

## THE WEEKLY PRINT

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JUNE 15, 2022

## Ambassador Tom Nides' shiva chronicles

*Six months into the job the U.S. ambassador to Israel is on a mission to show America cares*

By Ruth Marks Eglash

A few days after a Palestinian terrorist opened fire on a Tel Aviv bar in April, killing three Israelis, the U.S. ambassador to Israel, Tom Nides, joined hundreds of mourners in paying his respects to the young victims' families.

It wasn't his first set of shiva calls. Nides, who had been on the job for just four months, had already visited the relatives of those killed two weeks earlier in a stabbing and vehicular attack in Beersheva and spent time with families grieving five more people killed in an attack in Bnei Brak, including that of a young Christian police officer from Nazareth. But for Nides, the deadly shooting in the heart of Tel Aviv drove home what it's like to live in a place embroiled in constant conflict.

"I don't think people really understand," Nides told *Jewish Insider* in an interview last week. "They might read about what happens here in the newspapers, but unless you go to a house in Tel Aviv and sit with the fiancée of the 27-year-old kid who got shot in the bar in Tel Aviv, and you hold her hand and she says to you, 'I just don't get it, he just proposed to me three weeks ago,' ... then you really don't know."

Nides' own son is 27.

While it's not unusual for an American ambassador to pay condolence calls to the families of terror victims, Nides appears to have made it his personal mission. During the most recent wave of violence earlier this spring, the top U.S. diplomat in Israel has met with the relatives of many of the victims killed as a result of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Last month, he attended the wake of Palestinian-American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, who was killed while reporting on clashes between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian militants. The U.S. has called for a joint investigation into her death.

"This is not about me, it's about America," Nides told *JI*. "It's about showing up and telling people how much we care about them and how much the United States cares about their tragedy."

Admitting that the condolence calls are among the hardest things he's ever done, Nides said, "The shiva calls have made what happens here very real to me... it has also made it clear to me that it's not one particular part of this country that is affected by these attacks."

"Everyone is affected – the Arab community, the Druze community, the

ultra-Orthodox Jewish community and the secular Jewish community – everyone," he noted, emphasizing, "We just can't let terrorism – or the very, very, very small minority in this country, the West Bank and Gaza who want to do harm – win."

"Ninety-nine percent of the people in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza have no interest in causing harm," he continued. "They just want to live in peace and prosperity, and we cannot let that 1 percent of lunatics ruin it for everyone else."

Despite the tension and the heartbreak, Nides, a former banker, who was deputy secretary of state for management and resources from 2011 to 2013, said he feels extremely lucky to be serving in Jerusalem and tries to remain focused on his central goal: strengthening Israel's character as a democratic Jewish state, which also includes working to maintain the concept of a two-state solution for Israelis and Palestinians, while at the same time maintaining Israel's security.

He's a supporter of the normalization agreements Israel signed two years ago with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and later Morocco and Sudan, despite the fact it was achieved by the previous administration

and spends much of his time promoting programs aimed at improving the daily lives of the Palestinian people.

Of the first diplomatic posting for the self-described “little Jewish kid from Duluth, Minnesota,” Nides said, “obviously it’s exhausting but it’s beautiful. I love this place and to wake up and be the ambassador, I mean, how cool is that?”

While “totally humbled by the experience,” Nides said he is determined to get “stuff done” and is trying to “focus on things that I can manage” – not an easy endeavor in a country in constant conflict, with polarizing political and religious communities and flagrant leaders continuously vying to shore up their political support.

“I have no ideology, I just want to do the right thing and I’m trying to send a message to people that I will talk to and see everyone,” he said.

Nides has made a point of meeting with as many people as possible, traveling the length and breadth of the tiny country and hearing out even those who hold views contrary to the U.S. administration that he represents. He excitedly shares many of his interactions in colorful social media posts, including a weekly Shabbat greeting that often highlights peace, tolerance and coexistence.

Coming across as genuinely congenial and warm, Nides, however, upset some Israelis in his first local media interview by stating that as the U.S. envoy he would never visit an Israeli settlement in the West Bank. His comments were in stark contrast with his predecessor David Friedman, who was a strong advocate for Israeli settlements.

“I probably could have been a bit more artful in my words,” Nides told *JI* of the interview with the Israeli daily *Yediot Aharonot*. The ambassador’s words drew no small amount of criticism from Israel’s very vocal settler movement.

“I tried to explain that my position is not to do things that agitate people, although I think even by saying that I agitated those who live in the settlements,” said Nides, who has since clarified that he is willing to meet with Israelis from the settlements, but only at his office in Jerusalem.

“Our role here is to make sure the parties [Israelis and Palestinians] don’t do things

that make it exceptionally difficult to keep the vision [of a two-state solution] alive,” Nides explained. “I know that’s a lofty, Nobel Peace Prize-winning thing to say, but it’s pretty damn important and it goes for the Israelis, as well as the Palestinians.”

When potentially flagrant or sensitive events do occur, such as the killing of Abu Akleh, an iconic Palestinian voice who covered the West Bank for two decades, or the provocative Israeli nationalist flag marches that took place in the Old City on Jerusalem Day, Nides said he feels confident articulating the views of the Biden administration “in a clear and succinct way.”

Continual meetings and interactions with Israeli officials, he said, have enabled him to forge strong ties here that allow him to “express either my love or displeasure” with what is going on.

On the Palestinian side, in lieu of an official consulate for direct diplomatic relations, which was closed during the Trump administration, Nides said he works closely with the Palestine Affairs Unit in the embassy. The unit will soon have direct access to Washington with the appointment of Hady Amr, the deputy assistant secretary for Israeli and Palestinian affairs, to the role of special envoy to the Palestinians. Amr’s appointment, some believe, is a first step to reversing former President Donald Trump’s approach to the region.

On the specific issue of who killed Abu Akleh, Nides said that there has been progress and that he is working closely with both sides to convince them to collaborate and share evidence.

“Obviously, there’s lots of suspicion between the sides,” said Nides. “But we are trying to be the bridge between the two.”

Even after months of violence and tension between Israelis and Palestinians, and absent moves toward restarting the peace process, Nides said he remains hopeful and has even found small ways to advocate his firm belief in coexistence and peace.

Recently, he brought together two local embassy employees – one a young Jewish-Israeli who was injured during the Tel Aviv bar attack, the other an Arab-Israeli, who also works part-time as a paramedic and who treated the wounded at the bar – to watch the final soccer match of the Israel

State Cup.

While at the game, Nides took advantage of his diplomatic status – and his reputation as a friendly, approachable guy – making an impromptu introduction between the two men and Israeli President Isaac Herzog.

Tapping on the glass of the VIP box, he brought the two men over to meet Israel’s top ceremonial leader. “I told the guys, ‘I hate that you got shot and you had to treat victims, but it is kind of cool that you got to meet the president,’” Nides mused, adding, “The whole place, this whole country, is so small. Only 9 million people and everyone’s affected [by the conflict].”

# Meet Aviva Aron-Dine, the White House's newest econ wonk

*Aron-Dine is the White House's new deputy director of the National Economic Council, succeeding David Kamin*

By Jacob Miller

One of the lesser-known — but vitally important — advisory bodies in Washington, tucked away in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, is the National Economic Council (NEC). Currently led by Brian Deese, who directs the council, and attended by many cabinet members and federal agency heads, the NEC helps the president develop his economic policy.

With the recent departure of the NEC's deputy director, David Kamin, who is returning to his post at NYU's law school, the White House is tapping Aviva Aron-Dine, an economic policy analyst who served as executive associate director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), to fill the role.

The White House did not make Aron-Dine available for comment on this article, but confirmed she has started working in her new role.

Harvard economist Jason Furman, who chaired the Council of Economic Advisors during the Obama administration and has worked previously with Aron-Dine, told *Jewish Insider*, "It's no surprise" that she had been tapped for the role.

Aron-Dine, who received a bachelor's in philosophy from Swarthmore College in 2005, touts a long resume of positions in think tanks and economic policy. After receiving a doctorate in economics from MIT in 2012, she went to work in the Obama administration, first at OMB, where she began as associate director for economic policy and became the agency's acting deputy director and executive assistant director, while serving as the special assistant to the president for economic policy at the NEC. She then served in the Department of Health and Human Services, as senior counselor to the secretary.

Since then, Aron-Dine has served as the

vice president for health policy at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), a nonpartisan think tank, before returning to her old post at OMB when President Joe Biden took office.

In an interview with *Ji*, Furman lauded Aron-Dine, high praise from the policy shaper the *Washington Post* once called the White House's "wonkiest wonk." Furman first worked alongside Aron-Dine from 2005 to 2008 at the CBPP, where Aron-Dine researched federal tax policy before heading to Cambridge to start graduate school, and they later worked together in the Obama administration.

"Within hours of meeting her, it was clear just how extraordinarily brilliant she was," Furman recalls. "Just an amazing analytic mind that effectively gets to the heart of any question."

Bucking the pipeline to academia from MIT's economic department, one of the nation's top economics programs, Aron-Dine jumped directly into government.

"Generally, people who do extremely well in graduate school don't want to go straight into government," said Furman. "She cared about the world and wanted to make the world a better place and thought that was the best way for her to do it."

Policy was the area where Aron-Dine felt she could exert the greatest influence.

"I think she thought that adding new details to economic research was less important than taking what we already know and implementing it and using it," Furman explained.

Ditching the harsh Boston winters for humid D.C. summers, Aron-Dine arrived in Washington at a heady time for health policy. The Obama administration's signature Affordable Care Act had passed in 2010, yet its implementation would require painstaking effort.

"There were just lots of choices about how to set up the exchanges and do the reinsurance subsidies for cost-sharing," said Furman about her role in the ACA's implementation. "She was just very involved."

Additionally, Aron-Dine successfully argued the merits of continuing several tax credit programs, which mitigate poverty for an estimated 16 million people.

"I'm not sure the White House would have made those tax credits permanent and permanently reduced child poverty were it not for her combination of advocacy and analysis," Furman said.

Besides helping working families, Aron-Dine pushed to ensure the U.S. tax code would continue to create incentives for charitable donations. In a 2012 memo written alongside Jonathan Greenblatt, who served as special assistant to President Barack Obama in the Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation before becoming CEO of the Anti-Defamation League, Aron-Dine opposed capping the dollar amount on charitable deductions, a policy they claimed would reduce giving by billions of dollars each year.

"She was far more focused on getting to the right outcome rather than making the easy call," Greenblatt told *Ji*.

After working strenuously on healthcare reform for years, Aron-Dine watched as the Trump administration arrived in Washington intent on reversing the Obama administration's healthcare policy and repealing the ACA.

With the change of administration, Aron-Dine returned to the CBPP, leading its healthcare policy team.

"She came in at a really turbulent time when the Trump administration came in and was threatening health coverage," said Tara Straw, who worked alongside

Aron-Dine at the CBPP and is now a senior advisor at Manatt Health. “She was really instrumental in our response to those threats.”

During her time at the CBPP, Aron-Dine co-authored dozens of reports, many of which argued against repealing the ACA.

When Biden assumed office in 2017, Aron-Dine resumed her old post at OMB. As the Senate stalled Neera Tanden’s nomination to lead the agency, owing to her controversial Twitter account, Aron-Dine quietly filled the vacancy without public credit, leading OMB, until Biden’s second nominee, Shalanda Young, was confirmed several months later.

Her subtle leadership in the early days of the Biden administration fits Aron-Dine’s understated leadership style, which Furman called “unflashy” and “behind the scenes.”

Both Furman and Straw are optimistic about Aron-Dine’s future at the NEC, where she will contend with rising inflation levels not seen in decades.

“She is very, very much forward-looking and anticipates problems and questions and how to overcome them in a great way,” said Straw.

Furman highlighted her leadership prowess.

“Detailed knowledge is almost secondary to [the] ability to function in an organization,

to process, bring people together, aggregate what others are doing,” said Furman.

Aron-Dine assumes her new role under NEC Director Brian Deese, who also once served at OMB. Furman anticipates the two will complement each other well.

“[Deese] doesn’t know all the latest economic studies, and she does,” explained Furman. “I think he does a great job of getting a lot out of very substantive, analytic people like her, but he’s also going to need someone to help run the policy processes and the deputy processes and the like, so they definitely will work well together.” ♦

JUNE 16, 2022

## The mad rush to replace Bobby Rush

*Seventeen Democrats will be on the ballot in the June 28 primary to replace the Chicago congressman, who is retiring after 30 years*

By Gabby Deutch

When voters on Chicago’s South Side head to the polls later this month for the state’s first-ever June congressional primaries, they’ll face several changes: warm weather, newly drawn congressional boundaries and the first election in 30 years without retiring Rep. Bobby Rush’s (D-IL) name on the ballot.

The veteran lawmaker and activist, who is 75, announced in January that he would not seek another term in Congress, telling the *Chicago Sun-Times* that the decision was sparked by a conversation with his teenage grandson, who said he wanted to get to know Rush better. “I don’t want my grandchildren ... to know me from a television news clip or something they read in a newspaper,” he said.

His decision set off in a Democratic free-for-all ahead of the June 28 primary, with 17 Democrats set to appear on the ballot to represent the heavily blue 1st Congressional District.

“They all have basically the same beliefs,” Chris Shaffer, a political consultant who works with Democrats in Illinois, told *Jewish Insider*. “To be honest, I think it’s just

a popularity contest, who you think will do a good job, but they all pretty much have the same positions. There’s no real difference between them on taxes and gay marriage and different things.”

Shaffer said the top issues in the race will almost certainly be “kitchen-table stuff” — the economic issues and challenges that voters face every day.

“The South Side and the West Side deal with issues that are just normal issues: crime, inflation, jobs. There is a Whole Foods that’s a big grocer over in Englewood that is closing, so it’s going to be a food desert again,” Shaffer explained.

When Rush announced his retirement, he also attempted to anoint a successor, endorsing Karin Norington-Reaves, a lawyer and the CEO of the Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership. But the relatively limited polling in the race has shown Norington-Reaves, who is also endorsed by the *Chicago Tribune*, trailing three candidates: Jonathan Jackson, an activist who is the son of the civil rights leader Rev. Jesse Jackson; Pat Dowell, a Chicago alderperson and a former nonprofit administrator; and Jacqui Collins, who has served in the Illinois state Senate

for two decades.

The race has not attracted the national attention or spending that has dominated other Chicagoland races. In the Democratic primary in the 6th Congressional District between incumbent Reps. Sean Casten and Marie Newman, outside groups have spent more than \$570,000. The nearby open seat in the 3rd Congressional District, where Latino candidates Gilbert Villegas and Delia Ramirez are facing off, has attracted more than \$1.8 million from groups including VoteVets, the Working Families Party and Democratic Majority for Israel.

Instead, candidates in the 1st District are campaigning the old-fashioned way: by going door-to-door and talking to voters, a task made much easier by the warm weather.

“We normally have our primaries in March, so it’s a real difference. Normally in the wintertime, if you’re knocking doors at that point, you get sympathy points because you’re showing up to people’s houses in the winters, as opposed to this time around, it’s sunny outside,” said Shaffer. “It’s a totally different kind of campaign.”

A poll released in May by Collins’



campaign showed Jackson leading with 19%, followed by Collins and Dowell with 14% each, and Norington-Reaves with 5%. Forty-two percent of voters were undecided.

In conversations with *Jewish Insider*, the four candidates all touched on similar issues as their priorities, namely fighting gun violence, improving economic outcomes in the district and championing voting rights.

"It seems like this is the culmination of all my life and work experiences that have come together," said Jackson, who has made the work he has done alongside his father a central component of his campaign. "My experiences of having traveled far and wide and been in the room... with my father, when he was standing up for free South Africa ... I've seen the third rail, the outside force, to make the political process go forward."

Jackson, who is 56, is the spokesperson for the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, a nonprofit advocacy organization founded by his father — and a place that is a frequent campaign stop for other candidates in Illinois races. In the heavily Black 1st District, the Jackson name offers instant name recognition that the other candidates will have to work harder to achieve. (Collins and Dowell have their own built-in constituencies, whom they have each represented for more than a decade.)

Most of the endorsements in the race have come from local elected officials and activists in Illinois, but Jackson recently won the backing of Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT). The two are set to appear together at a campaign event tonight.

"Jonathan has been a fighter for working people for decades, and I know he will fight on their behalf in championing Medicare for All and a Green New Deal when he is in the Congress," Sanders said in a press release.

Jackson also boasts extensive experience in foreign policy. He has tagged along on several of his father's overseas peacebuilding missions since he was a teenager, to places including Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Israel.

His first trip with his father was to Syria in 1984, in what was ultimately a successful attempt to secure the release of Lt. Robert Goodman, who was shot down over Syria while on a mission to drop bombs on Syrian tanks in Lebanon. "I was maybe 18 years of age at the time, 17, 18. We went over there with an ecumenical delegation, Arab, Jewish,

Christian and met with the president, Hafez Assad," Jackson recalled. "That taught me a lesson on taking the initiative: Sometimes you can get just because you've asked, and the benefit of being a peacemaker, not just a peacekeeper."

With peace in mind, Jackson said he supports a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict "to bring about long-lasting peace," and he pledged to support U.S. security assistance to Israel, including funding for the Iron Dome missile-defense system. He also expressed support for reentering the nuclear deal with Iran.

Jackson, who traveled to Israel with his father in 2006 in an attempt to secure the release of two Israeli pilots from Lebanon, told *J* that he opposes the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement. "I respect the depth of history in other parts of the world, from my travel and from the architecture and the language and the traditions and customs," he explained. "We have to educate some members of our own Congress that there's a history here."

Recent reports from human rights organizations have accused Israel of committing "apartheid" in its treatment of the Palestinians, but Jackson, who for years worked with his father on the anti-apartheid movement, rejected the claim.

"It is two separate things, two separate times," he said. "There's a different set of circumstances right now and they'll have to be dealt with. Totally independent. That was a racial majority [in South Africa] with minority control. I would say that was different, and what would have to happen as it relates to Israel is multifactorial. The Jewish community has to be involved."

Collins was elected to the Illinois state Senate in 2002 following a diverse career path that included a long stint as a TV news reporter, as well as faith-based political advocacy and two mid-life master's degrees at Harvard.

"There's only so much you can do on the state level in the issues that are important to me. I think we're facing an urgency of now. Rise of white supremacy and nationalism, the attack on our reproductive rights and also the suppression of voting rights," said Collins, as well as countering gun violence. She authored a bill to ban ghost guns, which was recently signed into law.

Born in segregated Mississippi, "I came out of the '60s, that generation very much influenced by Dr. King and Robert Kennedy," Collins, who is 73, said. "The Kennedys basically, because of their definition of what public service looks like, Dr. King because of his witness from his faith. Faith informs my public policy. So I come out of that tradition of wanting to give voice to the marginalized."

She called Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel a role model, and said her admiration for him inspired her to earn a master's at the Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership in Chicago "to study the origins of social justice, which is in the Torah."

Collins is Catholic, but her sister Kai Gardner Mishlove — who converted to Judaism — is the director of Milwaukee's Jewish Community Relations Council. "She's the one on the forefront of addressing the antisemitism that's rearing its ugly head in Wisconsin," said Collins, adding that she is also "well aware of the issues confronting Israel."

"I've also been to Israel, so I'm aware of the geopolitical reality, of how important Israel is as an ally for democracy in the Middle East," she explained. Collins noted that she would vote to support Iron Dome funding, but that she did not yet have a stance on how to approach Iran.

"I will probably take a position on whether whatever it would mean to guarantee the safety and the security and the existence of Israel. I mean, that would be my guiding principle," said Collins, who added that she had recently discussed the matter with AIPAC.

Supporting Israel, for Collins, connects her to her faith, and her trip to Israel was a powerful religious experience.

"I got baptized in the Jordan River," she recalled. "I wanted to be on the ground. I prayed at the Wailing Wall. I wanted to go through those experiences because the foundation of the Christian faith is in Judaism, because Jesus was a Jew, basically. He was Jewish. So I wanted to understand my Christianity in the realm of the Jewish foundation."

Collins has dabbled in foreign policy more than many state lawmakers. At the height of the "Save Darfur" movement, she co-sponsored a 2005 bill banning

Illinois from doing business with Sudanese businesses and requiring the state to divest its pension funds from companies with ties to Sudan.

At a national level, Collins earned the endorsement of noted professor and author Cornel West, while in Illinois, she noted that a handful of her colleagues in the Illinois Jewish Legislative Caucus endorsed her. She tied the importance of Israel's security to political trends in the U.S., namely the rise in white supremacy targeting Jews.

"We're moving to a fascist state and the rise of white supremacy here, and white nationalism is becoming more and more — well, it's being emboldened," she said. "So we have to be critically aware. We have to be serious about the threat. We have to be serious about the threat here in the United States, as well as protect the interests of Israel, and stress the point of Israel's right to exist on all levels."

Representing a population of 2.7 million people, Chicago's city council exerts significant influence over the country's third-largest city. Dowell, who chairs the budget committee of the 50-person body, has served as an alderperson since 2007, an experience that she said has been characterized by "working with the people in the community, trying to move the needle on my community, making it better. And I have done that, moving two grocery stores into a community that was a food desert, bringing in a new classical school, creating and supporting dozens of new businesses that bring in jobs and amenities to the community, to building new parks."

Dowell, who is 65, grew up in Queens, where her parents — a janitor and a nurse — were active in the community. "Being an only child and them not wanting to let me stay at home a lot by myself, they dragged me to a lot of meetings," Dowell said, "so I watched my parents spend a lot of their free time working on concerns in our community."

After reading about the city of Chicago and its glamor and excitement on the pages of *Ebony* magazine, Dowell moved to the city to study social work at the University of Chicago. She stuck around in a career that included time as a social worker, a nonprofit professional and a university educator.

Dowell, who loves to travel, told JI that she would be eager to work on foreign policy

as a member of Congress. "I'm somebody who has traveled a great deal," she said, "so I have a view from the ground, so to speak."

She traveled to Israel about eight years ago, and was set to go on another trip to the region to connect with Israeli and Palestinian women that was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Israel is a country that is surrounded by people, or surrounded by countries that don't want them there, and then every day, people have to live out their lives, [to] self-actualize, be creative, have fun, build families, build institutions and businesses, always concerned about the security of their country," Dowell said. "That was something that came across to me when I was at the border of Syria in Israel, and saw peacekeeping troops there."

While in the region, "the other thing that I saw was, that I had some concern about, frankly, was realizing that the Palestinians are dependent upon Israel for everything. So the lights, the electricity, water, and there's something wrong with that picture," she explained. "So I have been somebody who's been supportive of a two-state solution."

Dowell, who said she opposes a boycott of Israel, added that she "understand[s] the importance of" the Iron Dome. "I think Israel has the right to protect and secure itself."

She vowed to work with Israel to head off the Iranian nuclear threat but did not say how she intends to do so. "I think the United States should work closely with Israel to, how should I say it, to sort of halt Iranian aggression," Dowell said, but added, in response to a question about her views on the 2015 nuclear deal, "I don't know that I can answer that question specifically."

If she is elected, Dowell pointed to her time as chair of the budget committee as an experience that prepared her well for the ideological divisions both across the aisle and within the Democratic Party.

As budget chairman, Dowell explained, she has to work "across the various ideologies within the city council, from the regular Democrats and the progressives to the Democratic Socialists to the Republicans to pass a budget that supports every community in Chicago," said Dowell. "That's not an easy feat to get the required votes. But I've always tried to create a win-win situation."

Norington-Reaves has not held public office, but she is no outsider to public service, having worked at nonprofits as a Teach for America educator and as an attorney with several government agencies.

"I'm a third-generation Chicagoan and I've been a 20-year resident of the 1st Congressional District," Norington-Reaves told JI. In recent years, she has seen changes in her neighborhood, as other families moved away because of growing gun violence. She decided to remain with her son and to head up a nonprofit job training center.

"This is not normal, and it's not OK," she said of the area's gun violence. "Several years ago, Congressman Rush called upon community leaders and others, state leaders and private sector leaders, to really make an investment in the community. And I had to make a decision, Do I stay or do I go? And so I decided to stay."

As a Teach for America teacher in Los Angeles' Compton neighborhood during the Rodney King riots, Norington-Reaves — who was already set on going to law school — decided to go into public interest law. The experience of working with young people and their parents who felt trapped due to generations of poverty "really just changed the trajectory of my career," she said.

Norington-Reaves, who is 52, has a longtime interest in foreign policy and other cultures, dating to her college years, when she majored in Spanish and studied Italian and Portuguese literature. She is also of Haitian descent, and adopted her daughter from Haiti six years ago.

"I think a lot needs to change with respect to our immigration policies, and our demonization of people who come to this country seeking a better life," she said. "I also think that the U.S. has a role to play in keeping peace throughout the world."

That role, she said, extends to "being a check with respect to Iran, and ensuring that Iran does not have access to nuclear weapons," and playing a role "with respect to a two-state solution in brokering peace, and helping to mediate and negotiate."

On those two issues, she supports a return to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and continued U.S. security assistance to Israel. Norington-Reaves added that she opposes the BDS movement.

“Part of the problem is that it sort of starts from a premise that Israel shouldn’t exist,” she said, and referred to a recent conversation with a friend to explain her thinking on the topic.

“He said, ‘Israel is to Jewish people what Wakanda is to Black people,’” recalled Norington-Reaves, referring to the fictional African nation home to the superhero Black Panther. “I said, ‘Yeah, only Israel is real.’ Wakanda is this fictionalized, beautiful society where you can defend yourself, and you can be safe, and your culture can

flourish. And Israel is a real place in which that can happen as an ancestral homeland for practitioners of the Jewish faith. And if BDS is rooted in the premise that Israel should not exist as such, then that’s a problem.”

She also called for building bridges between communities as a way to fight antisemitism, and described a college seminar she took “about the architecture of oppression, and the otherizing of people who are different, as well as the great massacres that we experienced through

slavery, and that Jews experienced in the Holocaust.”

“When I think about what it takes to create a structure of oppression, it makes me think about what it takes to disassemble that,” said Norington-Reaves, “and what it takes is sitting knee-to-knee with somebody who is very different from you, and seeing their humanity and learning about their humanity and learning that we have more in common with one another than that which separates us.” ♦

JUNE 13, 2022

## The view from Washington on the one-year anniversary of Israel’s groundbreaking government

*Experts agree that new leaders in each country have allowed tempers to cool and disputes to remain private*

By Gabby Deutch

**T**he political ground beneath the leaders of both Israel and the U.S. looks shaky.

In Israel, the year-old coalition government led by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett appears to be losing its grip on power amid several defections — including one from a member of his own party.

In Washington, President Joe Biden and the Democrats face a potential walloping in the midterms amid sky-high inflation.

But despite political turbulence at home in the U.S. and the Middle East, the state of the U.S.-Israel relationship is strong, experts agree. And they credit Bennett and Biden with working to calm the once-rocky waters of a relationship that had in the past been driven by strong personalities in both countries.

“The first year has brought about a complete makeover of U.S.-Israel bilateral ties,” said Scott Lasensky, who served as a senior adviser to former U.S. Ambassador to Israel Daniel Shapiro.

Biden and Bennett do not have a close personal relationship, although Biden has traveled to Israel many times throughout his career, with another visit to Israel reportedly planned for next month. Instead, both leaders have deputized their respective

cabinet members to form close working relationships that have rarely drawn headlines.

After meetings between American and Israeli officials, both sides generally release readouts describing the close security coordination between the nations and the ironclad U.S.-Israel bond. Leaks from either side on disagreements have been kept at a minimum.

“All the parties, both American and Israeli, deserve credit for managing the relationship without letting personality interfere with policy,” said Mark Dubowitz, CEO of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. “You’re able to work through the disagreements, and some of the disagreements are profound, but you can do it quietly without a lot of fanfare.”

That’s a departure from both the strained relationship between former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former President Barack Obama, and then the close personal friendship between Netanyahu and former President Donald Trump.

“Israelis still feel slighted by the [Barack] Obama administration and the hangover from that in the same way that I think Democrats feel anger from the Bibi [Netanyahu] administration and the

hangover from that,” said Michael Koplow, Israel Policy Forum’s chief policy officer.

Disagreements between Obama and Netanyahu — on issues ranging from Iran to the Palestinians — were often public and persistent. Early in Obama’s presidency, he visited Egypt and gave a speech in which he vowed to support the Palestinians in their quest “for dignity, opportunity, and a state of their own,” which upset the Israelis. In December 2016, weeks before Obama left office, the U.S. abstained from a United Nations Security Council resolution that demanded Israel cease building settlements in the West Bank. The U.S.’ refusal to veto the resolution allowed it to pass in the Security Council.

As Obama’s administration negotiated the Iran nuclear deal, Netanyahu came to Washington in 2015 to address a joint session of Congress about why Israel strongly opposed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Netanyahu was invited by House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH), who had not informed the White House. Democrats in the U.S. viewed the speech as a slight against Obama, and some did not attend for that reason.

Then, Donald Trump became president and strengthened an existing friendship

with Netanyahu. He pursued many policies that were long seen as priorities of the pro-Israel community in the U.S., such as moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem. But many Americans who opposed Trump also opposed his strong-armed approach to Israel and his support for Netanyahu.

"It's worth noting that we do have a Democratic president, and we do have a Democratic Congress, and it's no secret that the Israeli government had some work to do with Democrats, given the legacy of the Obama-era years and given the legacy of Trump's policies on Israel," added Koplow.

Like Obama, Biden has policy disagreements with Israel.

After Russia invaded Ukraine in February, the U.S. disagreed with Israel's approach to the conflict and its slowness in showing support for Ukraine. Eventually, on Washington's urging, Israel signed onto a UN resolution targeting Russia. Bennett sought to be a mediator between the countries, at times corresponding directly with Russian President Vladimir Putin. U.S. Ambassador to Israel Tom Nides has tried to quell reports of a dispute on the matter, saying in March

that the Biden administration is in "hourly contact" with the Israelis on the war in Ukraine.

Biden has been more critical of Israel's approach to the Palestinians than Trump, and has worked to halt settlement construction and advance peace prospects for the Palestinians. Israel has not stopped all construction, but the Biden administration approach of stern, targeted criticism coupled with collaboration has yielded some results.

"We're going to see Israeli construction no matter what. I think the question is, To what extent does that construction happen and where does it happen?" asked Koplow. "I think there are clear signs that the administration has communicated its reservations to the Israelis and the Israelis have been receptive."

On Iran, Bennett's government opposes the Iran nuclear deal that Biden is intent on reentering, although negotiations have been stalled for several months.

"A lot of the perceived evolution in relations between the current and former U.S. administrations and Israeli governments is spin and theatrics, because

the Biden administration has a clear political interest in making it seem like Israel's position on the Iran nuclear deal has changed," said Jonathan Schachter, who formerly served as an advisor to Netanyahu. "Israel's government may have changed, but its opposition to the JCPOA is clear and the same as it was in 2015."

U.S. officials have praised the Bennett coalition publicly and privately. "I really respect this government. It's working," Nides said at an Atlantic Council event in May. "I was anxious and thrilled working with them in a difficult situation. I am a big fan of this government, and we hope to continue working with them."

The strong working relationship on display the past year may not continue if Israel's political situation deteriorates and the country moves to new elections.

"It's brought a sense of normalcy back to a normally crazy place," said Dubowitz. "You're not getting the same daily crises and nonsense that has gone on in the past. But how long that lasts — I mean, they're holding it together by the skin of their teeth." ♦

JUNE 13, 2022

## One year on, Bennett's government hangs on by a thread

*It is the very makeup of the government that might end up being its downfall, as long-standing issues that stand at the core of Israeli identity continue to overshadow its successes*

By Ruth Marks Eglash

To mark the current Israeli government's first anniversary, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett last week published a 27-page Hebrew-language pamphlet highlighting its achievements over the past year and appealing to what he called the "silent Zionist majority" to help him keep his fractious coalition in power.

From less rocket fire from Gaza to some significant accomplishments for Israel's economy, including the passage of a national budget after more than three years of political stagnation, the government led

by Bennett has some cause for celebration.

The broadest ruling coalition in Israel's history, made up of eight ideologically opposing parties — including, for the first time, an Arab faction — this government is unprecedented in its scope. And, true to Bennett's claims, it has succeeded in reducing the national deficit to zero for the first time since 2008, stimulating economic growth even as the country emerges from a two-year pandemic and enabling the economy to remain open despite the omnipresence of COVID-19.

Additionally, there have been some

tangible achievements in Israel's foreign policy with Bennett and his political partner, Foreign Minister and Alternate Prime Minister Yair Lapid, in their efforts to restore Israel's bipartisan standing in the U.S. and set a new tone with the Democratic Party. The two have also managed to deepen ties with countries in the region who are party to the Abraham Accords, and hosted foreign ministers from the U.S., United Arab Emirates, Morocco, Egypt and Bahrain at the first-ever Negev Summit.

However, observers told *Jewish Insider*, it is the very makeup of the government —



and maybe even its effectiveness in running the country — that might end up being its downfall, as long-standing and potentially explosive issues that stand at the core of Israeli identity continue to overshadow its existence.

“This government is excellent and has shown stability,” Shalom Yerushalmi, a veteran political commentator, told JI. “It passed a budget and is doing some important things with Israel’s infrastructure and development, but it probably won’t be able to hold on to power for much longer.”

The reason, he theorized, is because it is impossible to have an Israeli government containing an Arab party that identifies with the Palestinian people in the absence of policies that aim to bring peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

“The Jewish-Arab partnership, the first of its kind, important, historic and correct, was supposed to do good and bring the two communities [inside Israel] closer together, but in effect this political coalition has been very bad for the relationship,” said Yerushalmi, who writes for *Zman Yisrael* (the Hebrew version of the *Times of Israel*) and *Makor Rishon*.

“It turns out that you can’t create an Israeli-Palestinian government when the Palestinians are still the enemy,” he continued. “A clash is impossible to avoid.”

Disputes on such core ideological issues have only served to exacerbate the differences among coalition members who hail from parties on both sides of the political spectrum, and embolden the position of opposition leader and former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his far-right partners.

An increasing number of embarrassing blows to Bennett and his partners — most recently when routine legislation to extend Israeli civilian law to Jewish settlers living in the West Bank failed to pass in the Knesset — suggest that the government’s days might be numbered.

Despite successes in economic and foreign policy, opinion polls increasingly show growing public dissatisfaction over the government’s makeup and suggest that support for Netanyahu and the right-wing bloc of parties he represents is growing.

Research published last week by the Israel Democracy Institute found that

public opinion on the effectiveness of this government is divided, even among those who voted for the parties that are now part of the coalition. Supporters of opposition parties overwhelmingly believe the situation in the country is much worse than it was a year ago, the survey found.

Yohanan Plesner, IDI’s president, told JI that the government had been successful in “extracting Israel from crisis mode” caused by four successive elections and putting it back into a state where it could properly function.

“During its first eight months the government brought back normality,” Plesner said. “Israeli citizens were allowed to get on and mind their own business while the government was minding state affairs.”

However, he pointed out, two events have now undermined that sense of normality — the wave of terror attacks in March and April that left more than a dozen Israelis dead and the resignation of coalition whip Idit Silman, a member of the Knesset from Bennett’s own Yamina party.

“By and large, I would give it [the government] a positive grade. Not only did it pass the budget but for the first time, [but] many economic reforms were put in place, and comparatively to other countries, the Israeli economy is functioning very well,” Plesner noted. “Policy-wise, or because of the terror attacks, the government is very much weakened and the public is beginning to believe the claims of the opposition that an Islamic party in the government means its hands are tied in fighting back against terrorism.”

In the opening lines of his pamphlet, Bennett pushed back against Netanyahu’s attacks on his multiparty coalition and called on the “silent Zionist majority” to speak out and help keep the government going.

“About a year ago, the State of Israel reached one of the most difficult moments it has ever known,” Bennett wrote in his introduction. He goes on to describe the chaos of “endless” elections, a paralyzed government, ongoing tensions with Hamas in Gaza, unrest in mixed Arab-Jewish cities in Israel and a country more or less held hostage by one man — Netanyahu.

“Spread our message,” he wrote, “that decent people with different opinions who

love the country can sit together and act for the good.”

Ben Dror Yemini, a political columnist for the Israeli daily *Yediot Aharonot*, said the Bennett-Lapid government had been functioning well, reducing crime, improving the economy, and bringing achievements in foreign relations, particularly with the Abraham Accords partners.

“In the big picture, the government is really functioning harmoniously but on the other hand, the coalition is falling apart,” he said, also pointing to the Palestinian issue as an ever-looming shadow and a weak spot that has allowed claims by Netanyahu and opposition leaders — that a government with Arab members allows terrorism to flourish unabated — to gain traction.

“I don’t follow polls, I look at facts and the same thing is happening in many countries — incitement works,” Yemini said, describing how Netanyahu expertly uses an army of followers to spread his message on social media. “What we are learning is that when you repeat a lie enough times, people will start believing it.” ♦

JUNE 14, 2022

## Blinken, Lapid highlight regional reconciliation, Iran and Ukraine

*The secretary of state and the Israeli foreign minister both delivered prerecorded video addresses at AJC's annual Global Forum*

By Matan Kogen

Secretary of State Tony Blinken and Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid discussed Israel's warming ties with the Arab world, rising antisemitism and the threat posed by a nuclear Iran in remarks on Monday at the American Jewish Committee's annual Global Forum in Manhattan.

In prerecorded video messages at the conference, held at Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York, Blinken focused on "the alarming rise of antisemitism around the world" and on the United States' commitment to maintaining Israel's security, while Lapid discussed the Abraham Accords, Iran and the democratic values that link Israel with a wartorn Ukraine.

Blinken pointed to the historical connection between antisemitism and hatred of other groups. "Where antisemitism and Holocaust-denial spread, repression and democratic backsliding are, often, not far behind," he said.

The secretary of state reiterated the Biden administration's commitment to combating hatred worldwide, preventing Iran from acquiring or developing a nuclear weapon and expanding normalization

with Arab states. He added, "Across these efforts, we're working to forge tangible improvements in the lives of Palestinians."

Lapid discussed the common experience of Israelis and Ukrainians in resisting the violence of international aggressors to maintain their respective democracies. Recently, Lapid has issued a strident condemnation of Russian actions, as the Israeli government has aided Ukraine while attempting to avoid aggravating Russia.

"This past year has reminded us that the biggest struggle in our world is not complicated," he said. "It is simple: There is a struggle between good and evil, between terror and violence on one side, and freedom and democracy on the other."

Lapid praised what he described as Israeli "liberal values," which he said persist despite perpetual conflict in the region.

"They never caused us to give up on freedom of expression, the rule of law, our democracy or on liberal values of freedom of religion and defending minority rights," Lapid said.

Referencing the one-year anniversary of Israel's governing coalition — whose future remains tenuous after Knesset member Nir

Orbach, a member of Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's Yamina party, quit the bloc on Monday, placing the ruling coalition into the minority — Lapid said, "This is not just the government, but an exciting political experiment, which says we believe that even people who do not agree can work together for the common good."

The plenary also included a panel of U.N. ambassadors from Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco, who spoke about the 2020 Abraham Accords and ties between their countries.

During the panel, Israeli Ambassador to the U.N. Gilad Erdan criticized the International Atomic Energy Agency, the U.N.'s nuclear watchdog, for condemning Iran's nuclear activities but stopping short of taking the country to the U.N. Security Council to trigger snapback sanctions.

Erdan also voiced hope about the possibility of Israel and Saudi Arabia normalizing relations, as President Joe Biden prepares to visit the region, saying he is "praying and wishing that [Biden's] stop in Saudi Arabia would help to expand the new circle of peace." ♦

JUNE 13, 2022

## Alessandra Biaggi distances herself from AOC on Israel

*'I support Israel,' the New York state senator now running for Congress insisted, 'not despite being a progressive but because I am progressive'*

By Matthew Kassel

It was an early warning shot in a bitter primary battle that will test the strength of the activist left against a powerful incumbent who has

recently drawn progressive wrath.

Last week, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) endorsed New York state Sen. Alessandra Biaggi in her newly launched

bid to dethrone Rep. Sean Patrick Maloney (D-NY), setting up a potentially bruising Democratic proxy battle of the sort that has figured prominently in recent intra-party

matchups across the country, including in New York City and its surrounding suburbs.

For Biaggi, a political scion who represents portions of the Bronx and Westchester County, the high-profile nod was a progressive stamp of approval that has given her access to a robust grassroots fundraising network as she competes with a well-resourced opponent who chairs the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.

But it also comes with some baggage, not least among Jewish voters who view Ocasio-Cortez as hostile to Israel and are wondering where Biaggi stands in relation to the congresswoman.

During her time in office, Ocasio-Cortez has accused Israel of “apartheid,” threatened to condition U.S. aid to the Jewish state and opposed resolutions affirming support for a two-state solution and condemning the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement. Following the conflict with Hamas in Gaza last year, she voted “present” on legislation providing supplemental funding for Israel’s Iron Dome missile-defense system.

More recently, the Bronx lawmaker joined with her fellow Squad members in backing a controversial resolution that referred to Palestinians as the “indigenous inhabitants” of Israel but gave no recognition of Jewish history in the region.

All the while, she has largely distanced herself from mainstream Jewish leaders in New York City who have sought engagement.

In her first interview to address Middle East foreign policy questions since launching her campaign last month, Biaggi, 36, was eager to clarify that she disagrees with Ocasio-Cortez when it comes to Israel, even if the two progressives are aligned on such domestic policy proposals as Medicare for All and the Green New Deal. “Just to be really succinct, there are issues that we differ on,” she said, “and our position on Israel is that.”

“I have consistently said, and I will consistently say here, too, that I support Israel,” Biaggi said in a phone conversation with *Jewish Insider* last Thursday. “I support it, not *despite* being a progressive, but because I am progressive.”

A spokesperson for Ocasio-Cortez did not respond to a request for comment from

Jl.

It remains to be seen whether such arguments will resonate with the sizable number of Jewish voters in New York’s redrawn 17th Congressional District, which spans several counties in the Hudson Valley. Biaggi, who lives just outside the district but plans to relocate before the August primary, said she was in the process of conducting outreach to Jewish leaders in Rockland County and elsewhere when she spoke with *Jl* late last week.

Meanwhile, in her current state Senate district, “a lot of people are alarmed,” said a Jewish community activist in the Bronx neighborhood of Riverdale who has long supported Biaggi but requested anonymity to discuss a sensitive issue. “Right now, there’s confusion because she is aligned with AOC on other things,” he told *Jl*, using a popular shorthand for Ocasio-Cortez. “I understand where they’re coming from.”

But he cautioned against “drawing conclusions” too soon, at the risk of dismissing a potential ally before she has had the chance to clarify her views. “I think they’ll be happy to see that she’s progressive and she’s pro-Israel,” he said, revealing that Biaggi had already committed to making her first trip to Israel this summer with a group of local Jewish leaders. “If you write off the progressive community in totality,” he warned, “it could be very dangerous.”

Binyamin Krauss, the principal of SAR Academy, a Modern Orthodox day school in Riverdale, described Biaggi as a “pragmatic progressive” who has been “open to learning” from Jewish community members on a range of issues. “She has expressed to me that she’s very supportive of Israel,” he told *Jl*, “believing not only in Israel’s right to exist but to thrive.”

Still, he suggested, Biaggi will need to strike a delicate balance as she seeks to allay concerns over her affiliation with the far left while appeasing her progressive backers. “How she positions herself and how she allies herself in a very polarizing climate,” Krauss said, “is going to be challenging.”

Speaking with *Jl*, however, Biaggi claimed she is well-equipped to navigate such tensions. “I’m someone who is, number one, fiercely independent in my thinking and my positions, and that is something that I find to be precious and something I

protect fervently,” she boasted. “When it comes to positions specifically on Israel, my positions are my positions, and so they’re going to be different than some of the other House members.”

Ultimately, her views stem from a sensitivity to the history of Jewish persecution that, Biaggi explained, undergirds what she described as a deeply held appreciation for Israel’s foundation as a Jewish state.

“It matters that Israel exists and that we support that existence and allow for Israel to be able to defend itself,” Biaggi told *Jl*. “It’s very clear that there has not been a moment in time, from the beginning of time, where Jewish people were not either attempted to be persecuted or killed or erased from the planet, and to me, that is why Israel’s importance and existence is there. That is real for me.”

For similar reasons, Biaggi rejected the BDS movement as misguided, though she refrained from endorsing legislation that criminalizes efforts to participate in boycotts of Israel. “If people are going to support BDS, they have the right to do that,” she said. “However, I am not in support of it, and I never have been.”

Instead, she advocated for expanding ties between Israel and the range of Arab countries that, until recently, had maintained their own boycotts of the Jewish state. “I support the Abraham Accords because I’ve learned the history,” Biaggi said. “Normalizing relationships with Sunni-Arab nations is a really historic step in Arab-Israeli relations that, I think, will help to keep Israel safe.”

Those sentiments put her at odds with another progressive ally in the Bronx, Rep. Jamaal Bowman (D-NY), who has expressed support for her campaign. In February, the congressman announced he would withdraw his support for and vote against the Israel Relations Normalization Act, writing in a letter to constituents that the bipartisan legislation, aimed at bolstering the Abraham Accords, had “unhelpfully” alienated the Palestinians.

Biaggi took an opposing position. “It’s important that we are really just encouraging communications between regions that historically have been against one another,” she said. The legislation, she argued, would

“help to build on” such “successes and better integrate Israel into the region.”

Likewise, she described her support for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a “no-brainer,” and “the only way to secure peace and security for Israel” as well as “the Palestinian people.” Ending the conflict “should remain our number one goal,” Biaggi emphasized, adding that the U.S. could play “a key role in making that happen.”

Echoing recent statements from the Biden administration, Biaggi criticized Israeli settlement expansion in the West Bank as damaging to the prospects of establishing an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel. “I just think it’s wrong,” she said. “We want to be able to allow for the Palestinians to live freely and to have the same kinds of freedoms that others around the world have, and I think that expanding settlements will undermine that.”

While some progressive lawmakers have called for withholding U.S. aid to Israel over its treatment of the Palestinians, Biaggi, on the other hand, stopped short of backing such measures, clarifying that she is in favor of Iron Dome funding and, more broadly, supports continued security assistance, with no added conditions.

“The aid that we’re giving to Israel supports the security of not just Israel but the Israeli people and all people who live in Israel,” Biaggi argued. “One of our main objectives is also to protect and to foster democracy around the world,” she elaborated, describing Israel as “our only democratic ally” in the region. “We should be very clear-eyed about our commitment to that goal.”

By advocating for policies aligned, by varying degrees, with the Democratic mainstream, Biaggi could effectively preempt attacks from pro-Israel groups that have frequently bedeviled left-leaning House challengers in primaries where more obvious differences over Middle East policy have emerged.

Most pro-Israel organizations have so far stayed away from the race, with the exception of the bipartisan lobbying group AIPAC, whose new political action committee endorsed Maloney in March, well before he had drawn a challenger and moved into a separate district. For the time

being, United Democracy Project, an AIPAC-affiliated super PAC targeting several progressives this cycle, is “watching all the congressional races in New York” but hasn’t “made any decisions yet,” according to a spokesperson.

Even if pro-Israel advocates are willing to look past Biaggi’s association with Ocasio-Cortez, the high-profile matchup has also exposed other Democratic fault lines that have sown division between moderates and progressives.

Recent polling released by the Maloney campaign suggests the race could be competitive with more than two months remaining until the primary election. While Biaggi was, at 15%, trailing by 30 points, the survey showed that Maloney had failed to clear the 50% threshold, a red flag for the five-term incumbent who, at 45%, pulled in only slightly more support than the percentage of voters who said they were undecided.

On Monday, the progressive Working Families Party announced it was pulling its support for Maloney and endorsing Biaggi instead, lending a crucial boost to her on-the-ground organizing efforts.

Biaggi proved she is capable of defying the odds in her first bid for public office four years ago, when she pulled off a surprise upset over former state Sen. Jeff Klein, whose chummy relationship with GOP lawmakers had made him one of Albany’s most powerful yet reviled Democrats. Her victory was part of a wave of progressive candidates who took down a prominent group of Democratic state senators known to caucus with Republicans.

Now, Biaggi is invoking a similar argument in her campaign to topple Maloney, accusing the 55-year-old congressman not only of enabling Republicans throughout his time in the House but opposing the advancement of signature Democratic policies such as the Affordable Care Act.

“Rep. Maloney’s record speaks for itself,” Mia Ehrenberg, a spokesperson for Maloney’s campaign, said in a statement to *JL*. “He has helped elect Democrats up and down the ballot, raising and contributing millions of dollars to candidates and party committees, campaigning for candidates, knocking doors, and rallying volunteers for his fellow Democrats. On the Affordable Care Act, Rep. Maloney has voted more than

a dozen times to defend the law, supported efforts to expand ACA subsidies in the American Rescue Plan, and has always been a strong advocate of accessible, affordable health care.”

Biaggi had initially been running in a separate race to succeed outgoing Rep. Tom Suozzi (D-NY), but found herself in limbo last month after the finalization of New York’s congressional map drew her out of New York’s 3rd Congressional District, which had mostly covered Long Island.

She launched her new bid, in mid-May, as Maloney faced widespread criticism for his decision to seek another term in a safer neighboring district held by Rep. Mondaire Jones (D-NY), the freshman progressive who recently fled to a crowded open-seat House race in Manhattan. In forcing a potential primary fight without first having consulted with Jones, many Democrats believed Maloney had abandoned a mandate to protect fellow incumbents as the high-ranking leader of the House Democratic campaign arm.

Ocasio-Cortez, for one, had even called on Maloney to resign from his chairmanship before escalating with an endorsement of Biaggi, whom she had gotten to know in 2018 while mounting her own insurgent bid to unseat an entrenched House incumbent. “Alessandra has been here before — she knows what it takes to go up against powerful opponents and win,” Ocasio-Cortez wrote in a fundraising email last Tuesday.

If not for Maloney’s recent gambit, which she described as “self-serving,” Biaggi claimed she would likely have returned to her state Senate seat.

“Running against Sean Patrick Maloney was not something that was on the vision board, so to speak,” she explained. “The reason I’m taking this risk and really running at full speed is because the risk of not having people in office who really actually have our backs, who are really putting the people first, is so much bigger to me than being reelected to the state Senate, where I know that seat is going to be solidly Democratic.”

While Biaggi said she had not informed Maloney of her challenge in advance, she “did call him before” deciding to run for the 3rd District in February. “He did not call me back,” she said indifferently. “But, you know, OK, whatever. Yeah, it’s fine, who cares.



Totally fine.”

A spokesperson for Maloney, who currently represents New York’s 18th Congressional District, declined to comment on the record, but referred JI to remarks the congressman had made at a press conference where he explained his thinking on the race.

“From my point of view, I’m just running where I landed,” Maloney, whose residence was drawn into the new district, said last month. “If someone else is looking at the district, as well, obviously we’ll try and work through that as colleagues and friends. Ultimately, this is up to the voters, and that’s what it should be.”

Michael Lawler, a state assemblyman in Rockland County, is running in the Republican primary and is expected to advance to the November general election.

In the interview with JI, Biaggi said she is running “for the same reasons” she had originally jumped into the other race more than four months ago. “There’s nothing that has changed,” she averred, referring to a sense of “urgency” around such issues as abortion rights, climate change, gun violence, affordable housing and raising the minimum wage.

While in Albany, Biaggi, who leads the Senate Ethics Committee, chaired the state’s first sexual harassment hearing in 27 years and helped pass anti-harassment legislation that she has described as the “toughest” in the nation.

Locally, Jewish community members say, Biaggi has been on hand to address antisemitic vandalism, private school education and Holocaust remembrance initiatives, among other things.

“The Jewish community has been an incredible source of strength for me and also a source of community, and when I say source of strength, I mean both in learning but also in showing up for the community in times of great need,” she told JI. “Whether there were fires or there were other parts of the district that needed help with food distribution, this community has come together in a way that, I think, is really powerful.”

Before she assumed public office, the former lawyer served on Hilary Clinton’s 2016 presidential campaign and worked as an aide to former Gov. Andrew Cuomo. She was among the first elected officials to call for his resignation last year, amid mounting allegations of sexual misconduct that precipitated his early departure from office.

If she is elected to the House, Biaggi would follow the path of her late grandfather, Mario, the Bronx congressman who, despite having resigned from office in 1988 amid a corruption scandal, is well-known among New York Democrats of a certain generation.

In the 17th District, Biaggi has encountered some voters who remember her grandfather, she said, including one man who said the congressman had once “caught” his mother “when she fell down a

flight of stairs and saved her life.”

“I was like, ‘What?!’” Biaggi recalled. “OK, that’s incredible.”

Hank Sheinkopf, a veteran Democratic strategist who knew and admired Mario Biaggi, said the congressman “cared about the Jewish people” and “was unswerving in his support” for Israel.

But he questioned whether Jewish voters will draw similar conclusions about the younger Biaggi, whose positions on Israel have yet to be tested. “She has the right name with the right history for those who know the history,” Sheinkopf said in an interview with JI. “And she has the wrong endorsements for those who are worried about the government moving away from the center and more to the left.”

Last week’s endorsement from Ocasio-Cortez, Sheinkopf speculated, could prove especially problematic, even as Biaggi seeks to convey that she is carving out an approach to Israel that sets her apart from the congresswoman.

“This is an area where I have really made a lot of progress and also have been really clear about my positions,” Biaggi said. “I’m not a close-minded, fixed-mindset person. Part of how I have grown my position is because I’m open-minded. I’m also a thoughtful person. I want to make sure that we’re putting our best foot forward in every way, and so, I think this is just one of those areas where we’re different.” ♦

JUNE 13, 2022

## To crack Emirati market, CEOs line up for ‘speed-dating’ with Israel’s ambassador in Abu Dhabi

*Amir Hayek, Israel’s first UAE embassy chief, says tech companies will fuel trade growth between the two countries even in rocky political terrain*

By Jonathan Ferziger

*This article first appeared in The Circuit.*

**B**ombarded by requests for personal assistance from startup executives hoping to launch operations in the United Arab Emirates, Israeli Ambassador Amir Hayek has developed a technique for identifying

the winners and being candid with the rest.

“In one hour, I meet 11 companies,” said Hayek, Israel’s first ambassador to the oil-pumping Gulf state, whose first encounters often take place through a Zoom screen. “It’s speed-dating. Some I tell not to come, some I say if you make a little switch in your

approach, you can meet Emirati needs, and some I say, run, because we are looking for the technology you’ve got.”

While the silver-haired, 58-year-old diplomat escorts Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and other Israeli officials in Abu Dhabi when they meet Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, who acceded last

month to become president of the UAE, it's the business side of the job that lights him up. Since the Abraham Accords were signed on the White House lawn in September 2020, normalizing ties with the UAE and Bahrain, the Gulf states have become some of Israel's biggest trade partners.

Hayek ticks off several reasons why the UAE offers a unique opportunity for Israeli companies: access to capital from some of the world's biggest investment funds; a diverse expatriate workforce; its position as an international shipping and logistics hub; a government-led "infrastructure for innovation" that includes grants and tax incentives; and the country's willingness to serve as a beachhead to markets in Arab and Islamic states that Israelis haven't been able to reach before.

"You might find each and every one of these in another country, but combined, you can find them only in the UAE," he said from Abu Dhabi in a Zoom interview with *The Circuit*.

Israel and the UAE signed a free-trade agreement in May that will eliminate customs duties from both countries on some 96 percent of goods, including food, agricultural products, cosmetics, medications and medical equipment. Last week, the Dubai International Chamber announced it will open a Tel Aviv office to help connect Emirati and Israeli businesses. Bilateral trade is projected to increase from \$1 billion to \$10 billion over the next five years.

Hayek, whose fluent Arabic comes from growing up in an Iraqi Jewish family that fled persecution in Baghdad in the 1950s, says the precarious state of Israel's current coalition government won't keep trade with the Gulf from growing. In April, Bennett lost his majority in the 120-seat parliament, and former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is gathering strength to make a comeback.

"Any Israeli government will support the Abraham Accords," Hayek said. "Even if the government falls, you won't see any gap."

Similarly, he sees little chance that the UAE will pull out of the U.S.-brokered normalization deal it signed alongside Bahrain. Morocco and Sudan joined soon after. Hayek said he wasn't ruffled when he was summoned to the Foreign Ministry in Abu Dhabi last month to hear the UAE's

official protest against Israel's response to clashes with Palestinians at holy sites in Jerusalem.

"We had a good conversation," he said. "You can tell one thing about the Emiratis – they don't watch the movie from the middle. They play the movie from the beginning to the end. I trust that the Emiratis see the whole picture and understand what happened on the Temple Mount. No one wants anything bad to happen there and Israel is doing its best to keep the status quo. I hope we will not see those scenes again."

The Palestinian Authority opposed the Abraham Accords and argues that Arab countries should reject normalization until a just solution is found to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Saudi Arabia, the biggest Arab economy, maintains that fairly addressing Palestinian concerns must precede establishing official ties with Israel. U.S. President Joe Biden is planning a Mideast trip to Israel and Saudi Arabia in July that may include a meeting with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

By the end of 2022, the UAE-Israel Business Council expects that close to 1,000 Israeli companies will be operating inside the UAE – or through it to manage activities in the Middle East and Asia. The largest deal between the two countries was the 22% stake that Mubadala Petroleum bought in Israel's offshore Tamar gas field from Delek Drilling for \$1 billion in 2020. It may soon sell half of that to an Israeli investor.

The giant energy company is controlled by Mubadala Investment Co., an Abu Dhabi sovereign wealth fund, which has more than \$230 billion in assets under management and has invested about \$100 million in Israeli venture capital firms. OurCrowd, a Jerusalem-based funding platform for startups with multiple investments in the Gulf, was the first Israeli VC to open an office in the UAE that is licensed to operate in the Abu Dhabi Global Market financial center.

Hayek, a father of four, grew up in the Tel Aviv suburb of Petah Tikvah and graduated with an accounting degree from Tel Aviv University. He has held a series of senior positions in the Israeli government, including director-general of the Industry and Trade Ministry. Hayek was also at various points chief of the Israeli Export Institute, the Israel

Manufacturers Association and the Israel Hotel Association.

"He's a talented connector," said Shalom Lipner, a non-resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, who recalled that Hayek was invaluable when the Washington-based think tank organized its N7 conference in the Abu Dhabi desert last year, attracting senior officials from all the Arab countries that have official ties with Israel, including Egypt and Jordan.

"With his track record in business and government, Hayek has the right skill-set to manage the delicate details of bringing Arabs and Israelis together," said Lipner, who was a policy advisor and strategist during his government career for seven Israeli prime ministers.

Hayek's small staff in the UAE, supplemented by temporary personnel sent from Jerusalem, will grow this year to house one of the largest commercial delegations of any Israeli embassy in the world, he said. Among possible joint ventures are proposals for Emirati investment in Israeli energy exploration, rail projects, airports and seaports, he said. Israeli technology companies with the best chances of success in the UAE are involved with water conservation, energy, telemedicine, medical devices, agrotech, foodtech and fintech, according to Hayek. He also said he's in frequent touch with his counterpart, Mohamed Al Khaja, the UAE ambassador to Israel.

"We didn't come here for a 200-meter sprint and neither did the Emiratis," he said. "We came to run the marathon. We came to build this right, to build the infrastructure, to let people get to know each other, to know each other's manners, habits, way of doing business, and it takes time. We started very quickly and we are running faster every day." ♦

# From Tel Aviv to Athens: Meet the Israeli hotelier taking a gamble on Greek tourism

*'I was asked again and again during the pandemic why we were developing this area, and I always said that Athens is the next Berlin,' Leon Avigad, founder and co-owner of Brown Hotels Group told JI*

**By Ruth Marks Eglash**

CORINTHIA, Greece – As a child, Leon Avigad was sure he would be one of two things when he grew up: a spy or a hotelier. While a life undercover still hasn't panned out, Avigad has fulfilled his other dream as a co-owner of Brown Hotels, one of Israel's fastest-growing hotel groups.

Together with partners Nitzan Perry (his husband) and Israeli businessman Nir Waizman, Avigad appears to have hit on a winning formula: purchasing old, forgotten buildings in down-and-out locations and reimagining them as fun and funky travel destinations aimed at entertaining and pampering.

In a retro style – think throwback lighting, rotary phones, record players and other knick-knacks for in-room decor – each of Brown's hotels tells a story and offers the visitor a distinct vibe, ranging from party-all-night to Paris chic.

With 21 boutique lodgings already in Israel (and several more on the way), the group is now shaking up Greece's tourism industry as it expands from five currently operating urban hotels, the bulk of which are in a less desirable section of Athens, to resort destinations beyond the country's existing tourism hubs.

"We like to stay away from the obvious places," Avigad, 50, told Jewish Insider in an interview last week. "Greece is so much more than its islands, and Athens should not only be a stepping stone for tourists to those islands."

Last week, the company inaugurated two more hotels in the Mediterranean country, branching out from its city-based accommodations to all-encompassing resorts that are welcoming and affordable to families. And, over the next year, Brown plans to open around a dozen more hotels,

including eight more in Athens and others on islands such as Corfu and Evia.

Additionally, the company just announced a 40 million euros (\$43 million) deal with Israeli airline Israir to purchase additional hotels in the country and create exclusive travel packages for Israelis, including direct flights from Tel Aviv to its new resorts.

Avigad, whose business card describes him as "founder/storyteller/impresario," told JI the company currently owns around 40 more properties in Greece that are just waiting to be "Brownized." And, he said, the company is eyeing other European destinations such as Croatia, where it already runs one hotel.

Such rapid expansion is ambitious for any business but especially risky in the hospitality sector, where the global tourism industry is only just beginning to rebound from two years of COVID-19 restrictions, which saw flights grounded, a steep decline in tourism and in some places, the banning of large gatherings in places such as hotels.

"We were always very optimistic," Avigad said of the challenges brought on by the pandemic.

He explained that the Brown group took advantage of the shutdowns to begin "rooting" itself in its chosen country, purchasing and renovating defunct former hotels and other interesting buildings, such as the former headquarters of the Greek communist party – now a boutique hotel named "Dave Red Athens – son of Brown." The hotel includes a dungeon-dive bar and leftover graffiti from its more socialist days.

Of the five Brown hotels currently up and running in Athens, four are in Omonoia Square, an area that for years served as the city's red-light district, and was largely avoided by tourists. Now undergoing

regeneration, Avigad and his partners are banking that the square – long ago a buzzing hotspot in Athens – and the surrounding neighborhood to return to its former glory.

"I was asked again and again during the pandemic why we were developing this area, and I always said that Athens is the next Berlin and Omonoia is the next Soho slash Meatpacking District," said Avigad.

"For us, the timing was perfect, and we've enjoyed the great luck of backwind from the [new] government and the mayors of Athens, Salonika, Loutraki and others," he continued, describing how over the past few years the Greek authorities have worked to ease bureaucracy and welcome foreign investors in an effort to improve the lives of Greek citizens.

"Yes, we love the food and the culinary and gastronomy and the art and the heritage here, but we're also business people and what we understood very early on was that Greece is a very welcoming country that has allowed us to enter into the market with relatively moderate real estate prices," explained Avigad, who relocated to Athens with his own family a year ago, after nearly four years of weekly flights from his native Tel Aviv.

He also pointed out that pre-pandemic, more than 32 million people a year visited Greece, almost the same numbers as Italy and France, but at one-quarter of the cost of those more expensive vacation spots.

Two weeks ago, Brown marked the opening of one of its newest destinations: Isla Brown Corinthia – a 166-room resort hotel replete with access to sandy beaches and crystal blue Mediterranean waters – with a one-day travel and tourism conference for Israeli and Greek developers and investors.

Organized in conjunction with partners

Israir and the Israeli financial news outlet Calcalist, the event took place in the still-under-construction hotel located in a sleepy Greek town more than an hour outside of Athens – far from the usual tourist destinations; it drew distinguished speakers such as Israel's Minister of Tourism Yoel Razvozov and Greek Tourism Minister Vassilis Kikilias, as well as other industry officials and business leaders who spoke about the new opportunities created by Brown and the many possibilities of reciprocal Israeli-Greek tourism.

Dimitris Vassiliadis, manager of Israel's office of the Greek National Tourism Organization, who attended the conference, called Avigad's vision "bold."

"I admire Leon and the people of Brown

Hotels because they started a new and very expensive investment in places with seemingly zero potential, and that is very bold of them," he said, adding that, "as Greeks, we only learn to gain from that."

Michal Manor, editor and founder of Israeli travel magazine RoaOlam, who also attended the conference, told JI, "It takes a lot of courage for them to open so many hotels during corona and in places not among the usual highlights for tourists – the Brown group sees opportunities and jumps on them, but it's a gamble."

However, for Avigad, who started his career in hotel management as a concierge at Jerusalem's iconic King David Hotel 20-something years ago and received training in top hotels in London, Switzerland

and Los Angeles, it is the very challenge of a fickle and unpredictable industry that appears to be the draw.

"It's always the most troublesome guest who ends up becoming a loyal customer," he quipped, shrugging, "Brown is not simply a chain of hotels, it's a collection of stories, and if you create a brand of soulful hotels then you know you'll succeed." ♦

*The writer was a guest of Brown Hotels in Greece.*