

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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SEPTEMBER 21, 2022

Masih Alinejad saw this coming

The Iranian dissident has attracted the regime's ire for her passionate criticism of the country's modesty laws. Now, she watches women march in the streets in Tehran while in hiding in the U.S.

By Gabby Deutch

Masih Alinejad is not marching with the thousands of women on the streets of Iran this week in protest of the country's laws surrounding the wearing of the hijab. If she were, her massive curls — brown with streaks of blonde, often styled with a yellow flower behind her ear — would easily give her away.

But the Iranian-American journalist, who built her career around advocating for Iranian women who did not want to adhere to the country's strict modesty standards, is stuck inside a safe house in the U.S. She has not been to Iran in more than a decade.

In July, a man with an AK-47 was arrested outside of Alinejad's home in Brooklyn, a year after she was targeted in a kidnapping plot believed to be orchestrated by an Iranian intelligence network.

"I'm very pleased that I'm being protected. But at the same time, it's frustrating living in hiding," Alinejad told *Jewish Insider* last week. "It's like being in quarantine, except

there is no cure for this virus. The Islamic Republic, to me, it's a deadly virus."

Throughout her career, Alinejad, 46, has made an enemy of the Iranian ruling regime. Her brother spent three years in prison because of their relationship, and now they're barred from speaking; her sister had to denounce Alinejad publicly.

"There are so many things that I was like, 'Is it worth it? Am I doing the right thing?'" asked Alinejad, who has worked at Voice of America's Persian service and for Radio Farda, the Iranian branch of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. "But at the end of the day, I know that freedom is not free, and we all should pay the price if we really care about democracy and freedom."

Since the kidnapping attempt last year, Alinejad has racked up more than 7.7 million followers on Instagram, with another nearly half million on Twitter. Lately, she's been posting videos from the streets of Iran, showing women removing their head

coverings and protesters clashing with police.

"The huge number of Iranian community in the West, in America, are against the Islamic Republic," said Alinejad. "It's clear that now, Iranians inside who took to the street ... they are fed up with the regime." So far, at least five people have reportedly been killed in the protests, with dozens more injured.

People in the country send her videos knowing that anyone who communicates with Alinejad could face stiff consequences, including jail time. "But anyway, people do that. People send videos to me," said Alinejad. "I try to give them a voice. It's unbelievable that this is a punishable crime."

The protests started after the arrest of a 22-year-old woman named Mahsa Amini for allegedly violating the hijab rule. Shortly after her arrest, Amini died in police custody in Tehran. Officials said she suffered a heart attack, but others speculated — after seeing

photos that showed her head bruised and bloody — that she suffered a concussion due to head injuries.

Here in the U.S., Alinejad defies easy political characterization. She is loudly opposed to the proposed nuclear deal with Iran, saying it ignores the country's human rights violations, which has earned her plenty of conservative friends. (She supported the deal in 2015 until she saw that it didn't improve human rights in the country.) She also criticizes progressive women who she thinks should be more vocal about Iranian women forced into wearing the hijab. "The Western feminists call the hijab part of your culture, and they don't get it. We don't have a choice. This is not our culture. This is a barbaric law when you don't have a choice," said Alinejad.

But five years ago, Alinejad also showed up to the Women's March the day after former President Donald Trump was inaugurated. "I was so proud of myself, just holding a sign criticizing President Trump," she recalled. "I remember, I gave a call to my husband and I said, 'I cannot believe this is the first time in my life I'm taking to the street, nobody beat me up, nobody killed me. No one attacked me.' I'm just happy shouting, 'My body, my choice.'"

But as Alinejad sees it, American women's support for bodily autonomy has limits. She pointed out that female American officials will usually don a headscarf to meet with Taliban officials. This week, when "60 Minutes" anchor Lesley Stahl interviewed Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, she covered her hair. ("I was told how to dress, not to sit before he did and not to interrupt him," Stahl told viewers. It was Raisi's first interview with a Western reporter.)

To Alinejad, none of this is about politics. "They were trying to kidnap me when

Trump was in power, but do they stop their terrorism? No. When Biden is in power? Not at all," she said. "I see myself in a battle, which is not a fair battle, with the Islamic Republic, with the Taliban, with Islamic ideology, with Islamic terror, that I need to get support from both sides. I need them to understand that when it comes to a terrorist organization, a terrorist regime, you should see this as a bipartisan issue."

Being so outspoken has at times made Alinejad suspect in the eyes of Western journalists, for whom objectivity, not activism, is the ultimate goal. "Sometimes I get bullied by some so-called liberal journalists, journalists from the left, saying that you are an activist, you're not a journalist," said Alinejad. But what, she asked, is journalism, if not telling the stories of people who can't speak for themselves? "I give voice to those Iranian women who do not have any voice inside Iran," she explained.

She compared her work as a journalist — advocating against human rights abuses in Iran by shining a spotlight on them — to what Americans in the U.S. did after George Floyd was killed. "All the journalists, they took sides," Alinejad noted. "I see my journalism as a tool for my activism for human rights, for women's rights, for our basic rights."

Judging by her social media posts, which are mostly written in Farsi, Alinejad's audience is the Iranian diaspora. It frustrates her that American outlets usually only cover Iran in the context of nuclear negotiations. "This is a topic in Washington, D.C., but for Iran, it's not about nuclear deal. It's about their daily life and their struggle," she pointed out.

Alinejad appears regularly on American news broadcasts. She'll speak to most

groups who want to hear what she has to say. Last month, she gave an interview to Kan, Israel's public broadcaster.

"I would love to go to Israel one day," she said. As a kid growing up in Iran, Alinejad and her classmates were made to burn American and Israeli flags — the two countries Iran has called "Great Satan" and "Little Satan," respectively.

"They were encouraging us, and telling me and my fellow students, like my fellow friends in the village, that you have to shout as loud as the people in the White House [can] hear you when you say 'Death to America,'" she recalled. "You must shout as loud as the people in Tel Aviv [will] hear you when you say 'death to Israel.'"

Alinejad has partnered with American Jewish organizations who also work on the Iran issue due to their support for Israel. In June, the American Jewish Committee honored her with its Moral Courage Award.

The Jewish community was the "first victim of the Islamic Republic," Alinejad said. "When they were oppressed, and we kept silent, we didn't know that Islamic Republic would come after us. And now, this is a lesson for many Iranians."

She reflected on the Iranian regime's persecution of Jews in a manner reminiscent of German pastor Martin Niemöller's post-World War II commentary on the Nazis. "First they came for the socialists," he wrote, "and I did not speak out — because I was not a socialist."

Alinejad added a modern twist.

"When the regime went after Jewish community, we kept silent. When the regime went after the Baha'i faith, we kept silent. And now," she added, "the regime is going after, you know, everyone: teachers, workers, women, students, bus drivers, nurses. Everyone." ♦

For Israel's ambassador to Germany, strengthening ties is both professional and personal

Ambassador Ron Prosor, who presented his credentials to Germany's president last month, has welcomed Israeli President Isaac Herzog and Prime Minister Yair Lapid to Berlin in recent weeks

By Ruth Marks Eglash

It's been a busy month for Israel's new ambassador to Germany, Ron Prosor.

He has welcomed Israeli President Isaac Herzog to Berlin, accompanying him to high-profile events such as the 50th anniversary memorial of the 1972 Munich Olympics massacre and meetings with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and President Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

He has stood on the red carpet as Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid descended the steps of his plane, once again overseeing meetings with the German chancellor, the president and the country's foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock. Prosor was in attendance at the notorious Wannsee Villa, where five elderly Holocaust survivors who traveled to Germany with Lapid recalled to Scholz how they survived years of Nazi atrocities.

"What people don't understand is that the Israel-German relationship goes deep," Prosor, who presented his diplomatic credentials just over a month ago, told *Jewish Insider* in a phone interview from Berlin a day after Lapid left Germany last week.

"Germany may be the only country in Europe where we have defense and military cooperation, as well as the economic, the scientific, the cultural and the youth exchanges," the veteran Israeli diplomat continued. "Nothing even comes close with anyone else and that was very apparent over the last three weeks."

Israel's relations with Germany come a very close second to the strategic partnership with the United States, standing above and beyond other countries in Europe, Prosor said.

And, he continued, that relationship is only growing as Germany eyes Russia's war in Ukraine with increasing concern for its own stability and is looking to Israel, among other nations, to bolster its defense systems and provide energy as Europe moves away from relying on Russian gas. At the joint press conference with Lapid last week, Scholz said that Germany was exploring purchasing the Israeli-developed Arrow 3 defense system, which a senior Israeli official later confirmed could become a reality.

"This is huge and it's not just words, there has been a huge change in the paradigm," said Prosor. "Germany is looking around for examples of other nations fighting to defend democracy and who are they looking at? They are looking at the Jewish state and so, after 74 years, the State of Israel is going to help defend Germany and Europe... What an amazing, amazing closing of a circle."

That full-circle feeling hits differently for Prosor, a seasoned diplomat who previously served as Israel's ambassador to the United Kingdom and later to the United Nations.

For Prosor, whose father, Ulrich Proskauer, was born in Germany, this posting is personal.

"As ambassador to the Court of St James's, handing my credentials to Queen Elizabeth II with white horses and a carriage, was very, very, very emotional," recalled Prosor. "But presenting my credentials to President Frank Walter Steinmeier was far more emotional for me."

Prosor, who speaks fluent German, told *J* how his grandfather, a Prussian army officer, was forced to leave Germany for Israel following the 1933 mass book burning

by the Nazis at the Bebelplatz.

"For me, this is not just a professional posting. As the grandson of Berthold Proskauer, to return to Germany as the ambassador of Israel, the nation-state of the Jewish people, 90 years after my family was thrown out of Germany, this is a very special thing for me," he said, adding that he plans to use the assignment "to enhance and deepen the German-Israel relations that are so close to my heart."

Prosor said he had been very moved during Herzog and Lapid's visits as he watched the German chancellor and president working to make amends for the past.

Scholz has faced criticism recently for staying quiet when Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, speaking at a joint press conference with the German leader, accused Israel of "committing 50 Holocausts" against the Palestinian people. Scholz later expressed outrage and Abbas was investigated for "inciting hatred."

"We cannot give discounts to something that is repetitive in Palestinian society," Prosor pointed out. "That Abbas made his comments in Germany was a disgrace on every level and it really shocked the Germans."

Conversely, Prosor called Scholz's visit to Wannsee alongside an Israeli leader "a courageous move."

"It was the highest level in Germany saying, 'I am here, not just taking responsibility' but also saying, 'We have to do something about it and I am willing to sit with people who survived the Holocaust,'" he said.

"I think is a real show of his commitment

to fighting antisemitism, and of his view toward Israel and the Jewish people,” Prosor continued, adding that it should also be a sign for Germany, and Europe, that they need to reassess funding for the Palestinian Authority’s education system, which is rife with incitement against Jews and Holocaust denial, and pressure Palestinian leadership to adopt a new approach.

Prozor welcomed Germany’s recent announcement to compensate, with some 28 million euros, the relatives of the 11 Israeli athletes who were killed in the 1972 Munich Olympic massacre – two almost immediately by the Palestinian terrorists,

the others during the ensuing gun battle with West German police as the terrorists attempted to take them out of the country.

“From the family’s point of view, after 50 years, it [the compensation] did create some closure,” said Prozor. “They were really left alone after the tragedy and no one worked to help them, but there is still no closure on the issue of what the Germans did there, the mistakes they made and tried to cover up what happened.”

Tim Assmann, bureau chief of ARD German radio and TV in Israel, told JI that Herzog and Lapid’s recent trips were only the tip of the iceberg. Over the past few

months, he said, delegations of high-ranking German officials, including ministers, have visited Israel and cooperation is booming on every level.

“Relations have intensified in the last few months,” said Assman, citing the changes in leadership in both Germany and Israel. “The governments were working closely before but now I see much more cooperation, especially in the defense sector.”

Assmann said that while in the past it was “a one-way street with Germany supplying things like submarines to Israel, now there has been a change in direction.” ♦

SEPTEMBER 22, 2022

The U.N.’s unlikely campaigner against antisemitism

In his six years as special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed elevated antisemitism as a global human rights concern

By Gabby Deutch

For decades, Jewish activists and supporters of Israel have criticized the United Nations for singling out the Jewish state. But in recent years, an unlikely champion for Jewish concerns has emerged in the international body.

Ahmed Shaheed, a Maldivian human rights activist, used his post as the U.N.’s special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief to shine a light on antisemitism and even criticize anti-Zionism — a major shock to longtime U.N. watchers.

“You’ve got to recognize when changes are being made,” Deborah Lipstadt, the U.S. special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism, told *Jewish Insider* in June, citing a report Shaheed published earlier this year with a detailed “action plan” to fight antisemitism.

Shaheed is among the thousands of activists, diplomats and world leaders gathered in Turtle Bay this week for the United Nations General Assembly. But this

time, after more than a decade, he’s there as a civilian: Shaheed stepped down from his position this summer to become a professor of international human rights law at the University of Essex in the U.K. He will be replaced by Nazila Ghanea, a professor of the same subject at Oxford.

“The United Nations itself is not a hospitable place to Jewish groups, the Human Rights Council in particular,” Shaheed acknowledged to JI in a wide-ranging interview last week. He called the Human Rights Council’s permanent agenda item on Israel “a big, I think, turnoff for many Jewish groups.”

The U.N. has roughly six dozen “special rapporteurs,” independent human rights experts who are tasked with monitoring and responding to human rights challenges around the world. (One special rapporteur covers “the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories.”) Shaheed, who first spent six years as special rapporteur for

human rights in Iran, called these positions “the eyes and ears of the U.N.,” but said that for him, the work went beyond mere observation.

“I’m not simply somebody who just watches and articulates concern. I am a doer as well,” said Shaheed. In 2019, he released a report that, for the first time, acknowledged antisemitism as a human rights concern at the U.N. Notably, the report discussed the many forms of antisemitism: from neo-Nazis, from Islamists and from people on the left who “have conflated Zionism, the self-determination movement of the Jewish people, with racism.”

“I criticize those who equate Zionism with colonialism, [and] I speak about how that conflation is wrong. That did get some pushback, and I do think there’ll be more of that,” Shaheed said. “A lot of it is the result of ignorance. A lot of people have no idea what is Zionism; people have no idea how to negotiate — how to engage with that

discussion about Zionism and anti-Zionism and antisemitism.”

The answer, in Shaheed’s opinion, is for Jews and Jewish organizations to engage with the U.N., even if that work seems difficult. “I think that discussion really has to happen as to, What is Zionism? Why is it important to the Jews? And why is it not the same thing as colonialism? Same thing [with the] apartheid claim as well. I think there should be better understanding of what apartheid actually is and means, and how that the use of that label on Israel is not valid.”

Helping spearhead the global fight against antisemitism is not an obvious fit for a diplomat from the Maldives, a Muslim nation in the Indian Ocean with a population of just 540,000 spread across hundreds of islands. The country is best known globally for its tourism industry, owing to its pristine white-sand beaches and bright blue lagoons.

“I grew up in a country which wasn’t antisemitic to begin with, but then turned antisemitic over time,” said Shaheed. The country and Israel had official ties for several years in the 1960s and 1970s, when Israel was one of the first nations to recognize the Maldives’ independence from the U.K. Diplomatic relations were cut off in 1974, but improved again in the 1990s and 2000s, in part because of Shaheed. When he was the country’s foreign minister from 2005 to 2010, he signed several cooperation agreements with Israel, although they have since been canceled.

“Simply for having signed this agreement, I faced impeachment. It was perhaps the most politically charged event in the Maldives that year,” Shaheed recalled. His elderly father-in-law and mother-in-law faced attacks.

Later, his work calling out human rights abuses in Iran earned him another antisemitic critique from people back home in the Maldives. “The allegation was, you know, I’m a CIA agent, paid by Mossad or whatever,” he said.

When the U.N. created the Iran special rapporteur position, “I was approached by many people, that because I come from a Global South country, from an Asian country, from a Muslim context, that I should step forward for that role,” he said. At the time, “the concern was that we weren’t concerned

about the rise of Islamic fundamentalism [and] radicalism in the Maldives.”

Working on the Iran portfolio, Shaheed didn’t feel like he was able to make any systemic changes in a country fundamentally opposed to reform. The country did respond to specific cases that Shaheed raised without changing any laws.

“When President [Hassan] Rouhani came in [in 2013], there was a feeling amongst the Iranian diaspora community that a new approach may be warranted, so that things kind of eased up a little bit,” he said. “But, of course, since then, I mean, there never really was a great line forward.”

After the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the nuclear deal with Iran, was enacted in 2015, the human rights situation did not improve in the country, Shaheed observed. “The lessening of tensions between the West and Iran with the JCPOA actually give them more confidence, I suppose, that they could still stick with their human rights practices,” he said, although he added that he felt human rights concerns should be kept separate from nuclear negotiations — that human rights in a country should not be tied to its security situation.

He called it a “natural move” to go from the Iran position to the one on freedom of religion. “Monitoring Iran for six years, again, further reinforces the point that religious freedom is fundamental to this space, to enjoy other human rights,” said Shaheed. And “as an academic, I’m always looking to critique things, question things, and not take what people say at face value. So I’ve had a lot of time in my my life to look at and read up on antisemitism.”

He wants his colleagues and others in the human rights community to start having difficult conversations about Israel. For instance, Shaheed included the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s working definition of antisemitism in one of his reports, “but now I’m finding a huge pushback on that,” he said, due to the way the IHRA definition describes anti-Zionism as a tenet of antisemitism.

“How many of us unconsciously singled out Israel,” he asked, “when you wouldn’t do that to somebody else, to something comparable? That is such an in-built culture that you pull out Israel first, I knew we totally

ignore similar sort of things elsewhere. And what that means, people don’t really fess up to.”

In his work on freedom of religion or belief, Shaheed sought to build coalitions across religious communities, “rather than simply people lobbying for their own kinfolk,” he said. “I also wanted to platform unheard voices. You can see certain voices always dominant in the space, almost hegemonic voices. And you’ll see others not so included in this. So I saw Jewish groups almost not engaging with the mandate.” The only area where he saw Jewish groups engaging with the U.N. in a significant and positive way was related to Holocaust memory and restitution.

“I think that that growing engagement with Jewish concerns and Jewish communities is something that I would say is quite recent,” Shaheed noted, but he expects it to continue. “I don’t think that other rapporteurs who follow me will disengage from this subject, and there are reasons for that.” It helps that he leaves them with an action plan to follow. Other U.N. officials have joined him at events he’s organized related to antisemitism, such as on Holocaust Remembrance Day.

This, Shaheed said, is what he is most proud of: bringing people together. “You can’t just have one person safe while the rest are not.” ♦

UAE rabbi weds before 1,500 as Abraham Accords enter third year

Chabad leader Levi Duchman's marriage to Lea Hadad brings royals, rabbis and friends from around the world to celebrate in Abu Dhabi

By Rebecca Anne Proctor

The article first appeared in The Circuit.

Capping his role in helping to bring Jewish life, kosher food and joyful Hasidic spirit to the United Arab Emirates, Rabbi Levi Duchman married Lea Hadad before some 1,500 guests invited to the ceremony in the Emirati capital.

Guests flew in from around the world to celebrate with Duchman, a Brooklyn-born, 29-year-old representative of the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic movement and Hadad, the 27-year-old daughter of the chief Chabad rabbi in Brussels. The wedding at the Hilton Yas Island hotel on the evening of Sept. 14 was timed to coincide the next day with the second anniversary of the Abraham Accords, in which the UAE and Bahrain normalized relations with Israel.

It was a historic event in many ways, embodying the UAE's promotion of cultural tolerance and Arab-Israeli cooperation. Duchman's synagogue is one of several that have sprung up since the agreements were signed. Previously, a single synagogue operated inconspicuously in a Dubai residential neighborhood to serve the small Jewish population.

"We are most fortunate to be in this great place, the United Arab Emirates," said Rabbi Levi Banon, Duchman's brother-in-law from Morocco, who spoke under the *chuppah*, or ritual wedding canopy, to the cheering guests. "Thank you for making us feel at home."

While there have been Jewish weddings in the UAE since the Abraham Accords were signed at the White House on Sept. 15, 2020 – many of them performed by Duchman – none of them was close to the scale of Wednesday's nuptials. Guests came from at least 33 countries, including the U.S., Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Singapore and

Nigeria. There were members of the Abu Dhabi Royal Court and officials from the UAE government.

Rabbis arrived from Iran, Russia, Turkey, Nigeria, Singapore and New York, with more than 20 resident ambassadors present. Emaar Properties founder Mohamed Alabbar, builder of the 162-story Burj Khalifa tower in Dubai, was sighted at the wedding, as was Terry Kane, CEO of Meta Middle East, and Manuel Rabaté, director of the Louvre Abu Dhabi.

"This was one of the most magnificent Jewish events that we have ever had in the UAE," Saoud Saqer Bin Hamoodah, an Emirati aerospace consultant who works with Israelis and attended the wedding, told *The Circuit*. "This is one of the fruits of the Abraham Accords that we are harvesting now."

Since Duchman's arrival in the UAE in 2014, he has established Chabad congregations in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. He is a member of the executive board of the Alliance of Rabbis in Islamic States and founded the Emirates Agency for Kosher Certification.

"Arabs, Jews and Christians were celebrating together and dancing together and that is a testament to the network of goodwill that Rabbi Levi himself has built," Frank Free, an American chiropractor who moved to Dubai last year and attended the wedding, told *The Circuit*. Such an event "would have been unthinkable only three years ago," he said.

While there has been no census of Jews in the UAE, the numbers range from around 500 to 3,000 or higher since the signing of the Accords. Since normalization, some 450,000 Israelis have visited the UAE, according to the Israeli Embassy in Abu Dhabi, as well as tens of thousands of Jewish

tourists from around the world.

The ceremony took place near Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Island, where the government is building the Abrahamic Family House, neighboring the Louvre's domed UAE branch. The unique prayer compound, designed by knighted British architect Sir David Adjaye and scheduled for completion later this year, houses a mosque, a synagogue and a church, each of similar proportions with iconic facades reflecting the individual faiths.

"As Jews we feel very comfortable and safe, and it is a big deal for us to feel this way in the UAE," Avital Shneller, who moved to the UAE two years ago from Israel and now works in tourism, focusing on Jewish markets, told *The Circuit*. "I feel that Abu Dhabi is definitely the place to be, especially with Rabbi Levi and Lea now making their life here." ♦

This Israeli nonprofit is trying to create spaces where Ukrainian refugee children can be themselves

Early Starters, an Israeli-founded nonprofit, has set up early childhood education and care centers in Moldova and Israel to serve Ukrainian child refugees.

By Daniela Cohen

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

When she thinks about her time working in refugee aid this year, Yulie Khromchenko recalls the story an Israeli volunteer in a childcare center in Moldova shared with her last week. As he walked out alongside a quiet 6-year-old girl, preparing to play ball, she told him he resembled her father back in Ukraine whom she hadn't seen for several months.

"I think it's a moment where we know that an important connection was formed," Khromchenko, Eastern Europe program manager of an organization called Early Starters International, told *eJewishPhilanthropy*. "It gave her an opportunity to voice her feelings towards that — that she misses him, that she knows or hopes that she will see him again."

Such moments of safety and comfort are the *raison d'être* of Early Starters, an Israeli-founded nonprofit that, working with IsraAid, has set up six early childhood education and care centers in Moldova, along with another seven in Israel, to serve displaced Ukrainian children and maintain their access to education. In total, the group serves 3,500 Ukrainian children.

"It's the right of the children to have quality education in the early years, even if they are in a war and [are] refugees," Ran Cohen Harounoff, the group's co-founder, told *eJP*. "Good quality education, with dignity, with warm space, with a great staff that hugs them, that talks to them and listens to them."

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, almost one

third of Ukraine's population has been displaced since the Russian invasion began in February, with more than seven million refugees documented across Europe. Half of the refugees are estimated to be children.

Research shows that "[this] is when we have the most impact for children, not only when it comes to development and learning but also on social-emotional levels and the well-being of people when they get older," said Early Starters co-founder Sarah Wilner, a Canadian-Israeli special education teacher and trainer who previously worked at Israel's MASHAV Carmel International Training Center, a part of Israel's international development agency.

Wilner and Cohen Harounoff founded Early Starters in 2017 while working together in Ghana, where they noticed a need for quality early childhood education programs. Cumulatively, the group has served 50,000 young children.

The organization has developed educational programming for young refugee children in various countries including Greece and Malawi, and has worked with more than 300 schools in Ethiopia to prevent trachoma, an eye disease that affects 20% of children in the north of the country, leaving up to 5% blind. Alongside the Israeli nonprofit Nala, which focuses on combating neglected tropical diseases, Early Starters helped children to change their behavior to prevent the spread of trachoma — something that has "a ripple effect as well in the community," said Wilner.

For Cohen Harounoff, Early Starters' mission assisting children in crisis situations has deep personal roots. As a young child during the Holocaust, his mother was

hidden for three years by a Dutch non-Jewish family. During that time, the family's young daughter, Fiet Primowees, went to school while keeping the secret. Cohen Harounoff is still closely connected with the family.

Passing through the town of Palanca on the border between Ukraine and Moldova and seeing the tents set up for Ukrainian refugees by international aid organizations reminded him of the Holocaust.

"I really feel that my mission is trying to do some good in the world," said Cohen Harounoff. "[Feit's] parents are my idol for those things. And I learned from them. I am not risking my life. They risked their lives to save a child that they didn't know. So [this is] the least we can do."

Khromchenko was born in Moscow and came to Israel as a child. An educator training young teachers there when the war in Ukraine started, she felt the need to do something but didn't know what. After seeing a Facebook post by Cohen Harounoff recruiting Russian-speaking educators, she offered to help. In total the organization has recruited roughly 50 staff members and volunteers to serve Ukrainian children.

"Then he called me and said, 'OK, well [we're] flying in two days to move over [to Moldova], get ready,'" said Khromchenko. "So, I got ready. And I guess you can never get ready for such a thing."

Moldova has become a corridor for tens of thousands of Ukrainian refugees traveling to other countries, and is one of the poorest nations in Europe. Khromchenko said that it has insufficient infrastructure to support the influx. Shelters have been set up in inappropriate places, she said, such as

an athletic stadium that was converted to house 800 “women, children, elders, dogs, cats, altogether.”

In collaboration with the Israeli disaster relief organization IsraAid, which provides Early Starters with psychosocial support across its work, the organization created a “safe quarter” for children within the stadium, with walls and a door, and has since established another five sites in the country. Children accessing these spaces range from under 2 to 11 years old.

“When we were just entering the stadium, we had a flock of kids coming with us because they saw us with all the materials and toys,” said Khromchenko.

She told *eJP* that it’s important to furnish such spaces with carpets and sturdy wooden furniture that make it feel like a home, and to include a structure resembling a small house inside for children to play in.

“So many kids replay the experiences they had in Ukraine through games,” she said. “And that’s a therapeutic way as we see it to [reexperience] that again, to have some healthier grasp on reality.”

Intentionally celebrating children’s birthdays also adds to a sense of belonging, said Cohen Harounoff. This creates space for the complex questions that arise for children while commemorating an ordinarily happy and purportedly normal day in challenging circumstances.

Each drop-in space is staffed by at least two team members, including local Moldovan educators and women refugees who receive stipends. That allows the

children to participate in engaging activities while establishing emotional connections with Ukrainian volunteers who have a similar background.

Seeing the organization’s work in Moldova, UJA-Federation of New York provided funding to Early Starters, which has a budget of \$500,000 and a core staff of five, to create similar spaces in Israel for Ukrainian refugees who are not eligible to access government benefits by obtaining citizenship. In July, Early Starters opened seven spaces across Israel in one week with 35 staff members, including educators, psychologists, doctors and volunteers who speak both Russian and Hebrew.

The centers in Israel serve children ages 3 to 7. In Israel, the same children show up every day, while in Moldova, each day finds a different set of children. The Israeli centers were opened in collaboration with the Jerusalem Variety Center and Yalduta, two nonprofits that focus on children’s development.

In Cohen Harounoff’s view, the older kids’ engagement in games traditionally reserved for younger children has also been a “way to overcome the trauma that they have been in.”

Parents have shared how, after their kids spend time in these spaces, they have transformed from being tense and stressed to happily running to kindergarten, making new friends.

The spaces have also provided an opportunity for mothers who volunteer to receive financial support, learn about

innovative educational methodologies, forge friendships and process their own trauma while knowing their children are being cared for, said Wilner. In Israel, the group offers a weekly parent-child support group for families, providing additional support for children with special needs.

In addition, the centers have been places for building bridges between Russians and Ukrainians. For the Ukrainian children in Israel, it was initially strange to have Russian teachers, said Cohen Harounoff.

“In the beginning, Russians [were] the enemy,” he said. “And here, there’s a Russian teacher that we really like. And she’s not this enemy that we heard about on the news, that our fathers are fighting.”

Early Starters is currently working on creating a TV show to educate the broader community in Israel as well as more broadly in Europe about the refugees’ situation, to combat racism and encourage welcoming behavior.

The organization is also planning to help open early childhood education centers in Ukraine, so they’ll be ready to support children when they return to a country that has been devastated by war.

“What is great to observe is the interaction that happens between the children [of] different ages,” Khromchenko said. “There [develops] a very strong connection between the older kids and the youngest kids based on much empathy and solidarity and helping each other. Kids play with each other, kids care about each other, and I think it’s strengthened everyone.” ♦

In Utah Senate campaign, Evan McMullin's independent views on foreign policy

Independent Senate candidate Evan McMullin detailed his approach to foreign policy in an interview with Jewish Insider

By Gabby Deutch

Evan McMullin is a conservative, but he is the Democrats' pick for Senate in Utah. Running as an independent against incumbent Sen. Mike Lee (R-UT), the former CIA agent's campaign is focused on threats to democracy in the U.S. In an interview with *Jewish Insider* on Monday in which he laid out his approach to U.S. policy in the Middle East, McMullin pledged to defend democracy abroad, too.

"I fought against violent extremism overseas and never thought I would see the kind of threats to American democracy that we do now see in America," said McMullin, who served undercover in the Middle East after 9/11. "It's absolutely critical that we maintain strong relationships with other democracies overseas. The world is experiencing now, I think, in the absence of American leadership, and recently, a rise in authoritarian regimes that are increasingly hostile and aggressive."

McMullin's conservative opponent has forged unlikely foreign policy alliances with progressive colleagues. Earlier this month Lee was the lone Republican who co-authored a series of letters with Sens. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) and Bernie Sanders (I-VT) demanding additional federal oversight over U.S. arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

"I have to agree that more oversight is required for those relationships, and for obvious reasons, so that we ensure that there are basic standards of human rights being met," McMullin said. "Where there are such violations, I think it should cause reconsideration on our part."

The Senate hopeful spoke about a need to balance national security needs with American values.

"We have to be realistic, and we have to put the security of our nation and of

our allies in the free world first, and that certainly involves, at times, relationships with other countries that are less than ideal at times," McMullin noted. "But I also think America needs to maintain a very strong voice for human rights, and I think we certainly should have additional scrutiny and oversight of relationships with foreign countries that are not meeting basic standards on human rights."

McMullin spent 10 years in the CIA before working briefly for Goldman Sachs and then as a national security advisor to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. He left the Republican Party and ran as a third-party candidate against Donald Trump in 2016, winning 21% of the vote in Utah. One of the most prominent public officials to back McMullin's long-shot 2016 presidential bid was Lee, who is now an ally of the former president but in 2016 was fiercely critical of Trump as a candidate.

Lee, who is considered a foreign-policy isolationist, has sought to rein in presidential war powers. McMullin appears more eager for diplomatic engagement, but he has also expressed skepticism of presidential actions in the Middle East, particularly when that president was Trump. In 2020, after the Trump administration authorized a strike that killed Qassem Soleimani, head of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, McMullin wrote a series of tweets criticizing the move. "No reasonable person is shedding a tear for Soliemani or Iran," McMullin wrote at the time. "We question whether this unwell, self-serving president used good judgment and obeyed the law in launching an escalatory act of war."

On certain issues, like abortion, the pro-life McMullin finds himself more closely aligned with Republicans. But he diverges

from his former allies on some foreign policy matters.

McMullin, unlike congressional Republicans, said he is open-minded about nuclear negotiations with Iran. "I'm glad negotiations are happening again," he said. McMullin opposed the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, arguing that it failed to keep Iran's malign regional activities in check.

"I thought that we had more leverage than we used in that negotiation, and I was just disappointed it didn't include anything to limit or stop Iran's relatively unchecked support for terrorist organizations around the region and around the world, and also, it didn't include anything on Iran's development of missile technologies," said McMullin. But, he added, it was "unwise" for the Trump administration to pull out of the deal in 2018 when "Iran was, by all reports, living up to its part of the deal."

Since the U.S. unilaterally left the deal four years ago, McMullin noted, "it's not easier now to strike the kind of deal I would like to see then than it was in 2015, but I'm glad, nevertheless, that an effort is underway and hopefully it will yield something of value."

After weeks of progress toward a deal last month, nuclear negotiations with Iran are now on pause. But while negotiations were happening, senior officials in the Biden administration noted that the deal being negotiated would only include Iran's nuclear program, and not other issues like its support for terrorism.

"If the commitment is to work on the terrorism side separately, that's fine, as long as we truly are making progress on that front," said McMullin. "What I don't want to see is us squander any leverage we still have with Tehran in such a way that we aren't

able to negotiate effectively with them on issues related to terrorism as well.”

McMullin also broke with some Republicans by asserting that a two-state solution is the best outcome to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a position that has become increasingly uncommon among Republicans who don’t believe the U.S. should determine the outcome of the conflict. “I think a two-state solution offers the best prospects for sustainable peace in the immediate region and for Israel,” said McMullin.

During his undergraduate years at Brigham Young University, McMullin lived

in Israel for six months in 2000, when he studied Arabic as a David L. Boren Scholar with the Department of Defense’s National Security Education Program. “I think Israel plays a stabilizing role in the region, and we have a very important national security relationship with Israel that is indispensable, frankly, not only in the region, but elsewhere.”

In a position paper shared with JI, McMullin vowed to partner with Israel “to thwart Iran’s terrorist activity in the region and elsewhere.” In that same document, he pledged to fight against white nationalism and antisemitism, including “standing with

Israel against the BDS movement.”

Recent polling paints a muddled picture of which candidate has the lead. In early September, Lee’s campaign released an internal poll showing the incumbent ahead by 18 points. But a poll from the McMullin campaign showed him leading Lee by one point. An independent poll conducted in July by Deseret News and the Hinckley Institute of Politics showed Lee leading McMullin 41% to 36%. Utah’s other senator, moderate Republican Mitt Romney, has opted not to endorse either candidate. ♦

SEPTEMBER 19, 2022

Pandemic’s aftermath and economic crisis have some synagogues rethinking their membership fees

Synagogues aren’t sure whether members will pay this year.

By Jay Deitcher

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

As a policy, Manhattan’s Congregation Beit Simchat Torah doesn’t sell tickets for services on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. To charge for High Holidays, says synagogue President Sabrina Farber, is “just not in our DNA.”

But this year, two years of pandemic-driven challenges and a recent economic downturn have made sticking to that policy more difficult for CBST, an LGBTQ+ multid denominational synagogue in midtown Manhattan.

“People have left jobs, people have moved, people have suddenly downsized in a way that obviously impacts giving,” Farber, whose synagogue instead asks for dues on a sliding scale, told *eJewishPhilanthropy*. “I’m

not gonna lie, we’re in a tough spot.”

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur can overwhelm synagogues in every way. Staff and volunteers are swamped. Some synagogues rent extra space, while others rent chairs or additional equipment. Organizing services can cost congregations exorbitant amounts of money. For many congregations, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are some of the only days members attend services. Because of that, congregations often depend on High Holiday appeals, ticket sales to non-members and annual membership dues — generally paid during the High Holiday season — that support the synagogue all year. Many synagogues told *eJP* that they need a ticket system simply because there is just not enough space to accommodate everyone.

But this year, congregants and synagogues across the country are stretched thin, whether they have voluntary dues, set dues, negotiated dues or a tiered payment system. When congregants have less money to spend, will synagogue membership still be on their radar?

For most synagogues in the Conservative movement, budgets, including staff contracts and membership fees, have already been set for the year. Linda Sussman, the interim director of synagogue consulting for the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, told *eJP*. Recent economic shifts, she said, would “certainly not [be] something that could affect anything in terms of [determining what this year’s] membership dues would be. That would be next year.”

While synagogues may have saved money on serving food and hiring security

while they were closed due to COVID-19, Sussman said that the pandemic hasn't lowered expenses for most synagogues. Staff salaries generally remain their biggest expense.

When the pandemic began, many Conservative synagogues anticipated to take a massive hit in terms of synagogue dues, expecting membership payments to drop off as much as 20%. But instead, Sussman said, "It was much, much, much lower, more like maybe 3 to 5% of the drop." According to internal studies conducted by USCJ, she said, donors stepped up too, understanding that synagogues were under financial stress and needed extra support. "Whether that will happen this year again, I don't know," she said.

But as synagogues begin to consider next year's budget, Barry Mael, the senior director of synagogue affiliations and operations for USCJ, told *eJP* that an increasing number of synagogues are considering moving from fixed to voluntary dues.

"I'm getting more calls in the last several months about synagogues...evaluating if their dues model was the best dues model for them," he said. "Sometimes coming out [of] something like a pandemic, where so many things have been upended, it's a good time to evaluate and say are we generating our revenues and supporting the community in the best way?"

For those who made the jump to voluntary dues, "overall they feel good about it," Mael said. "Sometimes it's a matter of culture, that people don't have to ask for a dues level. They make a pledge, and therefore that whole awkward process of some people needing to talk with others about what they can give disappears." But no matter the dues model a synagogue chooses, he said it's important for congregations "to make sure they're not confusing the dues model as the answer to their financial challenges versus looking at their overall financial sustainability." Instead, he said, they need to focus on cultivating a culture of philanthropy by strengthening their relationship with members.

Rabbi Aaron Melman of Congregation Beth Shalom, a conservative synagogue in Northbrook, Ill., serving more than 1,000 member families, told *eJP* that he avoids the term "dues" completely, instead using the

word "commitment."

"The word 'dues' maybe doesn't sit as well with people as it once did," he told *eJP*. So he stresses "the concept of recognizing that there is a commitment to being part of congregational life." Like most congregations across movements, Beth Shalom won't turn members away if they can't pay.

"We try to really work with people," Melman said. "There are people in the congregation who pay more than their commitment amounts to help offset those people who aren't able to pay. We call it pay it forward."

COVID and the economy have accelerated the way synagogues think about the economics of the High Holidays, Amy Asin, the Union for Reform Judaism's vice president of congregational engagement and leadership experiences, told *eJP*, "but a lot of these trends were happening before." Synagogues were realizing that even though their own costs were increasing, she said, they needed to see the High Holidays as an opportunity to engage their communities, not close budget gaps.

"On the other hand, they do need revenue," Asin said. "From their perspective, if they could charge, I'm sure that they would. I'm sure that they would want to raise prices. They're balancing a lot. And many of them, even before the pandemic, had started to lower their prices or not charge. They're balancing their own economics, their own structure, the effect of their costs going up... And at the same time, they want to lower barriers to participation in Jewish life, and they want to deliver something that's deeply meaningful and transformational for the people who attend."

Rabbi Jill Maderer of Congregation Rodeph Shalom, a Reform synagogue in Philadelphia with 1,000 members, told *eJP* that while many members are not able to give as generously as they did in the past, more members are contributing smaller sums.

"We're really pleased to see people who are really showing their commitment, but it's not easy," she said. The synagogue has a three-tier system for dues based on how much a member can afford. The synagogue also organizes a weekly food pantry and has hosted a diaper drive.

Synagogues are also searching for new

ways to support themselves. Asin said that some Reform synagogues have planted cell towers on their buildings while others sold their buildings and rented space for less money. The Houston Congregation for Reform Judaism holds a yearly golf tournament and "bark mitzvah" with pet vendors, food trucks, music, a chew toy giveaway and a dog blessing given by Rabbi Steve Gross, who described the day as "a festival for dogs." Manhattan's CBST has been seeking grants. All the while, synagogues try to support their congregants even as they struggle themselves.

"Every clergy person has a discretionary fund," Asin said. "And I guarantee you that those rabbis, those cantors, are using their discretionary funds to support congregants in need and the community."

The synagogues that *eJP* spoke to said that they haven't had to cut staff, often thanks to federal pandemic loans that were quickly forgiven, but they also haven't been able to grow programs and initiatives as they would like to. Farber said retaining staff is "something that we've worked very, very, very hard to preserve because, if anything, going virtual just made our work more difficult, more confusing and required a whole new set of skills."

Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, an Orthodox synagogue on the tony Upper East Side of Manhattan with around 1,200 members, sees itself as a community center, fulfilling its congregants' religious and social needs — even giving its members space to throw birthday parties.

"Especially in Manhattan and a big city where things can feel impersonal... community doesn't just happen on its own," said Associate Rabbi Roy Feldman. "Community has to be built."

Mael believes that "COVID forced all of us to be more relational in our connection to our members because the doors were closed." If synagogues stay focused on meeting their members' needs, he said, members will "will feel connected and committed to supporting the community, even in tough economic downturns. But if people don't feel connected, synagogues, unfortunately, sometimes, are one of the places [where] people make a choice whether or not to spend their money." ♦