

## THE WEEKLY PRINT

*The evolution of Blake Masters; Doug Mastriano's history of Holocaust comparisons; Israel's tourism minister is looking to jump-start a battered industry; Boston BDS map of Jewish groups has 'potential to incite violence,' Auchincloss says; Change to nonprofit security grant application weighing 'social vulnerability' raises questions; Washington remains committed to Middle East, says key U.S. diplomat; and The Israeli folk singer keeping Debbie Friedman's legacy alive*

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## The evolution of Blake Masters

*The Arizona GOP Senate candidate — who just earned Trump's blessing — decries 'open borders' but once called for 'unrestricted' immigration while praising drug smugglers as 'heroes'*

By Matthew Kassel

Blake Masters, an author and venture capitalist now seeking the Republican nomination in Arizona's high-profile Senate race, has cast himself as an outspoken immigration hawk who frequently inveighs against the dangers of "open borders" amid an influx of "illegal aliens" from Mexico carrying enough drugs "each month," he warns, "to kill every American twice over."

"Not on my watch," Masters declares on his campaign site, pledging to "finish the wall," "triple" the number of Border Patrol officials and "always oppose amnesty for illegal aliens," among other measures. "As your Senator I will fight tirelessly to end illegal immigration and secure our border."

While stridently worded, such hardline policy objectives are by no means unusual for a Republican primary candidate in Arizona, where border security is among the top issues. Masters' approach stands out, however, because it is so strikingly at odds with sentiments he expressed in the mid-aughts as an undergraduate at Stanford University.

In a series of short, polemical blog

posts, Masters once suggested that "illegal immigration is an ethical contradiction in terms," argued that "'unrestricted' immigration is the only choice," and commended U.S. service members who had participated in a drug trafficking ring along the southwestern border as "heroes," among other things.

The posts, published to a LiveJournal account in 2005, when Masters was 19, were recently unearthed by *Jewish Insider* and have not previously been reported. The account was operated under a pseudonym, but a person familiar with the entries — who asked to remain anonymous for fear of reprisal — confirmed to *JI* that Masters had written them.

Amalia Halikias, a spokesperson for Masters' campaign, did not respond to numerous calls, text messages and emails from *JI* over multiple days. Masters himself did not respond to requests for comment from *JI* via text.

Masters, who is now 35, composed the entries nearly 17 years ago, when he identified as something of a libertarian purist whose deep skepticism of state power appears to have influenced a proudly laissez-

faire approach to drug legalization, military authority, unfettered immigration and even the pretense of national borders themselves.

In one representative entry, for instance, Masters suggested that a government-drawn border is just a "line in the sand," and said that libertarians "would have no trouble stating that 'illegal immigration is an ethical contradiction in terms, with regards to nation-states.'"

"Does this mean unrestricted flooding of immigrants and the stereotypically ensuing anarchistic chaos? Hardly," he explained, using the abstract jargon typical of undergraduate students entrenched in political theory. "The key to the puzzle is private property rights. Anyone can clearly see the arbitrary and even violent foundation of a nation state...after all, are we really supposed to believe that a government can draw a line in the sand, and that the people living on one side are somehow inherently different or deserving of more or less rights (i use a negative concept of rights here) than those on the other?"

Elsewhere, Masters applauded U.S. law enforcement officers involved in a widespread criminal conspiracy —

uncovered by an FBI sting operation known as Operation Lively Green — to smuggle cocaine into the U.S. from Mexico. The drug bust, Masters insisted, had “it backwards.”

“For seeking a profit while conducting trade between groups of consenting adults, in the face of government oppression, these men and women arrested in the latest cocaine sting are heroes,” he proclaimed. “Furthermore, since many were members of the armed ‘services,’ the time they spent focusing on conducting this voluntary and peaceful trade was more time they were unable to spend executing a far less peaceful profession: that of a state soldier or military officer.”

The blog posts provide unique and seemingly unvarnished insight into the mind of an opinionated young political activist, once steeped in libertarian thought, who is now gaining traction in his first bid for public office while promoting a completely different message.

“Under Democrat rule, we have drug mules crossing the border freely while brave American law enforcement officers die to save their lives,” Masters said in one recent tweet. “Democrats have given up on you,” he charged in another, promising to “put an end to smuggling.” The border, he bemoaned, “is wide open” as “tons of drugs pour into Arizona.”

Masters claims to have jettisoned his libertarian views and embraced right-wing orthodoxy when he became a staunch supporter of former President Donald Trump, whose policies he has championed as a Senate candidate. On Thursday, following months of speculation, Masters notched a coveted endorsement from Trump, who praised the political newcomer as “a great modern-day thinker” who is “strong on border security” and will “support our military and our vets.”

“It’s incredible to have his endorsement,” Masters said in a statement last week. “I wish everyone could know how this feels. Soon we will have a young, fearless, dynamic America First coalition in the U.S. Senate and that is thanks to Donald Trump.”

Since he launched his campaign last summer, Masters has gained prominence as a figurehead in the so-called “national conservative” movement, which hews to a style of reactionary populism that

has recently gained a foothold within the Republican Party. Curtis Yarvin, the “neoreactionary” blogger who is viewed as an intellectual godfather of national conservatism — and openly favors monarchy over democracy — seems to appreciate Masters’ approach. He gave the maximum amount allowed for individual contributions, \$5,800, to Masters’ Senate campaign.

Even as Masters claims to have evolved in recent years, his older writings suggest a deeper penchant for extreme and often contrarian views that seem to be a defining feature of his political self-conception.

That he is given to significant ideological shifts — veering from an unqualified endorsement of open borders to vilifying undocumented immigrants, for example — could raise more immediate questions over the positions he is likely to adopt if elected to the Senate.

Of course, Masters first needs to advance past the August primary, where he is among five Republicans jockeying for the chance to unseat Sen. Mark Kelly (D-AZ), who is seen as a vulnerable incumbent. Trump’s blessing is all but certain to give Masters’ campaign a much-needed boost in the final months of the race. Polling has shown him in third place behind Mark Brnovich, the attorney general of Arizona, and Jim Lamon, the well-funded solar executive who has said he will spend \$50 million on his campaign.

While Masters is comparatively under-resourced, he has benefited from at least \$13.5 million in outside support from a super PAC funded by a powerful mentor, the billionaire tech investor and Republican donor Peter Thiel.

Masters, the former chief operating officer of Thiel Capital and president of the Thiel Foundation, first met his future boss at Stanford Law School, where Thiel taught a class on startups. Then in his mid-20s, Masters was so impressed that he published his notes on a personal blog, which would form the basis for *Zero to One: Notes on Startups, or How to Build the Future*, the bestselling book he co-authored with Thiel in 2014.

Prior to running for office, Masters — who is now known as a fierce critic of Big Tech — seems to have been an enthusiastic user of social networking sites and other

online message boards.

As recently as four years ago, for instance, he was posting his favorite book covers and children’s home decor ideas to Pinterest. Between 2012 and 2015, the Tucson native — who found success in Silicon Valley before returning to Arizona — maintained a Tumblr page, featuring personal and professional updates such as the birth of a son and a round of fundraising for a legal research and analytics startup he had co-founded.

Masters was also apparently an active commenter on web forums for gun enthusiasts and weightlifters. Back in 2008, for example, on a site called GlockTalk.com, a user named “kinggps,” who claimed to be “located in Tucson,” expressed interest in buying “a cheap 12g, an SKS, AK’s, or a good .308 bolt action rifle, among other things,” concluding, “and go Ron Paul!” — a reference to the former libertarian congressman from Texas who was then running for president. (Masters supported Paul’s campaign.)

On another site, BodyBuilding.com, a user with the same “kinggps” handle described himself as “a 6’3 college student weighing in at 185 pounds” and “training to walk-on to” his school’s varsity basketball team — as Masters had tried to do at Stanford. (The former athlete has said he “ultimately didn’t make” the cut, but did serve as a male practice player with the Stanford women’s basketball team during his time in college.)

In documenting his progress, the aspiring basketball star uploaded a number of shirtless selfies showing a man, who appears to have been a young Masters, flexing his muscles in front of a mirror while holding a digital camera. (The photos were removed from the site shortly after JI shared them with Masters’ campaign on Friday, though the profile page remains online.)

While the exact meaning behind “kinggps” is unclear, Masters has long favored the moniker as an online handle, according to three high school friends who spoke with JI. It was, Masters’ old classmates said, the screen name he used for his AOL instant messaging account when he attended Green Fields Country Day School, a private school in Tucson that closed in 2019.

If the message-board comments

are largely amiable and even earnest at times, Masters' LiveJournal entries are, by comparison, contemptuous of power.

The account was created on May 12, 2004, and last updated on Oct. 20, 2005 — two years before the site was purchased by a Russian media company. Founded in 1999, LiveJournal was once a popular blogging platform that served as an online diary of sorts where users posted confessional writing and other musings, back when the internet was a far more anonymous domain. It is now widely viewed as a repository of neglected accounts that many users have likely forgotten to deactivate.

LiveJournal was allegedly hacked in 2014, and emails and passwords associated with more than 26 million users were later leaked online. Among the accounts compromised in the security breach was "kinggps," according to DeHashed, a searchable database that collects leaked information. The email connected with the account, DeHashed indicated, was b-masters@comcast.net, while the password included Masters' initials, BGM, along with a string of numbers that seem to represent his birthday, off by one day.

The website Have I Been Pwned?, which announced in 2020 that it had obtained the data from the LiveJournal security breach, also revealed that a LiveJournal account tied to the email b-masters@comcast.net had been compromised.

Though his LiveJournal account has been dormant for years, Masters seems to have used the platform as a testing ground for intellectual ventures, despite having published only four posts. Even writing under an alias, he showed interest in engaging with the limited number of readers who happened upon his blog.

"Let me know what you think," he concluded in one entry, eliciting a comment from a fellow LiveJournal user who had recently been introduced to Masters through a mutual friend and was intrigued by the staunchly libertarian thrust of his opinions.

The former acquaintance — who confirmed that Masters was behind the blog — recalled reading and remarking on his posts during the brief period his account had been active in the late summer and early fall of 2005. The user, whose LiveJournal account is now private, was unaware their

comments were still visible on Masters' page until JI inquired about them on Monday. The comments have since been deleted.

For his part, Masters appears to have been a gruff interlocutor, if also somewhat apologetic for his unsparing tone. "Sorry if I come across as an asshole when it comes to politics," he said in one exchange, on the merits of a series of Supreme Court rulings. "I just refuse to compromise when I'm dealing with freedom and peace. But no bad feelings. I am actually kind of normal outside the political realm, anyways."

During his time at Stanford, where he received a political science degree in 2008, Masters was a lonely if exceedingly capable student who was known to spend time in the college library researching and writing papers for other undergraduates who paid for his services, according to two former friends from Tucson who kept in touch with him in college and said he had bragged about the scheme.

"He just thought Stanford was really, really easy and he was not challenged," one childhood friend, who grew apart from Masters over his political views, said in an interview with JI.

In many instances, Masters' LiveJournal posts suggested a similar attitude, as he expounded on a variety of subjects with characteristic bluster.

"I don't care about the Supreme Court," Masters declared at the beginning of one entry. "It just doesn't matter. That everyone thinks it does, or should, only illustrates the degree to which people prefer to dwell on what they're fed than actually think. But I'm bored, I'll play along. If I did care about the Supreme Court, here's what I'd say."

Among his arguments was the surprising suggestion — buried in a parenthetical near the end of the post — that American democracy had been a misguided experiment. The Founding Fathers were "wrong to set up the Supreme Court (and, by extension, the entire government)," Masters argued. "To their credit, I doubt they ever imagined we were going to be conditioned to worship democracy and let things get so messy."

Now that he is running for Senate, Masters has taken a more active interest in the High Court, alleging that Democrats are "chomping at the bit" to "pack" the bench

and describing President Joe Biden's newly confirmed Supreme Court pick, Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, as a "pedophile apologist."

While the blog posts contradict Masters' current thinking on a range of key issues, they also demonstrate how his political beliefs have, by varying degrees, shifted from one extreme to the other over nearly the past two decades.

"That's the biggest surprise for us, meaning anybody who knew him," Collin Wedel, a Tucson native who said Masters had been one of his closest friends until they stopped talking because of political differences that arose during the Trump era and have continued into the Senate bid, told JI. "If he had announced that he was running for Senate on some kind of weird libertarian, we-should-have-a-gold-standard platform, I think all of us would have said, 'Well, yeah, that was Blake.'"

Before Trump, Wedel said in a recent interview, Masters had long espoused the views of a "classic, extreme libertarian" who endorsed "open borders," backed the gold standard and identified as an "outspoken" supporter of abortion rights. "Blake was the one who convinced me to be pro-choice," said Wedel, who is now an attorney in Los Angeles. "I remember him arguing with me. I mean, it was Tucson, Arizona, in the '90s, so it was a very conservative evangelical community, and he was *not* that."

"How can you control somebody else's life or body?" Wedel said Masters had once reasoned while questioning the anti-abortion line.

Masters now says on his campaign site that he is "100% pro-life," describing *Roe v. Wade*, the Supreme Court ruling that legalized abortion at the federal level, as "a horrible decision" that "must be reversed."

Masters' teenage scribbles weren't reserved exclusively to LiveJournal. In recent weeks, he has faced scrutiny for a provocative essay — published on a libertarian website in 2006 and discovered by JI — in which he referenced a "poignant quotation" from Hermann Goering, the high-ranking Nazi leader, while arguing that "the U.S. hasn't been involved in a just war in over 140 years," among other tendentious assertions.

In a statement to JI in late April, Masters

acknowledged that he had gone “too far” when he said “that no recent American wars have been just,” but he did not address his decision to include the Goering quotation.

Speaking last month with Fox News host Tucker Carlson, who has hailed Masters as “the future of the Republican Party,” the Senate hopeful boasted that “most” of the essay — which had also cited a noted conspiracy theorist who has been accused of espousing antisemitic tropes — “holds up” in hindsight. “I explain how the state often uses propaganda to sell its wars,” Masters said on Carlson’s TV show, where he is a frequent guest. “I pointed out that that’s what the Nazis did.”

Masters, who describes himself as an “anti-progressive,” has expressed some surprise that his views have fueled controversy. But he has also often invited criticism, not least in a series of online ads whose stark imagery and alarming rhetoric have drawn national attention. In the videos, Masters has falsely asserted that “Trump won in 2020,” declared that “psychopaths are running the country” and argued that Americans “should be able to raise a family on one single income.”

Yet the revelation that Masters once quoted Goering seems to have unsettled the typically unflappable Senate candidate, notwithstanding the persistent accusations of extremism that have been directed at his campaign. Rather than bending to what he has criticized as a harmfully censorious media culture, Masters has aggressively pushed back against the “cheap journalist tactic” of “guilt by association,” rejecting the implication that he had in any way been wrong to invoke a Nazi war criminal who was known as Hitler’s right-hand man.

Last month, Masters even threatened litigation against an *Arizona Mirror* reporter who wrote that he had “praised” Goering — an allegation Masters disputed as defamatory in a letter from his attorney. “Blake Masters Is Not and Never Has Been a Nazi Sympathizer,” the letter said, while arguing, among other things, that *JL*’s initial report had made no such claim. The *Mirror* article has since “been updated to change the reference to Masters’ 2006 writing,” according to an editor’s note.

Not long after Trump issued his endorsement last week, Lamon had already

gone on the offensive, releasing an attack ad designed to ensure that voters would not forget the contents of Masters’ college essay.

“You think you know Blake Masters?” a narrator intones, before noting that the Republican Senate candidate had “called World War II unjust,” “extensively quoted an antisemite who believes Jews and Zionists are bent on world domination” and “unironically quoted a Nazi war criminal.”

On Friday, Masters responded in a video statement he shared with his nearly 130,000 Twitter followers. “Lamon basically calls me a Nazi, an antisemite, he implies that I somehow dislike veterans or that I support terrorism,” he said bluntly, his toddler-age son nestled in one arm. “It’s the worst.”

“As my competitors self-destruct, I’m sure these attacks are only going to increase,” Masters speculated. “They’ll interview my classmates from middle school. They’ll pore over whatever I may have written as a teenager and try to twist it all out of proportion. But I’m not going to get sucked into that kind of petty, dirty politics because I actually have something concrete to talk about — an optimistic vision to save Arizona and save this country. President Trump sure saw the difference between me and Jim Lamon.”

Still, Masters’ critics — particularly within Arizona’s Jewish community — remain convinced that the Nazi quotation was objectionable, even if his decision to mention Goering had been “the opposite” of an endorsement, as he argued at a local Republican club event.

“The overlap between conspiracy theorists and antisemites is quite strong,” Tim Eckstein, who chairs the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Phoenix, explained in an email exchange with *JL*. “Masters is no exception. The Goering quote is, in and of itself, not antisemitic. It is that Masters cannot appreciate that other non-Nazis have said similar things, and there is something pernicious in quoting Goering, or any other prominent member of that murderous regime. For him, it is all one big game.”

Masters does appear to delight in prodding at liberal orthodoxies. Lately, he has taken heat for blaming gun violence on “Black people” and agreeing with an interviewer who likened campaign finance

law to *Kristallnacht*. Masters has also promoted the “great replacement” theory, arguing that Democrats want to “change the demographics of this country,” while vowing to impeach Biden over what he characterizes as the president’s egregiously lax immigration policies.

Not unexpectedly, Masters held an opposing view as a college student. “People are free to move from place to place,” he wrote in one of his LiveJournal entries, “so long as they do not violate the property rights of the owners.”

In the following post, Masters held forth on the occasional merits of both conservative and liberal viewpoints — suggesting an ecumenical outlook that now largely appears to have vanished as the former libertarian seeks the kind of political power he might once have impugned on his LiveJournal account.

“Sometimes the conservatives are morally right, and sometimes the liberals are morally right,” Masters wrote. “Sometimes everybody’s wrong.” ♦



# Doug Mastriano's history of Holocaust comparisons

*The Pennsylvania GOP gubernatorial nominee once said nothing compares to the Holocaust. He's made those comparisons on topics including election fraud, gun control, abortion and cancel culture*

By Gabby Deutch

**D**oug Mastriano, a Pennsylvania state senator and the Republican nominee in the state's gubernatorial race, once wrote that making comparisons between the Holocaust and modern events "betrays one's ignorance of historic fact."

Mastriano, a military veteran who has a doctorate in history, shared a post to his public Facebook page in July 2018 in which a Holocaust survivor criticized Democrats who referred to detention camps on the United States' southern border as "concentration camps," and wrote that most Americans are "woefully ignorant" of the Holocaust.

"There is nothing to compare it to," he wrote.

But a review of his past social media posts and public addresses reveals a history of doing just that — comparing the horrors of the 1930s and 1940s in Europe to current political events in the United States, on topics including gun control, election fraud, cancel culture, abortion and the preservation of historical monuments. He also uses overtly Christian terminology as a way to explain American war victories, including the Allies' victory over the Nazis — a fight to which he compared his fight for "election integrity."

In August 2019, Mastriano posted a graphic to his public Facebook page — the page, created in January 2018 when he mounting a failed congressional bid, is called "Doug Mastriano Fighting for Freedom" and has 107,000 followers — that compared supporters of gun control to the perpetrators of the Holocaust.

Two images appeared side-by-side, with the caption "#ShallNotBeInfringed #NeverForget #NeverAgain." One was a photo of shoes left on the lawn in front of the U.S. Capitol that had been placed

there by supporters of gun control efforts to memorialize victims of gun violence. The other showed a massive pile of shoes of Holocaust victims that were discovered after a concentration camp was liberated. The first image was labeled "shoes left by supporters of gun control, 2018," and the second was labeled, "shoes left by victims of gun control, Germany, 1945."

A Facebook post from February 2021 expressed support for Gina Carano, the star of the Disney TV series "The Mandalorian," who was fired after sharing an Instagram post that compared the plight of Jews in the Holocaust to modern conservatives who face backlash for sharing their opinions.

"Gina Carano is absolutely correct. The Cancel Culture mob is behaving like its [sic] 1930s Germany," wrote Mastriano.

A June 2020 Facebook post, shared amid a summer of racial justice protests that led to Confederate monuments being taken down across the country, featured the caption, "Never forget" above an image of Auschwitz. "Over 1.1 million people were murdered in Auschwitz, and it still stands 72 years later," read the text that appeared underneath the photo. "Why? Because Jews who survived wanted it preserved, as it is a reminder to never let the evil that was Nazism ever happen again. Never tear down memorials!"

Robin Schatz, director of government affairs at the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia, said she does not believe Mastriano's views comes from a place of antisemitism, but added that he needs to learn why such remarks are problematic.

"I don't think this is coming from a place of deliberately antagonizing the Jewish community. I think, as with many people, it's not understanding, and hopefully he will sit down with us sooner rather than later," said Schatz. She said that representatives

of the state's Jewish federations have been trying to arrange a meeting with Mastriano, whose district in south central Pennsylvania does not have an active Jewish community.

"I think he needs to be educated," she explained, on "why this language is not appropriate."

Mastriano, who is Christian, has sparked criticism from the Pennsylvania Jewish community in the past, particularly over his use of Jewish religious symbols in his campaign. At an event announcing Mastriano's run for governor, a man blew a shofar and wore a tallit, or prayer shawl. A speaker identified as "Pastor Don" told the crowd that the sounding of the shofar — which is used by Jews on the High Holidays — would "blow the breath of God over this place and this people." Several Jewish leaders wrote in a letter to the editor of Harrisburg's *Patriot-News* that they "object to State Senator Doug Mastriano's appropriation of Jewish symbols."

The Democratic candidate in the governor's race, Josh Shapiro, has made his Jewish identity central to his candidacy. A spokesperson for Shapiro declined to comment.

Mastriano, who did not respond to a request for comment, has stood by his use of Holocaust comparisons on at least one occasion.

Earlier this month, after *The Forward* reported that Mastriano once compared gun control policies to actions Hitler took in the 1930s, Mastriano reposted the video of him making those remarks to his Twitter. "Historically, this is accurate," he wrote.

Mastriano, who was elected to the Pennsylvania Senate in 2019, is known for his opposition to vaccine mandates, his belief that the 2020 election was stolen from former President Donald Trump due to

widespread election fraud and his presence on the grounds of the Capitol during the Jan. 6 riot.

During a speech at a December 2021 “Medical Freedom Rally” in Harrisburg, Pa., Mastriano acknowledged the difficulty of using Holocaust comparisons, but proceeded to use one as a motif throughout his speech.

“As a historian, I’m a little cautious about this next quote I’m going to read you, but please just please bear with me. This is not the 1930s or 1940s, but look at this minor comparison here,” said Mastriano. He told the crowd about Martin Niemöller, the German pastor who publicly criticized Adolf Hitler and author of the famous poem “First They Came.”

“This is what he said. You think about how people are being demonized and isolated in our society at this time — it’s not as bad as what I’m reading to you, but just think about it in this context here, historically. Here’s what Dr. Niemöller says,” Mastriano told the crowd, before reading the poem: “First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out because I was not a socialist...”

“That’s the importance,” said Mastriano, “of us coming together in this vein at this time, with so many of us being demonized and castigated and judged and condemned and having names called at us the past year and a half here for standing for freedoms.”

Several minutes later, Mastriano returned to the poem when he described the people whom he alleged had been persecuted because of vaccine mandates.

“First they came for the students, then the athletes, then the pilots and then the medical care workers,” said Mastriano. “Suddenly because you want to have a choice, now you’re a villain, you’re going to lose your job? What is going on here?”

Mastriano has long been fascinated by military history. He has written multiple books about World War I, and his most recent — published in 2017 — pays homage to a “devout Christian” who was honored as a hero for his role in the “Great War.”

His writings also express an interest in the period between World War I and World War II, when freedoms were lost and the tyrannical Nazi regime rose in Germany.

In a 2001 master’s thesis, Mastriano

warned of a left-wing “Hitlerian Putsch” that will overtake America if the U.S. government puts guardrails in place “to limit the power/influence of the military,” *The Washington Post* first reported.

He has also compared his own political goals to American efforts to defeat the Nazis in World War II.

In December 2020, Mastriano authored an op-ed in *The Mercury*, a newspaper covering Pottstown, Pa. Published on Christmas Eve during the weeks-long period in which Mastriano and other Trump allies attempted to overturn the election results, the op-ed placed that fight in the context of pivotal battles in World War II and the Revolutionary War. The article was titled “A Christmas Miracle.”

Mastriano described the apocryphal story of George Washington, then a general in the Continental Army, leading his soldiers across the Delaware River into New Jersey on Christmas in 1776. “The impossible became possible,” wrote Mastriano. “The tide was turning.”

Then, he wrote, “Fast forward to Belgium, 1944. The Nazis were bent on blunting the Allied offensive in the west.” But Gen. George Patton issued a prayer ahead of Christmas 1944 “that would change the course of history,” wrote Mastriano.

“Soon after the prayer, the weather cleared. And not only did the weather clear, but so did the path to victory,” he wrote. “Within days, General Patton counterattacked the German forces.” The result: “The impossible became possible, just as it had in 1776.”

Now, wrote Mastriano, “we are facing political struggles that seem despairingly ‘impossible.’” He described “widespread fraud allegations plaguing our election processes, and election officials afraid of standing up for their country.” The U.S., he wrote, “is facing unprecedented political turbulence.”

He called for the same kind of miracle that helped the U.S. defeat the British two and a half centuries ago and the Nazis nearly 80 years ago.

“I believe that if we prayerfully stand in solidarity, remembering the reason for the season, and the legacy of history that brought us here,” wrote Mastriano, “we may just have a Christmas miracle in 2020.”

The op-ed no longer appears on *The Mercury*’s website, but Mastriano’s Facebook post with its full text is still available.

In an August 2018 tweet, Mastriano appeared to compare Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-MI), then a first-time congressional candidate, to Nazis. He linked to an article from a right-wing politics site that claimed Tlaib had stolen the phone of Laura Loomer, a Jewish political activist, under the headline “Palestinian Congressional Candidate ASSAULTS Jewish Journalist at Political Event.”

In the tweet, he also included an image of Nazi propaganda minister Josef Goebbels.

“This sort of evil has been around before,” Mastriano wrote. “Stand against these evil fascists.”

In a February 2019 Facebook post, Mastriano used a quote from Hitler to describe pro-choice activists.

“Adolf Hitler said, ‘I want to raise a generation of young people devoid of a conscience, imperious, relentless, & cruel,’” wrote Mastriano, although the source of the quotation is not clear. “Picture below is what he wanted.”

The image showed a girl stepping on a baby doll, and the caption claimed it was at a pro-choice rally. ♦

# Israel's tourism minister is looking to jump-start a battered industry

*'We need a vision for where we are heading,' said Yoel Razvozov. 'If we want to aim for 10 million tourists, then we will need to build another 40,000 hotel rooms and we must also improve the services we provide and the value for money'*

By Ruth Marks Eglash

**A**THENS – As Israel gears up for what could be its biggest summer ever for incoming tourism – rebooting an industry shattered by two years of COVID-19 restrictions and closures – Tourism Minister Yoel Razvozov says the country is now ready and eager to welcome back international visitors, particularly Diaspora Jews.

"Our industry has really missed its tourists, especially the Jews from Diaspora communities in the United States, France, Britain and elsewhere – we know how much people want to come now and see the relatives they've not seen for two years," Razvozov told *Jewish Insider*.

Razvozov, who spoke to *JI* last week on the sidelines of the Israel-Greece Conference, a one-day confab in Athens sponsored by the Brown Hotels Group, Israeli financial news outlet, Calcalist, and Israeli airline Israir focusing on mutual travel, real estate, energy and innovation between the countries, said Israel was now completely open to tourists.

Last month, Israel scrapped its COVID-19 testing policy at Ben Gurion International Airport, and, said the minister, since entering office a year ago he has been working to develop a long-term strategy that will tackle soaring hotel rates and improve services and conditions across the hospitality sector.

According to figures from the Central Bureau of Statistics, Israeli tourism is returning slowly, with some 262,700 overseas visitors arriving this past May, roughly half the number of May 2019, but an increase over April 2022 when 216,400 foreign tourists came, many for the Passover holiday.

"Prices in Israel are very high," Razvozov

acknowledged. Often, hotel prices rivaling those of far more popular destinations are not matched by the same service found abroad.

"It's a free market and demand is very high," Razvozov continued, explaining that he has raised the issue with the hotel sector and begun introducing reforms such as lowering the cost of koshering restaurants, which pushed up prices, and increasing permits for foreign workers from the Philippines and Jordan to address a severe shortage of workers.

Razvozov, a former Israeli judo champion who made aliyah in 1991 as a child from the former Soviet Union, said he has faced a conflict of interest over the past year being part of the cabinet, concerned about the spread of COVID-19, while at the same time representing a struggling industry severely impacted by the restrictions.

While those working in tourism did receive some compensation from the government for losses incurred during the pandemic, Razvozov, who served as a member of Knesset in Foreign Minister Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid party, said the challenge remained that many of those furloughed or fired as the industry shut down have not returned to work in the sector.

"It's a global phenomenon that there is a shortage of workers; it's a problem across the hospitality sector," he explained.

As Israel's domestic and foreign tourists wait for supply and demand to level off, Razvozov said he has also taken steps to encourage cheaper alternatives that will offer more affordable stays in Israel. Camping, glamping and caravan parks are among the options, he said.

And, continued the minister, he has been working to develop a long-term strategy that he hopes will help Israeli tourism grow and

flourish in the future.

"When I was in the Knesset, I used to complain that the country only looked for short-term solutions and did not think about the long term," Razvozov said. "That is why I have set a future goal for my office to see 10 million tourists a year visiting Israel by 2030."

While figures for 2022 are still not complete and those for 2020/2021 were impacted by the pandemic – in 2020 there were 887,100 tourists, 2021 saw less than half that number – 2019 saw a record 4.5 million foreign visitors in Israel, according to official statistics.

In addition to developing alternative accommodations, Razvozov said he is also working to create new tourism attractions, with a focus on Israeli wineries, the country's booming gastro sector and ecotourism.

"We need a vision for where we are heading," he stated. "If we want to aim for 10 million tourists, then we will need to build another 40,000 hotel rooms, and we must also improve the services we provide and the value for money."

A leading minister in an increasingly unstable government coalition – with most political pundits betting its days are already numbered – Razvozov is aware he will probably not be around in 2030 to see the fruits of these efforts, but, he said modestly, that a solid plan was more important than receiving praise for the outcome.

"We need to build more hotels and we need more alternatives," he opined. "We also need to think about the airport, the security and the services tourists receive – I know my plans are grandiose, but I came to serve the country and improve it."

During his stay in Athens, Razvozov met with Greek Tourism Minister Vassilis Kikilias, signing an agreement that seeks

not only to boost tourism between the two countries but also to develop dual travel packages for tourists from East Asia and the U.S. enabling them to visit both Israel and Greece in a single trip.

“People can come for 10 days, visit Israel and Greece and see a mix of ancient sites and holy sites,” he said, adding that the two countries have much to learn from one another.

Greece welcomes around 32 million tourists a year, said Razvozov, so Israel can learn from its Mediterranean tourism partner how to handle high volumes of visitors, while Israel can share with Greece

some of its advanced travel technology and innovation. Israel’s minister of innovation, science and technology, Orit Farkash Hachohen, also attended the conference, as well as representatives of Israel’s high-tech sector.

Razvozov told JI that the Israeli tourism industry only stood to gain from such collaborations, including with its new Abraham Accord partners.

“Tourism from the Abraham Accords is still not bringing in high numbers,” he said, adding, however, that such geopolitical relations only worked to boost the flow of visitors from other places.

“It’s a new reality and it really does help,” Razvozov said about the potential of travel packages and tourists from the Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco – Arab countries that signed normalization agreements with Israel in 2020.

“Of course, there are extremists that are trying to destroy it, and [unrest in Jerusalem] does impact the flow of visitors – that is why we need Diaspora Jews to come back and support us,” he concluded. “Tourism is about people-to-people, and we have really missed our Diaspora tourists.” ♦

JUNE 9, 2022

## Boston BDS map of Jewish groups has ‘potential to incite violence,’ Auchincloss says

*A Boston BDS group released a chart alleging Jewish groups were connected to a network of government, media and police and linking them to a range of malign activities*

By Marc Rod

Rep. Jake Auchincloss (D-MA) said on Wednesday that a report released last week by a Boston-area Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement group plays on millennia-old antisemitic tropes and could inflame violence against the Jewish community.

The group, calling itself the “Mapping Project,” alleges sinister connections between Jewish and pro-Israel groups across Massachusetts and government, politicians, the police and the media, and blames these groups for a range of nefarious activities. The group plotted the locations of the organizations on an interactive state map — drawing lines between the Jewish groups and institutions the project claims they influence — and released the addresses and names of some of the groups’ staffers.

The project’s organizers accuse the groups — which include the local Jewish Community Relations Council and Synagogue Council, the Anti-Defamation League and American Jewish Community, a Jewish high school, local philanthropies, an arts group and J Street — of ties to “harms that we see as linked, such as policing, US imperialism, and displacement/ethnic

cleansing.”

“Our goal in pursuing this collective mapping was to reveal the local entities and networks that enact devastation, so we can dismantle them,” the organizers wrote in an op-ed published on *Mondoweiss*. “Every entity has an address, every network can be disrupted.” Local Jewish leaders have said this amounts to a call to “dismantle” the entire Massachusetts Jewish community.

“This is just chilling to me. It is tapping into millennia-old antisemitic tropes about nefarious Jewish wealth, control, conspiracy, media connections and political string-pulling,” Auchincloss, who represents an area in the Boston suburbs with a large Jewish population, and is himself Jewish, told Jewish Insider. “To name names and keep lists, which has a very sinister history in Judaism, in terms of how we are targeted, is very irresponsible. [The group] needs to take this down and apologize.”

Auchincloss tied the release of this project to current debates in the House over gun violence, explaining that he believes history shows that previous efforts to “keep lists” of Jews “can incite violence” and “inflame the deranged among us to take

the next step from contemplating to acting upon violence.”

The Mapping Project’s organizers did not respond to a request for comment.

“[The organizers] need to recognize actions that have the potential to incite violence, especially in a moment of heightened antisemitism and gun violence,” Auchincloss continued.

He said that the project carries echoes of “a very sinister vein of Western history” — efforts to identify and keep rosters of Jews, including, but not limited to, the Holocaust.

Auchincloss said he plans to raise the issue with colleagues and with groups in the area that have promoted the Mapping Project, and will urge his colleagues to do the same.

“I will give direct and stark feedback about how inappropriate and unacceptable this is,” he said.

Rep. Seth Moulton (D-MA), tweeted on Wednesday that “Targeting the Jewish community like this is wrong and it is dangerous. It is irresponsible. This project is an anti-Semitic enemies list with a map attached.”

The other members of Massachusetts’



congressional delegation — including Sens. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) and Ed Markey (D-MA), who are named in the Mapping Project — did not respond to requests for comment.

Rep. Ayanna Pressley (D-MA) has been endorsed by the advocacy group Peace Action, whose local chapter, Massachusetts Peace Action, has amplified the Mapping Project.

Rep. Ritchie Torres (D-NY) also called out the project, saying that it “accuses Jewish and ‘Zionist’ institutions of various evils in

American society,” adding, “Scapegoating is a common symptom of antisemitism, which at its core is a conspiracy theory.”

The project has caught the attention of Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whose spokesperson, Lior Haiat, tweeted earlier this week, “This whole project is reminiscent of a dangerous antisemitic pattern of activity known from antiquity through the horrors of the 20th century: a pattern which has led to violence against Jews and their institutions.”

Jeremy Burton, director of the Jewish

Community Relations Council of Boston, told JI, “We see this as an explicit effort name and identify and put a target on physical Jewish spaces in Greater Boston, with the purpose, explicitly in their own words, of dismantling our Jewish community here in Boston,” which could “inspire others to dangerous action.”

Burton urged lawmakers with ties to groups like Massachusetts Peace Action that have amplified the project to enact “consequences in those relationships.” ♦

JUNE 9, 2022

## Change to nonprofit security grant application weighing ‘social vulnerability’ raises questions

*Institutions in areas with high ‘social vulnerability’ scores will receive a boost on their applications, a development raising concerns among some NSGP supporters*

By Marc Rod

A change to the Nonprofit Security Grant Program application, which will measure the “social vulnerability” of the communities in which applicants are located, is raising questions from both lawmakers and members of the Jewish community.

The 2022 NSGP application provides a boost to nonprofits with a high score on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Social Vulnerability Index. Previously, SVI had not been taken into consideration in the grant process. The NSGP provides grants to religious groups, houses of worship and other nonprofits to upgrade their security.

A CDC fact sheet for the SVI explains, “A number of factors, including poverty, lack of access to transportation, and crowded housing may weaken a community’s ability to prevent human suffering and financial loss in a disaster. These factors are known as social vulnerability.”

A letter from House Homeland Security Committee Chair Bennie Thompson (D-MS) and Rep. Bill Pascrell (D-NJ) to Federal Emergency Management Agency Administrator Deanne Criswell questions the new application parameter.

“Concerns have been raised about FEMA’s plans to incorporate the Centers

for Disease Control and Prevention’s social vulnerability index (SVI) in scoring NSGP applications,” the letter, sent May 27, reads. “It is our strong view that, with the \$70 million funding increase Congress approved for FY 2022, FEMA should be able to bring at-risk nonprofits located in underserved and underrepresented communities into the program, while ensuring availability of funding to at-risk nonprofits not located in underserved or underrepresented communities.”

The program was funded with \$250 million for 2022. Jewish community groups have, for several years, argued that \$360 million is necessary to meet demand in light of rising incidents of antisemitism and other hate crimes. In 2021, fewer than half of all grant applications, which totaled nearly \$400 million in requests, were approved.

Rep. Josh Gottheimer (D-NJ) called for the change to the application process to be “reconsidered” in his own letter to Criswell, dated June 1.

“While encouraging new applicants is a worthy goal, the SVI is not an appropriate measure to utilize when the purpose of the grant program is to protect vulnerable institutions that have a demonstrated active threat against them,” the letter, obtained by

*Jewish Insider*, reads.

Gottheimer emphasized that the grants should be provided “to the most threatened institutions,” and called the SVI “a powerful tool for good” that is nevertheless “not relevant to the NSGP.”

A FEMA spokesperson emphasized to JI that “just being in a high vulnerability area is not enough to receive a grant.”

According to a FEMA informational page, applicants in communities with a “high” SVI ranking will receive 10 bonus points on their applications, and those in communities with “very high” SVI will receive 15. First time-applicants will also receive 15 bonus points.

Applicants can receive up to 40 points in the initial stage of their application, FEMA spokesperson Jaclyn Rothenberg told JI. A multiplier of three is applied for religious or spiritual institutions, for final scores of up to 120 points. Bonus points are added after the multipliers.

Rothenberg told JI the agency remains concerned about the increased risk to communities, “especially those that are experiencing any antisemitic or religious attacks” and that the agency is “expanding the program to attract more communities that have high SVI... to be able to reach

communities that don't have the funds to protect themselves."

"However, we still remain dedicated to making sure that communities that did receive the funding are still able to apply," she said. "And the bonus points are not enough to [receive] the funding unless there's a clear security need. So at this point, we don't see there being a huge barrier... The idea behind advancing this program to more high SVI communities is so that more apply to the program in general. It is not to take away from the communities that are reliant on these funds."

She also said "we don't know if there is or there isn't" a correlation between SVI score and risk of attack, whether communities with high SVI will actually apply or whether consideration of the SVI factor will impact where grants are awarded this year.

Several of the most high-profile attacks at Jewish institutions in recent years have taken place in areas with low SVI scores. SVI is measured on a scale of 0 to 1, with 0 indicating lowest vulnerability and 1 indicating highest.

Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas, which had received a grant previously and was the site of a hostage situation earlier this year, is located in an area with an SVI score of .0129. The Chabad of Poway, Calif., where one person was killed and three were injured in 2019, is located in an area with an SVI score of .0714. The Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, where 11 people were killed and six wounded in 2018, is located in an area with an SVI score of .1752. Other attacks have taken place in areas with higher scores, and Jewish communities and

institutions are located in areas with a range of SVI scores.

Responses to the change from Jewish community groups that have championed the NSGP have been mixed.

Nathan Diamant, executive director of the Orthodox Union Advocacy Center, told JI that OU has had "candid conversations with people at the highest level of DHS" about the change.

"We're going to watch very closely how this year's grant cycle plays out," he said. "And if this factor does cause problems, then we expect we will be able to work with DHS leadership to correct those problems."

Abba Cohen, Agudath Israel's vice president for government affairs, told JI that the group supports "finding a methodology that will bring more people" into the program, but questioned the relevance of SVI — which he described as tailored to natural disasters and other incidents "of a different nature" — to NSGP.

"There's no doubt that some of those issues would be applicable to the security situation, and to the extent that they're applicable, we would think that it's appropriate to include them," Cohen said. "But the concern is that if you include more than that which is applicable, then we might be moving away from the original intent and purpose of the Nonprofit Security Grant Program, which is to guard against terrorist attacks directed to at-risk nonprofits."

He also said that Agudath Israel has heard from institutions in close proximity to one another that have received significantly different SVI scores, despite facing presumably similar levels of terror threat.

Cohen said his organization has been communicating with FEMA to "see if there can be some kind of adjustment."

The Anti-Defamation League's director for national security, Ryan Greer, told JI that the ADL supports expanding access to the grants in communities that have not received them previously — particularly through increasing NSGP funding.

He added, "at a time of growing antisemitism across the country, it is critical that FEMA not create additional roadblocks to access for anyone trying to participate in the program, especially those in the Jewish community."

Elana Broitman, The Jewish Federations of North America's senior vice president for public affairs, told JI that the group has worked with local federations to "clarify" the process for this year's funding requests.

"We... are grateful to Rep. Pascrell and Chairman Thompson for their oversight initiative," Broitman said. "We have and will continue to work with diverse communities on outreach and training to help ensure that at-risk nonprofits in every community have increased access to coverage."

At a Senate hearing in February, Christopher Logan, deputy assistant administrator for FEMA's Grant Programs Directorate, said that the agency was reaching out to "underserved and marginalized communities" to provide both information and technical assistance about applications, as well as analyzing "where the grant program has not historically been awarded."

The Jewish community has historically received the majority of NSGP grants. ♦

JUNE 8, 2022

## Washington remains committed to Middle East, says key U.S. diplomat

*Yael Lempert suggested that Washington will double down on its commitment to the region, contrary to concerns that the Biden administration has scaled back its involvement*

By Gabby Deutch

Atop American diplomat laid out the Biden administration's vision for engagement with the Middle East in a speech on Tuesday and

contested the widely held belief that Washington has sought to distance itself from the region in favor of engagement with Asia.

Speaking virtually to an Atlantic Council event in Rome, Yael Lempert, the principal deputy assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern Affairs, argued that Washington

remains deeply engaged in the region — and, more bluntly, insisted that the United States, rather than China or Russia, can offer both economic advantages and a commitment to democracy.

A “regrettably pervasive” narrative “has emerged in some corners that the United States is leaving the Middle East and North Africa,” said Lempert. “That narrative is wholly incorrect, as becomes abundantly clear upon reviewing the breadth of American engagement throughout the region.”

What Washington offers, Lempert argued, is “support for a rules-based international order, a dynamic global economy and respect for democracy and human rights.” Rather than being separate from concerns over security, putting human rights at the center of U.S. foreign policy in the region is actually good for global security, Lempert said.

“Our common values and beliefs in a rules-based democratic order stand in stark contrast to competitors destabilizing the region through military opportunism and economic coercion,” she said. “The states that will be best equipped to meet the challenges of our changing world, such as COVID-19 and climate change, will be those with resilient, inclusive governments.”

She specifically noted that the Biden administration’s recent focus further east has not, as some critics argued, been

at the expense of the Middle East. “The administration’s efforts to the Indo-Pacific are not mutually exclusive with our sustained efforts in the Middle East. As we Americans would say, we can walk and chew gum at the same time,” said Lempert.

Lempert’s address to the Washington-based think tank seemed designed to reach both skeptics in Washington and allies in the region who might be considering closer ties with China and Russia. “In an age of strategic competition, we want partners to look to Washington,” she noted, and pointed out that U.S. financial investment in the region still surpasses that of China — although China is rapidly catching up. But U.S. allies should not think only about the financial benefits, although, she argued, the U.S. hopes to expand trade with the region.

“Both Russia and the People’s Republic of China have attempted to increase their influence across the Middle East, and both have been found lacking in their commitment to the region,” she said. “Neither country has shown any success in deescalating, let alone resolving, regional conflicts.”

Lempert stated that Washington’s relationship with its regional allies cannot be one-sided, and she urged “our partners and our allies to take a stand against Russia’s unprovoked aggression” in Ukraine.

“The choice is clear,” added Lempert. “We should expect more from our regional

partners, even as they ask more from us.”

At the heart of the U.S. approach to regional security in the Middle East and North Africa is diplomacy, Lempert argued. She highlighted several areas upon which the Biden administration has focused its attention: United Nations-facilitated peace process in Yemen, Syria, Libya and the Western Sahara; expanding the Abraham Accords; and reentering the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action to counter Iran’s nuclear ambitions.

“The Abraham Accords and normalization represent one of the most regionally significant strategic shifts in recent years, and building on that breakthrough is a focus for the administration,” she said of the 2020 agreements that normalized ties between Israel and several Arab nations. She also touted U.S.-negotiated projects that have resulted from the Accords and highlighted Project Prosperity, a plan brokered by the U.S. and the United Arab Emirates that will deliver fresh water to Jordan from Israel and will bring solar-powered electricity from Jordan to Israel.

“It’s a model of sustainable development and innovation only made possible through regional cooperation,” said Lempert, and noted additional regional cooperation that the U.S. is supporting, like the burgeoning relationship between the U.S., the United Arab Emirates, Israel and India. ♦

JUNE 8, 2022

## The Israeli folk singer keeping Debbie Friedman’s legacy alive

*Bat Ella is determined to find a place for Jewish-American singer Debbie Friedman’s music in Israel and use it to connect with Jews in the Diaspora*

By Ruth Marks Eglash

If music can serve as a bridge between communities, or be a balm for “those in need of healing,” in the words of the “Mi Shebeirach” prayer, Israeli musician Bat Ella might just have all the right tunes.

A veteran folk singer and recording artist, Bat Ella spent more than a decade living and

working in the U.S., where she forged a close professional relationship with celebrated Jewish-American singer-songwriter Debbie Friedman, whose musical setting of “Mi Shebeirach” is perhaps her most beloved musical arrangement.

Later this month Bat Ella will be the featured performer in a New York tribute

concert to honor the legendary musician, who died in 2011 from pneumonia complications. On June 14, she’ll be singing alongside Park Avenue Synagogue’s Cantor Azi Schwartz and special guests Josh Nelson, Cantor Natasha Hirschorn and Shira Kline.

“I want to take her torch and continue

her legacy,” Bat Ella told Jewish Insider in a recent interview from her home in central Israel.

“I want to use her music to build a bridge between Israel and American Jewry,” she added, referring to two groups that are pulling apart and may very well be in need of a source of healing.

Friedman has been called “the Joan Baez of Jewish song.” Her New York Times obituary described her as having a clear, strong voice with an “intense spiritual conviction” and her 20-plus albums have sold more than half a million copies. With compositions featuring modern settings of traditional Hebrew liturgy, often paired with original English lyrics, Friedman’s melodies are still regularly heard in Reform, Reconstructionist and Conservative services and beyond. (After Friedman’s death, the Reform movement’s seminary, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, named its cantorial school The Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music.)

“Debbie had this ability to take prayers out of the synagogue and make them relevant to day-to-day life,” noted Bat Ella, 55, who regularly performed with Friedman in the U.S. and Europe.

“She changed the whole concept of prayer and service in synagogues,” continued Bat Ella, describing how Friedman inspired community singing and revolutionized the place of the female voice in Jewish prayer.

Born to immigrant parents from Iran and Syria, Bat Ella’s deep connection to modern liturgical music so familiar to many American Jews is an unlikely one for someone who was raised in a secular household and never entered a synagogue as a child.

“Sometimes life surprises you,” shrugged the singer as she told JI how she was introduced to Friedman’s music during her first trip to the U.S. as a teenager in 1983, as part of the Israeli Tzofim Friendship Caravan.

“We traveled around the camps and the Jewish communities and congregations, and I started to hear Debbie,” recalled Bat Ella, adding, “As I got more familiar with her songs, I also learned that there are all kinds of Judaism, and that there is more than one way to be a Jew.”

“I grew up in a very specific Jewish way. I

was secular and traditional, we did Shabbat, but I never went to a synagogue or opened a siddur; it was very far from this [American] world of Judaism,” said the singer, who was raised in the southern Israeli development town of Dimona

Bat Ella returned to the U.S. several more times, first as a music specialist working for The Jewish Agency in summer camps run by the Reform movement and Young Judaea, and later with her American-born husband, Daniel Birnbaum, former CEO of SodaStream and son of Ervin Birnbaum, rabbi emeritus of Congregation Bet Israel in Netanya.

On each visit to the U.S., she grew closer and closer to Friedman’s style of modern religious music. After moving to the States in 1994, Bat Ella met Friedman at a Reform movement summer camp in Wisconsin. Bat Ella credits the American Jewish artist for launching her own career as a singer.

“After I met Debbie, everything changed,” said Bat Ella. “I saw a person full of charisma who loved what they were doing – kiruv levavot [bringing hearts together] and building spirit with her sing-alongs.”

“At that time, I was in a place where I wasn’t even sure music was my dream, definitely not Judaism or education, but when I met Debbie the fire and the drive that had been in a coma inside me, very much came to life,” she continued.

Moving back to Israel after a decade of living in Cincinnati, Bat Ella was determined to continue performing Friedman’s songs and try to find a place for them in Israeli society.

“People in Israel don’t know Debbie and that is such a pity because she was such a profound person who had so much influence in the world of Judaism,” reflected Bat Ella, who translated into Hebrew some of Friedman’s greatest works. “When I translated her songs, it was like I created a new option for her, and today I am taking the torch and continuing her legacy, but with an Israeli adaptation. I am also building a bridge between Israel and American Jewry and making sure her message is not forgotten.”

Eleven years after Friedman’s death, Bat Ella, who last year performed in a tribute concert in Tel Aviv on the 10th anniversary of Friedman’s death, said that the singer-

songwriter’s message is more important than ever. “Judaism is a home that belongs to all of us, no matter if you are religious or secular,” concluded the singer, who sports jeans and cropped hair. “I don’t look like a religious person, I wear jeans and I have short hair, but I do connect to this music and this message, and I think it’s finally time to wake up and realize there’s a big Jewish community that lives in all different ways.” ♦