of objects are received each week – sent from across the globe by aging survivors or their descendants.

He is diligent about researching the backstory of everything that reaches his hands, cross-checking personal stories with the extensive list of names – Holocaust survivors and victims – kept at Yad Vashem and searching out the photographs of each item's owner and their relatives.

"Even though I've been here for a very long time, I'm still surprised that we keep receiving things," Tal told *JI* in an interview. "Gathering artifacts is only one element of what needs to be done, we also need to tell the stories behind them too. That's what makes an ordinary object so impactful, so priceless."

"When we receive an object, we try to find out as much information as we can on the person who it belonged to," he continued, underscoring that in many ways,

these belongings are as much testimony to what happened 80 years ago as the writings, artwork and photographs that are also kept at Yad Vashem.

"Every object tells a story," Tal said, estimating that there are more than 42,000 artifacts stored at Yad Vashem, from the striped uniforms once worn by those imprisoned in concentration camps to unused stacks of yellow stars the Nazis forced Jews to sew onto their clothing, as well as long-lost precious Shabbat candlesticks, Chanukiah's (eight-branch candelabras) and other religious paraphernalia.

A handful of such items appear in the museum's permanent display cases; others are carefully packaged up and sent around the world to various Holocaust and World War II museums for temporary or special exhibitions. Some of them are cataloged online, a virtual museum where one can discover to whom the objects belonged and their significance.

Opening a closet filled with neatly wrapped camp uniforms, Tal explained that for many survivors, such artifacts, even though they are a chilling reminder of the horrors of the past, are also a link to a lost life and lost loved ones, and a way of reminding

the world of the terrible injustices to which they were subjected.

"As the war continued, people managed to hold on to less and less of their possessions," he said. "Either they were forced to sell the things they managed to take from home for food, or their belongings were stolen from them. After the war, the artifacts they managed to hold onto represented their past lives and memories."

The teddy bear, for example, belonged to a Polish girl, Stella Knobel. The single child of a wealthy doctor, she received the bear for her 7th birthday in 1931. When the family fled to the Soviet Union in 1939, Mishu, the name given to the bear, was one of the few items Knobel took with her. With no siblings, Mishu became her only companion and it traveled with her, first to Siberia and Uzbekistan, then to Tehran, Iran. Both Knobel and the bear eventually reached pre-state Israel in 1943.

"Because I was an only child who very much wanted a sister and brother, the teddy is like family," Knobel wrote when she donated Mishu to Yad Vashem for safekeeping. "He was my sister and my brother, and I clung to him. I didn't have other toys. He's part of my family, the last remnant of my home in Poland. I know that

in Yad Vashem he'll be taken care of."

She added: "I thought of burying him in the garden, but I was afraid that someone would find him and get rid of him. The thought that he could be thrown in the garbage is terrible to me...it (the teddy) is symbolic of my life."

For many survivors and their descendants, such artifacts contain both the hard truths and the happy memories of their past lives and, more importantly, tell the story of their triumph over death and their ultimate survival, Tal explained.

The mangled silver spoon belonged to Artek Poznanski, also from Poland. On his harrowing journey from ghetto to labor camp, Poznanski managed to procure the spoon, an object of great value in the camps. He guarded it closely and when he decided to escape while heading to near-certain death at the Mauthausen extermination camp, the small metal utensil saved his life. Daring to jump from a train, Poznanski was shot at by Nazi guards, but the bullet hit the spoon tucked into his pocket, wounding but not killing him. Poznanski survived, hiding out in Czech territory until the war ended.

And the scarf, decorated with tiny flowers, was once worn by a woman named Anna Lichter, who also attempted

to escape from the Nazis on her way to an extermination camp. Lichter was shot dead by guards as she jumped from the train, but her 18-year-old daughter, Debora, who was traveling with her, managed to save the scarf and held onto it for the rest of the war.

This week, as Yad Vashem prepares to hold its first live ceremony after two years of COVID-19 closures, the museum has returned to life. Local and foreign visitors were there to learn and remember. Adjacent to the archive building, cranes and laborers were busy working to expand the existing storage space. A new, 65,000-square-foot center – The David and Fela Shapell Family Collections Center – will provide improved storage conditions for these precious artifacts and allow more of them to be displayed to the public; it is set to open in 2023.

Tal said the new space is greatly needed as the old archive is already cramped and new storage conditions will allow the items to be better preserved.

"It is so important that we collect and preserve these items for the future," he concluded. "We are in a race against the clock to gather as many of them as possible because as time goes by, these items and their stories are being lost." ♦

APRIL 25, 2022

## Widespread Passover celebrations highlight a changing Gulf

*Thousands of Jews from around the world gathered around the Gulf, marking the largest Passover festivities since the Abraham Accords were signed*

By Rebecca Anne Proctor

*This article first appeared on The Circuit.*

Next year in Dubai. If you can find a seat at the Seder table, that is.

"The challenge this year was finding a Seder that wasn't too crowded," said Michal Divon, a Dubai-based journalist who lives and works in the cultural capital of the United Arab Emirates.

The jam-packed Passover Seders held last week in Dubai and Abu Dhabi — more than 2,000 Jews from all over the world

were in attendance — marked the largest celebration of the Jewish holiday since the historic Abraham Accords normalization agreements were signed between the UAE and Israel on Sept. 17, 2020. The thousands of attendees mark a significant change from seders in the UAE several years ago, which were often held in secret and attracted only a handful of attendees.

A sign of the UAE's growing Jewish population, many of the Passover Seders in Dubai and Abu Dhabi were hosted by Rabbi Levi Duchman, an American-

born Chabad rabbi and the first resident chief rabbi of the UAE, in the presence of community members, government officials and ambassadors. Seders were also hosted by Lebanese-born Rabbi Elie Abadie, who joined the Jewish Council of the Emirates as its senior and resident rabbi in 2020.

And, in an indication of the increasingly global and cosmopolitan makeup of the Jewish community in the Emirates, the Seders were conducted in several different languages, including Hebrew, English, French and Russian.

The celebrations this year marked several firsts. The Association of Gulf Jewish Communities (AGJC) baked and distributed matzah around the region for the first time. For the occasion, AGJC leaders shipped 775 pounds of matzah to the UAE and then distributed it from there throughout the GCC, including to Bahrain and Kuwait. Most of the Passover supplies were sourced locally in the UAE, including kosher chicken and milk that was produced in Fujairah.

“It is incredible to see the infrastructure that has been built for Jews in the UAE with help from the government,” Duchman told *Jewish Insider*. “Eight years ago, I started off at NYU Abu Dhabi making a small Seder, and this year, to have Seders run by multiple rabbis...and having the Israeli ambassador, the American chargé d'affaires present — it was truly beautiful. This is such a beautiful message for our children and for other communities to witness coexistence and tolerance.”

This Passover also witnessed an influx of Israeli and Jewish visitors to the UAE.

Ross said that seven large communal Seders were arranged by local community leaders or Jewish travel organizations like the Israel-based Shainfeld Tours, which organizes kosher vacations and offers Passover packages at a number of luxury hotels, such as the five-star Conrad Dubai.

“An important evolution this year was the extent of formal government support for many Seders that took place in Dubai,” he added. “Every effort was made to support large events like Shainfeld, which had 640 attendees.”

“The numbers of Jews in the UAE are not known but clearly are on the increase,” Ross Kriel, a founder of Dubai’s Jewish community and representative to the emirate’s government, told JI. “There has been significant recent growth of Jews from France, Russia and Israel. Different congregations are beginning to take shape in an exciting moment of formation. A key is for us to take our place within Dubai’s plural mix of communities and respond intelligently and sensitively to our context.”

This year also saw the convergence of Ramadan, Passover and Easter — a rare event in the calendars of the three Abrahamic faiths. “The experience of the three Abrahamic faiths celebrating this

month as holy was moving and poignant,” added Kriel.

Jews in the UAE have long practiced their faith, but it wasn’t until the signing of the Accords that public celebrations took place as they do today. In 2014, when Duchman first arrived to the UAE, he established numerous places of worship, kosher dietary laws, Jewish education, relocation support, business networking and community life.

Since the signing of the Abraham Accords, Jewish UAE, the organization founded by Duchman, has received thousands of requests from Jews from all over the world for assistance and information on various matters regarding Jewish life in the Emirates.

“There were 13 flights from Israel to the UAE the day before Passover, and that is a huge number,” Duchman told JI. “To just think about the numbers of Israelis and Jews that were celebrating in the UAE over Passover — it is something very special and unique.”

Many Jews and Israelis who have moved to the UAE since the signing of the Accords also celebrated Passover in the UAE this year.

“[The rabbis who came to build a community in the region] saw that Dubai was a growing place for the Jewish community and has been backed up by facts with many Israelis moving here and French Jews moving to the UAE,” Rabbi Moshe Haliwah told JI. “It’s a very multi-cosmopolitan place. Wherever Jews are coming there is a need for spiritual services.”

Passover in Dubai, explained Haliwa, is different than in many Jewish communities around the world, where people celebrate in their homes. “Everyone travels long distances by car and there is not yet a focus of Jews in any one single place so hotels are very much the venue for celebrations also for the need of license for prayers which can only be carried out in a place such as hotels. Most of the people are semi-educated in the Jewish sides of life and are thirsty to learn more.”

Haliwa said that this is particularly crucial for Jewish children living in Dubai. “Jewish parents are concerned that their children remain attached to their roots and therefore they appreciate anything that is done for the children,” he added.

Michal Divon, who moved to the UAE last year from New York after previously living in Tel Aviv, celebrated her second Passover in the UAE.

“From the first time I visited in November 2020 when I came for Sukkot and then I fully moved to the UAE a few months later, I always felt at home,” Divon, a journalist working as a senior editor and producer for *Khaleej Times*, an English-language daily newspaper based in Dubai, told JI. Divon now hosts “Dubai This Week” for the outlet.

“It’s so natural and easy for me to embrace the culture,” she said. “Passover this year was really special because it coincided with Ramadan, which changes the pace of life.... There are now all of these interfaith gatherings taking place in the evening in Dubai. These holidays have combined in such a natural way this year and that is what makes them so special.” ♦

APRIL 26, 2022

# Israeli defense chief hosts Iftar for Arab ambassadors

*The dinner comes amid weeks of simmering tensions in the country*

By Jonathan H. Ferziger

*This article was first published in The Circuit.*

Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz on Monday sought to soothe tensions over recent violence in Jerusalem by inviting Arab diplomats to break the daily Ramadan fast at his office compound in Tel Aviv.

Over a traditional *Iftar* dinner, Gantz asked envoys from the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Egypt to relay to their leaders that Israel is “taking unprecedented steps to enable freedom of worship,” according to a Defense Ministry statement. He said “extremists” are to blame for restrictions that have triggered clashes between Palestinians and Israeli security forces on Jerusalem’s Temple Mount, a site held sacred by both Muslims and Jews that is known in Arabic as the *Haram Sharif*.

The conflict, which has flared for

weeks and included Israeli-Palestinian confrontations in Gaza and the West Bank, has been condemned across the Arab world, including by the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco, all three of which normalized relations with Israel in 2020. A year ago, tensions over Jerusalem led to an 11-day conflict with Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi convened a summit in Cairo on Sunday with Jordan’s King Abdullah II and UAE Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, in which the three leaders expressed their “readiness to exert all efforts to restore calm in Jerusalem, end all forms of escalation and remove obstacles impeding worshippers’ access.”

In his remarks to the Arab diplomats on Monday, Gantz hailed the Abraham Accords while warning about the nuclear threat from Iran.

“Israel values freedom of worship and

we will do everything in our capacity to enable it, while an extremist group — the minority — aims to harm it,” Gantz said. “It is important for us that this message is brought to the leaders of your countries.”

Guests at the Iftar meal in Tel Aviv included Moroccan Ambassador Abderrahim Bayoud, UAE Ambassador Mohamed Al Khaja, Bahraini Deputy Head of Mission Abdulkarim Ebrahim Alanansari and Egyptian Embassy Counsellor Walid Talaat Mahdy.

Also at the table were Jonathan Shrier, deputy chief of mission at the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem and two Israeli lawmakers — Ruth Wasserman Lande of Gantz’s Blue & White party and Likud’s Ofir Akunis, the co-leaders of a Knesset caucus set up to support the Abraham Accords. No Jordanian representative was listed in the Defense Ministry statement. ♦

APRIL 19, 2022

# A seat at the vice president’s Seder

*An inside look at the first Seder held at the Naval Observatory, hosted by Vice President Kamala Harris and Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff*

By Gabby Deutch

There comes a point in every Passover Seder when someone rises from the table and opens the door to ceremonially welcome in Elijah, the prophet whose arrival is said to mark the arrival of the messiah.

Every Seder except Vice President Kamala Harris’, that is.

“We didn’t open the door for Elijah because we weren’t sure if we were going to be able to with the Secret Service,” recalled one attendee at the Seder, mostly — but not entirely — jokingly. Eighteen people

attended the first-ever Seder held at the vice president’s residence at the Naval Observatory.

Harris presided over Friday’s Seder along with her husband, Doug Emhoff, the first Jewish spouse of a vice president. It “looked like Seders that you would recognize in places all across the country,” Herbie Ziskend, senior advisor for communications to Harris, told *Jewish Insider* on Monday.

The “bubbe-driven” menu, as one guest described it, featured a kosher catered meal that included matzah ball soup, gefilte fish,

salmon, brisket, chicken marsala, carrot tzimmes and potato kugel. Attendees followed along in the Maxwell House Haggadah, which was used annually in the Seders hosted by former President Barack Obama, beginning on his 2008 presidential campaign (a tradition that Ziskend had a hand in arranging).

The Seder was co-led by Ziskend and Cynthia Bernstein, Harris’ director of management and administration. The pair initially intended to stick to English, but more Hebrew was incorporated into the

readings and the singing at Emhoff's urging. (And there was a lot of singing — "whenever the spirit called, people would just break out in song," said Bernstein.)

The evening featured all the usual trappings of the festive Passover meal — singing the Four Questions, searching for the afikomen and telling the story of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. The Seder plate on the table also included an orange, a more recent and progressive addition to some Passover tables that is meant to symbolize the inclusion of women in Jewish life.

"At least for us, it symbolizes inclusion, and especially making sure that women's voices are heard and are provided the same opportunity," explained Bernstein.

Eight of the vice president and second gentleman's staffers, along with plus-ones that included significant others, mothers and one brother, attended the Seder. Guests included Harris' National Security Advisor Philip Gordon; Deputy Chief of Staff Mike Fuchs; Special Advisor for National Security

Dean Lieberman; Emily Langner, Harris' staff secretary; Michelle Solomon, the senior director of Harris' West Wing operations; and Kendall Krupkin, Emhoff's director of scheduling.

Conversation topics throughout the event, Ziskend and Bernstein shared, included family members of the attendees, and stories of guests' parents and grandparents who had come to the U.S. as refugees fleeing the Holocaust and others who had served in the U.S. military.

Krupkin and Ziskend's wife, Arlie, as the two youngest attendees (although both were over 30; staffers' children were left at home), searched for the afikomen. (Emhoff hid it in the piano.) Both received a gift from a woman-owned business that Harris frequented in California, her home state.

This year's Seder was not Harris' first; she and Emhoff had a two-person "COVID Seder" during the pandemic, Emhoff told *JI* in a recent interview. She kicked off this year's Seder telling of the story of the Jews' exodus from enslavement in Egypt,

beginning with the line about the Israelites being slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt.

"That was extremely, extremely moving and impactful to have this vice president, who is so many firsts, sharing that story, reading that passage, and really framing how this is a timeless story," said Bernstein, who as an observant Jew walked the couple of miles to the Naval Observatory from her home. "Yes, it's about freedom for the Israelites thousands of years ago, but there's still so many who are working for freedom."

Both Harris and Emhoff spoke about lessons from the story of the Exodus, including how the transition from oppression to freedom resonates with modern issues. The Seder was meaningful for them as people "who could take the opportunity and spend this important holiday reflecting and being with their colleagues, their teams, and thinking about, How do we make the world a better place in the context of remembering the story of the Exodus?" ♦

APRIL 28, 2022

## How Israeli philanthropy is changing in the COVID era

*There are signs that as Israel has become more affluent, its citizens are beginning to donate more.*

By Linda Gradstein

*This article first appeared on eJewishPhilanthropy.*

When David Kahan, a tech executive who lives in the Tel Aviv suburb of Ra'anana, turned 60 a few months ago, he sent an email to his friends and relatives asking them to donate money to an organization called Ten Gav to buy 60 beds for needy Israelis.

The campaign succeeded beyond what Kahan had hoped. More than 120 donors gave more than 135,000 shekels (about \$40,000), enabling Ten Gav to provide 93 beds for Israelis in need.

"There were donors from every stage and every stop of my life — people I first met

more than 40 years ago, to people I only met recently," Kahan told *eJewishPhilanthropy*, adding that the initiative "inspired even people with whom I have only modest relationships to give. It made my birthday an occasion of great joy."

Ten Gav, a nonprofit based in Ra'anana that sources most of its donations from Israelis, is one example of a slowly growing culture of philanthropy in Israel that has been accelerated as the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated socioeconomic gaps. While in past years Israeli institutions relied heavily on donations from the Diaspora, now observers of philanthropy in the Jewish state say Israelis are increasingly giving as well.

"There's a steady rise, slow but stable,

in the amount of money donated and the number of donors giving in Israel," Sigal Yaniv Feller, executive director of the Jewish Funders Network in Israel, told *eJP*. "More people understand that it's important to give, and have the ability to give."

Historically, Israel was a developing nation whose populace had a strong tradition of volunteerism and national service, rather than a culture of financial giving. Israel's mandatory draft, which conscripts most 18-year-olds for two to three years, continues to reinforce an Israel ethos of giving time and physical energy. As of 2020, Israelis on average donated 1% of their disposable income, as opposed to Americans, who donated 2% on average.

But there are signs that as Israel has



become more affluent, and particularly as its tech sector has brought wealth to the country, Israelis are beginning to open their wallets. According to a study commissioned by the government and Tel Aviv University, Israeli philanthropy grew 43% between 2009 and 2015 in total shekels given, and native Israeli philanthropy accounted for more than a third of donations in the country.

Yaniv Feller said that because many wealthy tech entrepreneurs are younger, it may take them several years to realize that they're in a position to become philanthropists. But she feels like a broader shift is taking hold.

"People are realizing that they're also able to give financially, and I think they're going to start," Yaniv Feller said. "It's part of our mission to change the philanthropic culture in Israel, and those who can give should understand that it's part of their responsibility as a citizen of the state."

Since the onset of the pandemic, Israeli philanthropic culture has developed further. A research paper by Noa Krauz-Lahav and Galia Feit, two professors in Tel Aviv University's law faculty, posited that in the Israeli philanthropic sphere, COVID "accelerated and strengthened partnerships between actors, and sharpened their understanding of inter-philanthropic partnership and connectivity."

"Collectively, philanthropy in Israel is becoming more collaborative," Yaniv Feller said. "We are seeing changes among younger philanthropists in their 20s, 30s and 40. They're stepping up as a second generation and they have a more strategic outlook on the state and philanthropy. They want to invest in social issues such as education, youth at risk, civil rights, justice."

The end of 2020 also saw the formation of Keshet, Israel's first donor-advised fund, or DAF, which allows wealthy individuals to deposit money into charitable accounts, then facilitates donations from those accounts. Keshet now has more than \$50 million under management, from 87 donors, and has allocated more than \$14 million.

Keshet founder Maya Natan, JFN Israel's former executive director, said that she felt the organization was necessary especially because Israel doesn't have a mechanism akin to family foundations in the United

States.

"It's hard to plan when to give in Israel when you don't have a structure that can be your foundation," she told eJP. "The best years to put money aside for giving are years where you have a high income. Keshet allows you to have a fund where you can plan for the long run, you can build up your giving and create a portfolio of organizations you want to support."

Some 70% of the DAF's accounts belong to philanthropists from the tech world. For new donors, Natan said, "We wanted to make it easier for them to access the giving world. You don't need to be a multimillionaire with a humongous structure to give philanthropically."

Despite the growth of Israeli wealth and philanthropy, socioeconomic gaps are still visible, said Ten Gav co-director Naomi Brounstein, a Canadian immigrant and former lawyer who works full-time with no salary. Israel has a high income inequality rate relative to other members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a group of developed countries. In addition, the child poverty rate in Israel is higher than 20%, versus an OECD average of 12.8%.

Brounstein said that in lower-income or single-parent homes, children can be found sleeping on a torn mattress or directly on the floor, and mothers on an uncomfortable couch. Ten Gav, which was founded in 2014, aims to address needs like those by offering a direct link between donors and the recipients of their charity. Donors can give to specific individuals — each of whom is referred to Ten Gav by a social worker — providing everything from beds to computers to university tuition. Ten Gav does not fund ongoing expenses, food, dental work or debt.

Donors find recipients by browsing individual stories with pseudonyms that are posted on Ten Gav's website. Each profile also displays how much has been raised to meet each need. Charity recipients can request a maximum of about \$1,500, and Brounstein says 100% of each donation goes directly to the recipient. The organization fundraises separately for its budget of roughly \$840,000 and has just three part-time employees alongside dozens of volunteers.

"We tried to create a platform to broaden the circle of givers with a direct link between the giver and the receiver," Brounstein told eJP. "You get a real person, so that smaller givers feel they have an impact."

At Keshet, Natan said she was also cognizant of the potential for money to sit in a donor-advised fund rather than make its way to recipients. Keshet requires donors with more than NIS 1 million (roughly \$300,000) to give at least 5% of their total account annually, among other requirements, though she said so far donors have far exceeded that number, giving an average of 25% of their accounts.

"One of the biggest issues was, we don't want to become a parking lot for money," she said. "We wanted to be more of a family foundation structure with a minimum payout of 5% per year. But Israelis are very different from Americans. They don't park their money."

COVID also spurred changes at Ten Gav, which saw there was a growing need for laptops for students attending school remotely, as well as concerns about making rent. So Ten Gav established a \$470,000 relief fund that bought 490 computers and tablets, subsidized rent for 119 families and helped four students pay tuition costs.

Recently, the group has begun working with city governments to reach larger groups of Israelis in need. The Jerusalem municipality, for example, offered a manicurist training course for low-income residents and Ten Gav provided them with professional equipment following the course's completion — helping alumni open their own businesses.

"We think of ourselves as creating a triangle," Brounstein said. "The family gets the help they need, we empower the social workers and the donor gets access to a giving opportunity they would not otherwise have." ♦

*With additional reporting by Ben Sales.*

# The VC who believes investing in women is good business

*Less than 3% of venture capital dollars go to startups founded solely by women. After building a network of 25,000 female founders, Leslie Feinzaig is investing in their ideas*

By Gabby Deutch

One might expect that a venture capitalist who invests in women-led companies and founded a network of 25,000 female entrepreneurs came to the female founder space after facing gender discrimination in her own career. And Leslie Feinzaig certainly did — she found it nearly impossible to score VC investments when she was pitching a successful gaming company several years ago.

But early on in her career, the barrier the Costa Rica-born entrepreneur had to face most regularly was not her gender. It was her lack of a green card.

“Out of business school, for example, the jobs that I could apply for were a lot more limited versus my American counterparts,” Feinzaig told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview from her home in Seattle. “For my classmates, if they lost their jobs, they had to live off savings for a little while and they can get back on their feet. If I lost my job, I would have had 60 days to find a new one or leave the country.”

Now, Feinzaig writes checks to women-led startups as the CEO and founder of Graham & Walker, a VC fund, community network and startup incubator. None of this is what Feinzaig expected when she came to the U.S. for business school.

She moved to Boston in 2005 to study at Harvard Business School on a full scholarship. She was drawn to startups and early stage companies, but the precarity of her immigration status and the expense of landing a work visa led her to take a job at Microsoft, where she weathered the Great Recession.

That she ended up in the U.S. at all represented something of a multigenerational full-circle experience for Feinzaig. Her grandparents had hoped

to settle in the U.S. when they fled Poland on the eve of the Holocaust. But strict immigration quotas were the law of the land in the 1930s. Her grandfather and the 10 other Jewish men who had traveled from his village were not allowed to leave their ship when it docked in Ellis Island. Instead, the boat sailed south, and an immigration officer in Costa Rica said anyone could enter the country if they paid a small fee.

“They pooled all their money together. They basically just, like, wadded up the cash,” Feinzaig said.

Her family’s story is the story of the Jewish community in San Jose, and in other communities across Latin America — Jews fled Europe, were denied safe harbor in the U.S. and settled in whatever country would welcome them. Feinzaig expected she would someday return to the country where her entire family still lives. (She recently flew home to Costa Rica to vote in the country’s presidential election; her cousin Eliécer Feinzaig Mintz is the leader of the Liberal Progressive Party and a member of the Legislative Assembly.)

“Originally I just wanted to stay a few years and work here and learn as much as I could and save as much as I could. My earning potential in America is much higher,” said Feinzaig, who is 43. But then she met her American husband, and Seattle became home.

After she got her green card in 2013, Feinzaig left Microsoft to work in product management at tech startups. But the inflection point in her career came in 2016, when she launched her own business, a gaming company called Venture Kits LLC “that was designed to teach kids leadership skills through games,” she explained. “I did all the things that you do to bootstrap a company right from my basement.”

The games, which drew thousands of users, allowed kids to explore being an entrepreneur. Kids and parents enjoyed the games, said Feinzaig: “Even the mommy bloggers loved it.”

But her meetings with investors didn’t go anywhere. They told her she needed more “traction,” a comment that felt hypocritical to Feinzaig when the same VC firms invested in companies “that are just an idea,” while she had already built out a product.

“This is before #MeToo,” Feinzaig said, referring to the social movement that saw women speaking out about sexual harassment and led to broader conversations about gender bias. “We weren’t really talking about who is getting venture capital.”

She was referring to the figures that have emerged in recent years showing a dismal investment environment for female founders. In 2021, companies founded solely by women garnered just 2% of funds invested in VC-backed startups in the U.S., according to PitchBook. The amount of money raised by female-founded startups improved significantly over 2020 — those startups raised \$6.4 billion in 2021, an increase of 83% from the previous year — but the percentage has hovered around 2% since PitchBook began releasing the figures in 2019.

At first, when pitching her own company, Feinzaig took the rejections to heart. “Being the type A personality that I am, I completely internalized it, and thought that there was something wrong with me, and that I just needed to work harder and do better and be better,” she said.

But after talking to other women who were pitching investors and getting similar responses, Feinzaig realized her predicament was not due to any personal failing. So she did what people in the 21st

century who want to build community with strangers do: She turned to Facebook.

In February 2017, she launched a Facebook group called the Female Founders Alliance with 24 CEOs. She never intended for it to morph into the VC fund she now runs, or to grow beyond a few hundred people.

"It just really hit a nerve, and it grew," said Feinzaig. The community has ballooned to 25,000 members, who congregate in a private group on an online platform called Mighty Networks. Founding C-suite employees who identify as female or nonbinary can apply to join the online community, which also offers virtual and in-person networking events as well as seminars on fundraising.

The network's foremost goal is to help founders successfully raise money from VCs. "We're trying to get founders in front of people who can accelerate their success and really unlock doors," said Feinzaig. The founders "needed a safe space where they could ask stupid questions but also a place where they were taken seriously."

In creating the community, Feinzaig was looking for a place to vent and a way to reach investors. But as it grew, she eventually closed down her gaming company and

turned to this work full-time. The next step was launching an accelerator program, which started as an intensive boot camp to help startups raise capital but became a proving ground for female-founded startups whose legitimacy had previously been questioned.

"People always think that you've made it easier because you're a woman. I get that all the time today. Like, there's always that question mark hanging over your head, like, 'Are you the diversity hire?'" asked Feinzaig. "You cannot claim that on my accelerator, because 100% of applicants are women, and so when investors come and check out our deal flow, they know that we are seeing hundreds of startups — at this point we are seeing thousands of startups every year...and the caliber of those companies is extremely high."

A couple years into the project, Feinzaig began to question why she was sending promising startups to other VCs instead of making investments herself. She had no experience raising a fund — the vast majority of general partners at VC funds are men, although the percentage of female GPs in the U.S. has increased to 15.4% — and it took her two years to raise \$10 million,

which was raised mainly (but not entirely) from women. She launched Graham & Walker, a VC firm, in October.

Graham & Walker does not make the massive investments that garner headlines or whispers of unicorn status. Most of its investments are between \$100,000 and \$300,000, the type of early stage investment that could make a decisive difference for a startup that needs a small infusion of capital to get started.

Most importantly to Feinzaig, the companies in which she is investing have smart ideas and strong business models — in other words, they're sound investments. The startups' products need not relate to gender or other social goals. "We're not a women's fund. We are a tech fund with proprietary deal flow," she said. Graham & Walker has invested in 27 companies to date in fields like artificial intelligence, healthcare and legal tech.

"We're investing specifically in tech companies," said Feinzaig, "with a goal of reshaping what the NASDAQ looks like by the time my daughters" — they're 6 and 3 — "graduate from college." ♦

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## Blake Masters' provocations reach back to his college days

*In an essay published in an obscure libertarian publication and unearthed by JI, the Arizona Republican Senate hopeful quotes Goering and a noted conspiracy theorist who espouses antisemitic views*

By Matthew Kassel

**B**lake Masters, a leading candidate in Arizona's Republican Senate primary, has gained national prominence thanks in part to a series of defiantly controversial online ads in which he has brandished a menacing short-barreled rifle, argued that "psychopaths are running the country" and pushed the false election narrative that former President Donald Trump "won in 2020."

The self-proclaimed "anti-progressive" seems to revel in such starkly worded

provocations. Since launching his campaign last July, he has also described Lee Kuan Yew, the founder of modern Singapore who was seen as an authoritarian if visionary leader, as one of his favorite historical figures, and — more recently — expressed admiration for the Unabomber's anti-tech manifesto.

Even as his actual positions remain somewhat hard to decipher, Masters, a 35-year-old venture capitalist and Peter Thiel protégé, has quickly staked a claim as one of the most high-profile figures in a

nascent but growing coalition of populist right-wing ideologues affiliated with the so-called "national conservative" movement.

The political newcomer has long espoused divisive views that, however authentic, seem designed to stir outrage. In fact, a tendentious essay written when Masters was a 19-year-old undergraduate student at Stanford University — recently unearthed by *Jewish Insider* — may provide insight into his thinking as well as a possible throughline from his college years to today.

In 2006, Masters penned an article



for an obscure libertarian publication in which he referenced a “poignant quotation” from Nazi leader Hermann Goering, while citing a noted conspiracy theorist who has suggested that an infamous antisemitic tract “accurately” describes “much of what is happening in our world.”

The essay was published on the eponymous website of a controversial libertarian author and think tank leader named Lew Rockwell, who is alleged to have ghostwritten a series of bigoted newsletters for former Rep. Ron Paul (R-TX) in the late 1980s and early '90s. The site, founded in 1999, describes itself as “anti-state,” “anti-war” and “pro-market.”

Masters now describes himself as a former libertarian who is fully supportive of Trump’s agenda, but at the time of the essay, he appears to have been deeply embroiled in libertarian thought. The essay’s brash rhetoric and somewhat paranoid insinuations, however, are reminiscent of his current approach, though he now appears to have shied away from Nazi allusions.

The emphatically titled piece, “The Lusitania Is Down! (or How to Sell a War),” examines the U.S. entry into World War I to illustrate what Masters notes is his “primary message” — that “government creates war for no good reason.”

Among his main “sources,” Masters says in a parenthetical at the beginning of the piece, is G. Edward Griffin’s *The Creature from Jekyll Island*, a conspiracy-laden polemic — published in 1994 and widely revered in die-hard libertarian circles — that calls for the abolishment of the Federal Reserve. The book, whose title alludes to the location of a secret meeting off the coast of Georgia that led to the Fed’s creation, argues that the central banking system “has become an accomplice in the support of totalitarian regimes throughout the world.”

Now 90, Griffin is known for espousing a wide range of dubious beliefs on cancer treatments, chemtrails, the assassination of John F. Kennedy Jr. and the Sept. 11 attacks, among other things.

Griffin has, additionally, been accused of propagating antisemitic conspiracy theories, including the suggestion that *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* — a fabricated Russian document, first published in 1903, that describes a Jewish plan for world

domination — bears some truth. “There is no doubt that the *Protocols* accurately describe much of what is happening in our world today,” Griffin once wrote of the text, which has long been discredited.

While Griffin has acknowledged that “there is considerable evidence that the *Protocols* are a forgery,” he has also charged that “present-day political Zionists are promoting the New World Order.”

In his best-selling book on the Federal Reserve, Griffin invokes another classic antisemitic trope in describing a nefarious financial plot that is engineered, he theorizes, by a prominent Jewish banking family. The “Rothschild Formula,” as Griffin puts it, is a scheme “in which the world’s money cabal deliberately encourages war as a means of stimulating the profitable production of armaments and of keeping nations perpetually in debt. This is not profit seeking, it is genocide.”

Despite such assertions, Griffin has denied accusations that he is antisemitic.

Masters, who mentioned the Rothschild family in his essay, relies heavily on Griffin’s work to support his suppositions — most notably, that the sinking of the R.M.S. *Lusitania* by a German U-boat in 1915 was used as a pretext for America’s entry into World War I the following year. The U.S. government — in the interest of safeguarding U.S. banking interests and securing America’s position on the international stage — deliberately misrepresented the attack, Masters contends, through a “massive” propaganda campaign “designed to demonize Germany and drum up support for American involvement in ‘protecting democracy.’”

“This example shows that wars really are manufactured by government, often at the request or benefit of third party special interests,” Masters writes. “Wars can, and are, sold to the public through propaganda and murder. Unjust wars (and the U.S. hasn’t been involved in a just war in over 140 years) always benefit certain groups and ultimately serve the aspirations of the political class in general at the expense of thousands and millions of lives.”

Masters goes on to suggest that this line of thought may also extend to World War II.

“I’ll stop just short of claiming that FDR

knew about Pearl Harbor, etc.,” Masters elaborates. “But clearly, we have seen here that blindly accepting the official historical account as absolute truth can be (and usually is) a grave and ignorant mistake. Are we really to believe the hackneyed paradigm of the gentle and peaceful America that contentedly minds its own business until some anti-democratic foreign band of lunatics inexplicably attacks us? That America only flexes its military might when the security of world peace or democracy itself are in jeopardy? I need not connect the dots and illustrate the obvious parallels with the current American wars and foreign policy.”

Unexpectedly, Masters concludes his article with what he describes as a “particularly representative and poignant quotation” from Goering, a high-ranking Nazi official who was known as Adolf Hitler’s right-hand man: “Oh, that is all well and good, but, voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same way in any country.”

Goering made the assertion to American psychologist Gustave M. Gilbert during the Nuremberg trials. The Nazi war criminal committed suicide in 1946 just hours before he was to be hanged.

In a combative statement to *JI*, Masters defended what he described as the essay’s “anti-war” sentiments while acknowledging that he had gone “too far” in suggesting that America’s involvement in most armed conflicts had been unjustified.

“Guilt by association is a cheap journalist tactic and I reject it. If an essay I wrote in 2006 cites an author, that doesn’t mean I endorse all of his views,” he argued. “As for the anti-war statement, I was 19, writing in opposition to the Iraq War — a stance that turned out to be prescient. I went too far and stated that no recent American wars have been just. In this race, I have been called sexist for saying you should be able to raise a family on one income, racist for taking a stance against crime and believing we should fund our police, and xenophobic for arguing a real country must have real borders. Looks like the journalist class is

running out of content... I suppose it was only a matter of time before I got called anti-semitic for criticizing wartime propaganda in an essay I wrote as a teenager.”

Masters had no response when asked to explain his decision to include the Goering quotation, nor did he directly address a question about Griffin’s alleged antisemitic statements.

While the article was published more than 15 years ago, its thesis seems to align with what Masters now characterizes as a non-interventionist foreign policy outlook that is highly skeptical of providing international aid to most countries.

Such views, while hardly anomalous within the Republican Party, have raised concerns among Jewish leaders in Arizona who have questioned, among other things, whether Masters will support the continuation of U.S. security assistance to Israel if he is elected to the Senate. Masters has insisted that he is in favor of such aid, noting that the U.S. and Israel have a “special relationship.”

“My model here is President Trump,” he said in an interview with JI a few months ago. “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.”

But at least one instance of past social media activity suggests that Masters may previously have held different views about America’s long-standing relationship with Israel. In 2010, he shared an article on Facebook that criticized Israel as “the North Korea of the Middle East” and argued that the Gaza Strip “has been made a modern concentration camp.”

The article — written by Karen Kiattkowski, a former Pentagon officer — was published on LewRockwell.com.

Masters did not respond to a question from JI asking whether he was endorsing the views expressed in the article when he shared the piece.

That such questions exist, however, underscore some possible tensions in

Masters’ foreign policy platform as he has strained to balance an overwhelmingly isolationist worldview with what seems, at times, like an otherwise aggressive approach.

Earlier this month, at a Senate candidate forum hosted by the Republican Jewish Coalition in Scottsdale, Masters announced that he would “partner” with Sen. Tom Cotton (R-AR) in opposing the Iran nuclear deal, according to a recording of his remarks obtained by JI. By aligning himself with the Arkansas Republican, Masters was suggesting that he is in favor of an unusually hawkish approach: Cotton has long been among the most vocal advocates of bombing Iran.

“The Iranians, they’re paying attention. They see the weakness, they see the embarrassing debacle in Afghanistan, they smell blood in the water just like Xi and Putin do,” Masters said at the RJC event, referring to Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin. “And so it’s important to remember that when we stumble, that has consequences not just for America but for friends and allies abroad.”

“And the antisemitism problem, by the way, obviously not just confined to Iran, right?” Masters went on. “I mean, look what’s happening in France. It’s in our own Congress. It’s in the Squad. Look at, you know, Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar. These women have been very clear about how they feel about Israel.”

On other issues of international concern, Masters has advocated for a more hands-off approach, including American support for Ukraine amid a sustained Russian assault. While Masters has argued that there is “no reason to provoke” Russia “over NATO expansion and Bush-era regime change mania,” he has also said the conflict is difficult to read because “so much of what you see is propaganda and emotionalism all the way down.”

In an interview with Fox News host Tucker Carlson last month, Masters doubled down on that argument, noting more broadly that “there is an awful lot of” disinformation and propaganda “coming from the White House.”

Days later, a clip of the segment was recirculated on Russian state television.

Masters is among at least three leading

candidates who are competing in Arizona’s crowded Republican primary this August, including Attorney General Mark Brnovich and energy executive Jim Lamon. The victor is expected to go up against Sen. Mark Kelly (D-AZ), who is viewed as vulnerable, in the general election.

While Masters does not appear to have spoken publicly about Griffin’s work since publishing his essay years ago, he has otherwise more recently expressed support for another polarizing figure: Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA). The freshman congresswoman has frequently been accused of invoking antisemitic tropes, including social media comments in which she speculated that California wildfires were caused by a space laser controlled by “Rothschild Inc, international investment banking firm.”

“I’d love her endorsement,” Masters said, of Greene, in the interview with JI a few months ago. “I think she’s just really impressive.” ♦