

## THE WEEKLY PRINT

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## Amb. Mike Herzog uses his peace negotiating skills to break D.C.'s partisan divide

*The scion of Israel's most famous political dynasty sat down with Jewish Insider to talk about his priorities — and unexpected challenges he's faced — as ambassador to the U.S.*

By Gabby Deutch

Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. Michael Herzog has held a lot of important jobs over the years — soldier, diplomat, negotiator — but rabbi is not one of them. Still, as an emissary of the Jewish state, he won't let the High Holidays pass without at least offering some words of Torah. (His grandfather, after all, was Ireland's chief rabbi a century ago.)

"Rosh Hashanah is a *chag*, a festival where you do some soul-searching, and you think about how to correct and improve your relations with one another and with God almighty," Herzog said, noting that he wanted to tie these themes to "the current geopolitical situation."

"Even though Israel is a thriving nation and very successful," Herzog continued, "we are ever challenged, and we cannot sit on our laurels. I think Rosh Hashanah is a good

time to reflect on that and think where we can do better."

Since arriving in the U.S. last November, the taciturn Herzog's assignment has been relatively straightforward: bring back a sense of normalcy to U.S.-Israel relations, which grew frayed among Democrats and Likud leaders during a tumultuous few years in both Washington and Jerusalem.

When it comes to appearances, President Joe Biden's administration and the Israeli ruling coalition seem eager to cooperate.

"I know that from time to time you hear voices asking questions about our relations. But I say it with conviction, our relations with the administration and with the American people are strong and solid," Herzog told *Jewish Insider* in an hour-long interview at the Israeli Embassy. "It's no secret that there are differences between us

on some issues. But we speak openly about everything. We know exactly where we stand. We know what we agree on. We know what we disagree on. And to the extent that we disagree on certain issues, we know how to manage our disagreements."

Herzog and his wife, Shirin, accompanied the president and First Lady Jill Biden on their trip to Israel in July (Biden's first as president), which Herzog called a "remarkable visit." There have been no fireworks in Herzog's tenure, except for when Shirin comes out and sings at parties. Instead, Herzog has overseen a quiet mending of ties with skeptical congressional Democrats, even those who are often critical of Israeli actions.

"I hear from some Democrats, saying that there was no real dialogue between them and the State of Israel in the past

few years, and they would welcome such dialogue,” Herzog said. “I’m not saying it to pass criticism on anybody or accuse anybody. I’m reflecting a certain reality that I encounter here.”

He has witnessed an “erosion in bipartisan support for Israel,” in recent years, some of which is a result of “developments here in the U.S. which have nothing to do with us.”

He counters the divisions with skills he learned in decades of Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. “As a negotiator, you have to listen to the other party. You have to understand the psychology, what’s really important to them,” he said. That doesn’t mean he buys into all of their concerns.

“Some people, not in the administration, but in public opinion here, relate to [the Israeli-Palestinian conflict] in the context of intersectionality, as if lumping together all the so-called ‘oppressed,’” Herzog noted. “I explain to people that this is a totally wrong analogy. There’s no analogy whatsoever. We’re talking about a national conflict between two national movements with historical claims and aspirations to the same piece of land.”

On Capitol Hill, Herzog’s policy is to meet with almost everyone. “I will not speak to [Rep.] Rashida Tlaib (D-MI), because I know that she doesn’t want to speak to me, and she has no interest in whatever I have to say,” he said, “and I will not speak to antisemites, people like that. But save for that, everybody else I will speak to, no matter if they agree with me or disagree with me.” Tlaib recently came under sharp criticism from within her own party after saying last week that supporting Israel and being a progressive are incompatible.

Herzog, a retired brigadier general in the Israel Defense Forces, has been a constant figure in Arab-Israeli peace negotiations going back nearly three decades. He served in Israel’s Ministry of Defense under four different defense ministers. This posting is not his first stint in Washington — he lived in the nation’s capital from 2004 to 2006 as a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

“I will say that I was surprised somewhat by the depth of political polarization here in this country. Not that we do not have political polarization back in Israel. We do,”

said Herzog, pointing out that Israel will have its fifth election in three years this November, which may leave him out of a job. “But still, when you encounter it face-to-face, and I see it all the time on the Hill and elsewhere ... so while I was cognizant of this, when you see it on the ground, it was somewhat surprising to me.”

Herzog said he talks to a lot of people who are either “misinformed” or “informed by some myth” when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

“I try to explain, I’ve been in the room for well over 20 years of negotiations,” he said. “What I try to impress on my counterparts and people who talk to me about is that, first and foremost, this is not a black-and-white situation where you have one party 100% right and just and the other party just totally wrong.”

In recent months, Herzog has faced sustained pressure from some congressional Democrats over Israel’s handling of the investigation into the death of Shireen Abu Akleh, a Palestinian-American journalist who was killed in the West Bank in May. Earlier this month, an official investigation from the IDF determined that Abu Akleh was likely killed unintentionally by Israeli forces.

“Our government expressed sorrow for the outcome of this incident,” said Herzog, adding, “we have to understand the context in which this occurred.”

Biden administration officials have continued to seek accountability for the incident, particularly after several prominent news publications such as CNN and *The New York Times* published analyses concluding that IDF soldiers were behind Abu Akleh’s death. “Since she was killed, the administration called on Israel for accountability. We carried out a very, very thorough IDF investigation, which took several months, because we added more and more layers,” said Herzog. “I think we addressed all elements of accountability, which were raised by the administration.”

“Let’s not forget,” Herzog added, “that we are sending our soldiers to risk their lives in the fight on terror. So to the extent that we do not find any violation on their part, we will back them, because we need them to continue to fight terrorism.” Israel’s investigation concluded that the killing

was unintentional, and the IDF’s top legal authority decided against prosecuting any soldiers for their role in the incident.

“We got a lot of questions from people on the Hill and also from the administration,” Herzog acknowledged. Some of the loudest critics, Herzog argued, were simply parroting Palestinian Authority talking points that began before any forensic investigation into Abu Akleh’s death had taken place. “They from day one said Israel deliberately assassinated her. Based on what? It’s just a campaign, a political campaign against the State of Israel, and some people here in the U.S. acted on that campaign,” said Herzog. “To those who are not motivated by any anti-Israel political motivation, we are ready to answer any question they may have.”

But Herzog’s biggest focus in Washington is not the Israeli-Palestinian issue that he’s worked on for much of his career. It’s Iran.

“When I arrived here last November, I was told by my counterparts in the administration that [the Iran nuclear deal] will be decided by the end of year, talking about 2021. Then they say, maybe January, maybe first quarter of 2022. We are now in September,” said Herzog. “It’s not clear whether there will be a deal, and how exactly it will be decided, because since nobody wants to issue a death certificate to a diplomatic effort, this drags on and on in this kind of in-between twilight zone.”

Herzog offered familiar Israeli criticisms of the Biden administration’s diplomatic efforts. “Israel is not against diplomacy or a diplomatic outcome. We agree with the administration that Iran should be denied the nuclear weapon or the ability to become a nuclear-armed state, and that diplomacy is the preferred method to go about it. The issue we had was with what kind of deal was — is — on the table,” Herzog said, offering a list of priorities that might lead Israel to accept a deal: inspections from the International Atomic Energy Agency, further limits on enriched uranium, stricter sanctions.

Instead, Herzog argued, the focus must be on deterrence. “Diplomacy offers Iran incentives, but I think you have to focus on the disincentives,” he said.

Given Herzog’s negotiating background, what “disincentives” would he use to bring Iran to the table? “Economic pressures,

political pressures and other types of pressures on Iran, including a last-resort credible military option,” he listed — essentially, the strategy for which Israel has been advocating for years, and a phrase reminiscent of former President Donald Trump’s “maximum pressure” campaign. “We think that with more pressure on Iran, and with a better mix of incentives and disincentives, you can get a better deal,” said Herzog.

In press releases, readouts and official talking points, Biden administration officials frequently note how closely the Israelis are consulted in the course of nuclear negotiations, but the airing of grievances does not appear to have affected Washington’s stance toward the negotiations.

“I can’t say that I managed to convince [them of] everything on all issues. But on some issues, I think what we said resonated,” said Herzog. For instance, he noted, Biden insisted that the U.S. not remove the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps from the State Department’s list of foreign terrorist organizations, despite Iran’s requests. “I think our voice resonated for the simple reason that this is a very simple case,” he added.

As an emissary of the Jewish state, Herzog feels an obligation to build ties with the American Jewish community. Everywhere he travels in the U.S., he meets with members of the local Jewish community. “I meet all of them in one room. I don’t meet separately with the Orthodox and Reform,” said Herzog. “I speak to everybody, but I think we have to do more work with the young generation. We need many more delegations in Israel to show them the realities on the ground.” He attributed the “distancing that exists among the young generation” to “ignorance” and to the influence of “anti-Israel voices.”

Herzog also comes to Washington as an emissary of one of Israel’s best-known families, brother of President Isaac Herzog, and son of the country’s sixth president, Chaim Herzog.

“Part of our education was to go to public service,” said Herzog. Still, he admitted, a part of him regrets not trying his luck as a writer. “I once worked as a research assistant to a very famous novelist, and I always told myself, one day I should do so,” Herzog recalled.

That novelist was Leon Uris, whose 1958 novel *Exodus* “shaped the awareness of a whole generation,” said Herzog. “It was

essentially the story of the revival of the Jewish nation.” The book sold millions of copies and became a top-grossing movie starring Paul Newman.

Herzog met Uris after the success of *Exodus*, and worked with him to research a follow-up novel, *Haj*, that told the story of Israel’s founding from an Arab perspective. “It was not as successful as *Exodus*, and not as impactful. But working with him instilled in me the desire to be a novelist one day,” Herzog reflected. His literary heroes are about what one would expect for a 70-year-old Ashkenazi diplomat steeped in tales of Israel’s early decades: Amos Oz, David Grossman, Shai Agnon, the poet Yehuda Amichai.

“I received Jewish religious education, so I’m also — what I carry with me also, I’m always mindful of Jewish history, Jewish destiny and what it means to be the representative of the old-new nation-state of the Jewish people,” Herzog said. “I never take Israel for granted. That’s what my father taught me.” ♦

# Lakewood's Yehuda Tomor is reinventing the frozen cocktail

*The New Jersey native spoke to JI about Cooloo's origin, growing success and his plans for its future*

By **Tori Bergel**

**Y**ehuda Tomor's fascination with cocktails began at a young age. On Friday nights in his Lakewood, N.J., home, he'd watch his father unwind from the workweek with special "Shabbos drinks" — alcohol blended with ice and Mr. & Mrs. T mixes, or whatever flavorings he could find. They weren't always the most elaborate cocktails, but to 7-year-old Yehuda, the process was an art.

As he grew, so did his interest in mixing drinks, loving the sophistication and taste, just not always the hassle. "Once I got married, I started making cocktails in my home," Tomor, now 30, told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview, "and it started becoming annoying cleaning up and all that. So the idea was really an RTD cocktail, a ready-to-drink cocktail."

And so was born Cooloo, his Lakewood-based business that manufactures frozen cocktail pops and is part of a fast-growing segment of the liquor industry.

As reported in NJBIZ, sales of ready-to-drink (RTD) beverages grew by 40% from 2018 to 2019, and soared 162% over 17 weeks in the late fall and early summer of 2021, compared to the same period in 2020, according to analytics giant Nielsen. However, while many brands jumped on the RTD trend, Cooloo is not a bandwagon label. The company, which launched in 2019, was actually conceived by Tomor three years earlier as he began to sense an opportunity in the liquor market.

"If you look back in 2016, 2015, when I was looking at this, no one was making those [RTDs]," the Cooloo founder and CEO told JI. "There was no such thing as seltzers, there was no such thing as all that stuff that are currently out there, they didn't exist."

To understand the reason behind the gap in the market, Tomor, 23 at the time,

analyzed what the average consumer wanted in a drink by going to liquor stores and polling both vendors and their customers. The study's finding: something fresh; no stale cans.

"Our idea was: 'Hey, what if we freeze it? Why don't we take this and freeze it and make it exciting, make it a real enjoyable [experience], and that is, make it more fresh?'" he said.

"Initially, we were actually planning on doing a real frozen [product], like you buy it frozen and you enjoy it frozen, but the problem is, you know, liquor stores having freezers and distributors having freezers, delivering it within freezer trucks, that doesn't really work. So that's when we pivoted to a shelf-stable product," he added.

Tomor's drive to create a successful business is no surprise to those who know him.

"I'm an entrepreneur at heart," he said. "I was always that hustler growing up, you know, finding ways, I will say less of making money, [and] more of helping people and trying to enjoy."

As a child, both of Tomor's parents owned their own businesses, which still exist today — his father opened a locksmith and security shop called Arrow Locksmiths, while his mother founded a retail clothing store, His Place. Tomor worked at the boutique with his older brother, who helped expand the company into wholesaler T.O. Collection. The experience, and watching his brother take the reins of the family company, drew Tomor into the entrepreneurial world, where he sought to build his own legacy.

"I wanted to do something myself. I didn't want to be working for a company, I wanted to be doing my own," Tomor said.

And while he ventured far away from the fashion industry, Cooloo's foundation

is still rooted in family. In an overflow of good fortune, the day production for Cooloo began — July 24, 2019 — Tomor's wife gave birth to their third son.

"The joke we always say is that our biggest fear is having twins, but you know, I had a company and a baby on the same day," he said.

Despite the care Tomor took with his fledgling business, like most startups, Cooloo faced some pushback when it launched. Doubts even came from Tomor's own research and development team, which for a time, Tomor said, wouldn't answer his calls.

"They sent me an email that pretty much [said], 'we don't think you'll be successful. This kind of product doesn't seem like it'll work and we don't see a future in it, and it's not worth our time and effort,'" Tomor recalled. "But we made it through. We weathered through those storms and we brought out a really good-quality product I'm very proud of."

Public reception of Cooloo has been overwhelmingly positive, and the company is growing. Cooloo sold 300,000- 350,000 frozen cocktails in its first year, according to Tomor, which it surpassed nearly fivefold two years later, selling over 1.5 million pops in 2021. The manufacturing plant itself grew as well, Tomor added, expanding from a small, 2,500-square-foot space to a 10,000-square-foot building, despite operating during a global pandemic.

"COVID was hard on us," he said, but added that they were able to reduce pandemic setbacks by taking steps to confront the new challenges. As reported by NJBIZ, Tomor began manufacturing the packaging canisters he was missing due to supply chain shortages on site at Cooloo.

The Lakewood community was also

invaluable to the brand's success. A largely Orthodox Jewish town of about 100,000 with a thriving business culture, Tomor spent time studying at Beth Medrash Govoha, or BMG, Lakewood's famous yeshiva — and the largest outside of Israel. Though he now lives in the neighboring town of Jackson, N.J., it was Lakewood where he wanted his business to thrive.

"This is my house. This is where I live, you know. I wanted to make sure to be on top of, especially in the beginning stages, be on top of every single aspect [of the company]," he said.

The community has also been receptive toward Cooloo, Tomor expressed.

"In the beginning it was exciting," he said. "Some people didn't realize that it's a kosher, it's a *frum* Jewish guy owning the product."

"Definitely we have phenomenal success in the kosher world and been really supportive among the kosher world,

whether it's on social media or wherever it is. They've always been very, very supportive of us," he added.

But Cooloo's customers hail from beyond the Jewish world, and the company has found popularity within the larger consumer market.

"In the non-Jewish world it's been really really phenomenal success. Even seeing other big brands copying us, to us is a compliment, showing that we actually built something out there," he said, adding that he and his team have even worked with other brands to build their own ice pop lines by creating private labels and helping with research and development.

"We do whatever it takes to make sure the kosher customers are happy, but let's face facts, kosher is not the No. 1 demographic in America. There's so much more opportunities out there," he said. "This is a great product that tastes great, so there's no reason we should limit ourselves to one

demographic."

Along with distribution expansion — Cooloo is currently available in a dozen states nationwide, as well as in parts of Israel and the U.K. — Tomor is working toward adding more products to the brand's roster, which already includes flavors like piña colada, mai tai and paloma. The company is hoping to soon launch mini versions of its cocktail pops, which would be found in supermarkets and retail between \$9.99 and \$12 — the current, full-size pops typically sell for around \$19.99 in liquor stores. Tomor added that Cooloo cocktail machines, which would serve slushy-style drinks rather than pops at bars and entertainment venues, are also in development.

Still, Tomor is looking to mix it up even further. "Just really the whole frozen cocktail space, we want to make sure that we can bring our quality cocktails into every single area," Tomor said. ♦

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## In new museum exhibit, a rare journey into Samaritan life and religious practice

*The exhibition, on display at Washington's Museum of the Bible through the end of the year, offers an interactive glimpse at life for the 850 Samaritans living in Israel and the West Bank*

By Gabby Deutch

Next month, as the leaves begin to change colors and the air turns crisp, Jews around the world will gather in makeshift huts for Sukkot, a holiday celebrating the fall harvest. The *sukkah*, or booth, built by each family will follow the same guidelines: three walls, with one side open; and a roof, partly open to the sky, made of plants like branches or palm fronds.

In two tiny corners of Israel and the West Bank, another Sukkot will be observed — a familiar but somehow different celebration,

one that is marked indoors due to fear a millennia-old fear of persecution, under colorful roofs adorned with fruits of every variety.

This is the Sukkot celebrated by the Samaritans, an ancient Israelite religious group whose members number just 850, split between Holon, near Tel Aviv, and Nablus, a Palestinian city in the West Bank. Visitors to "Samaritans: A Biblical People," a new exhibit at the Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C., can sit under a replica Samaritan *sukkah*, decorated with more

than 1,800 pieces of plastic fruit in a rainbow array of concentric circles.

"Everyone's heard of the 'good Samaritan,' of course, or just the New Testament story," said Jesse Abelman, the museum's curator of Hebraica and Judaica. "They go back farther than that. They see themselves as the descendants of the biblical tribes of Ephraim and Menashe, and so they've been continuing their tradition sort of beside, parallel, to Jews."

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a good Samaritan as "one who voluntarily



renders aid to another in distress although under no duty to do so,” and suicide-prevention charities around the world bear the name “Samaritans.” But the notion of a good Samaritan comes from a parable in the Book of Luke, in the New Testament. Jesus tells of a man who was on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, who was attacked and left for dead. A priest passed him by, and then a Levite, before a Samaritan — a member of a religious group viewed by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike as outsiders — stopped to help him.

“I try not to interpret New Testament passages for people,” Abelman, who earned his doctorate at Yeshiva University, joked. “But I think the basic point is clear, that you shouldn’t reject people out of hand, but that they may actually be the person who best embodies your values.”

On an exclusive tour previewing the exhibit last week, Abelman pointed out some of the unique artifacts on display, like a centuries-old mosaic from a Samaritan synagogue and a stone with an inscription of the Samaritans’ Ten Commandments, on loan from Israeli President Isaac Herzog. The exhibit, which runs through the end of the year, is meant to educate visitors about Samaritans and their encounters with other monotheistic religions over the past 2,000 years.

It is the museum’s first partnership with Yeshiva University, which helped curate the exhibit through its Center for Israel Studies. The museum, which opened in 2017, has close ties to the evangelical Christian community through its founder and board chair Steve Green, the president of Hobby Lobby. But it has made efforts in recent years to broaden its reach into other religious communities.

The museum has also faced controversy over the provenance of some of its artifacts. In 2020, the museum returned thousands of objects to Iraq after discovering that they had been looted, three years after the Green family was forced to turn over thousands of other artifacts from its personal collection — and pay a \$3 million fine — for the same reason. Also in 2020, independent researchers confirmed that 16 Dead Sea Scroll fragments in the museum’s collection are modern forgeries. The permanent exhibition where those fragments appeared

still displays the now clearly-marked forgeries, while also offering insight into how experts figured out the fragments were not authentic.

Like Jews, the Samaritans are descended from the Israelites. Their religion is similar to Judaism — they also read a version of the Torah, and use a form of ancient Hebrew with different letters — but one of the biggest differences is that they still conduct animal sacrifices, a ritual that is explained in videos and photographs at the museum. The exhibit also makes other comparisons between the faiths, such as one display case where a Samaritan Torah and a Jewish Torah are placed next to each other to show the difference in calligraphy and style.

In the Samaritans’ origin story, when Jews went to Jerusalem to build the Temple, the Israelites stayed at the foot of Mount Gerizim, the mountain where they believe the biblical story of the binding of Isaac occurred (and not Mount Moriah, which is where that occurred according to Jewish tradition). “None of this happened, according to the Jewish side of the story,” Abelman said. “And so there was, historically, conflict: Who really holds the proper Israelite tradition?”

Samaritans were historically regarded as suspect by Jews, and here Abelman pointed to a famous travelog by Benjamin of Tudela, who was born in what is now Spain in the 12th century. Abelman traveled to the Middle East and encountered the many people — including Jews and Samaritans — who lived there.

“He says, ‘They all basically get along. The Jews don’t marry the Samaritans, but they basically get along,’” said Abelman. “At the same time, he also repeats things about the stuff he thinks they get wrong. He ‘others’ them.”

Christians, too, were often intrigued by the Samaritans, given the prominence of the “Good Samaritan” parable. At the turn of the 20th century, as the Samaritans’ numbers dwindled and many lived in poverty, they sold artifacts to collectors, usually Protestants. This sparked worldwide interest. In the museum’s exhibit, one display case shows in-depth magazine feature stories — one in *National Geographic* in the 1920s, and another in *LIFE* in the 1950s (alongside a large Kool-Aid ad) — about

Samaritan rituals. (Twenty-seven different institutions from around the world lent objects, letters and artifacts to the Museum of the Bible for the exhibit.)

The exhibit explains the Samaritans’ history, and how the group expanded around the Eastern Mediterranean, to places such as Greece and Syria. At the time the Mishnah, a major rabbinic work, was written, the Samaritans were the largest ethnic group in the region which is why they appear in that Jewish text.

But they were killed in large numbers after rebelling against the Byzantines, and today less than 1,000 remain. Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, the second president of Israel, helped mend ties between Jews and Samaritans after he came to Ottoman-era Palestine in the early 20th century to learn Hebrew and accidentally ended up in the home of a Samaritan family, rather than a Jewish family.

“The relationship with the president’s office has been important to the Samaritans in terms of their relationship with the State of Israel and Jews more broadly,” said Abelman. “That has really helped to repair, like, thousands of years of — if not outright animosity, at least dislike and distrust and ambivalence.”

The museum also features several short films that take visitors into the homes of Samaritans, people who today are mostly assimilated into modern life in Israel and in the Palestinian territories. (Samaritans who live in Holon have special permission to go to Mount Gerizim, where religious ceremonies occur.)

“They’re really happy and excited to be able to have this exhibition take place and help tell their story,” said Abelman.

That’s how the museum always tries to “tell a story about another people,” said Rena Opert, the museum’s director of exhibits. “We would work with them and never presume to just make our own exhibit about a community that we don’t work with.” ♦

# Gulf-Israel train project chugs into political, financial obstacles

*Fraught with political challenges and staggering costs, the tantalizing vision of a regional railway stretching from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf lingers on the shelf*

By Saeb Rawashdeh

*The article first appeared in The Circuit.*

When Knitting together the Middle East with a network of train tracks has been a dream of transportation planners for over a century. The vision persists today as part of ongoing efforts to link the six Gulf states through an east-west rail network that would span Saudi Arabia and connect with the Red Sea.

However, tying the project to a northern route that leads through Jordan to Israel's Mediterranean port of Haifa – a notion floated amid the exuberance of the Abraham Accords – is still a long way off. Just as the megaproject was suspended more than 100 years ago, the politics and multibillion-dollar cost involved mean it will probably remain on the shelf for years to come.

"The success of a railway link would be dependent on the willingness of Saudi Arabia to support such a project," RAND Corp. researcher Daniel Egel told *The Circuit*. "I think that they would have to be incentivized to include Haifa as a primary terminus for the railway" – given the current absence of diplomatic relations with Israel.

The history of the never-completed Hejaz railroad, which was built by the Ottomans in 1908 so that Muslims from parts of Asia and Europe could make the *hajj* pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca, is a saga that illustrates the idea's appeal and serial failures.

Designed at the beginning of the 20th century by German engineers, the railway ran some 820 miles (1,320 kilometers) of rocky desert trail from Damascus to Medina, Islam's second holiest city, stopping 220 miles short of Mecca. It wasn't until four years ago that Saudi Arabia built the high-speed Haramain rail line connecting the two

sacred sites at a cost of about \$16 billion. By then, the Hejaz was a tin-can artifact with no connection across the Saudi border.

Besides its original north-south route, the Hejaz – named for the ancient western kingdom in Saudi Arabia – included a branch line running west through Palestine to connect with Haifa. The project was built solely through Islamic financing and donations from wealthy Muslims, under the principle that Western money was inappropriate for its religious nature.

Instead of the arduous 40-day journey by camel or horse, the Hejaz's steam engines enabled pilgrims to complete the trip in three days. By 1912, train travel between Damascus and Medina carried an annual 300,000 passengers.

The railway's builders had to overcome rocky terrain and other obstacles in southern Jordan and Saudi Arabia, where flooding in desert ravines required construction of bridges and viaducts. Bedouin tribes, which for many centuries lived off servicing pilgrims on the long overland routes to Mecca, lost business because of the Hejaz, leading them to attack the trains and sabotage the tracks.

"The railway reignited long-standing conflict between the Bedouin tribes and the Ottoman rulers of the Hejaz and Greater Syria," Oxford archaeologist John Winterburn told *The Circuit*.

The Hejaz line also connected the Ottoman Empire's main urban centers with distant provinces in the south, facilitating movement of its military troops. The railway later became a security headache for the British Mandate forces, who saw it as a potential means for Germany to invade Egypt.

The Arab Revolt of 1916 against the

Ottoman Empire interrupted use of the Hejaz railway, and it fell into disrepair as its tracks started to rot.

"After the First World War, the railway was split into three separate sections – the Syrian sector, run by the French; the Transjordanian section, run by the British; and the southern section, which became part of the Kingdom of the Hejaz," said James Nicholson, author of *The Hejaz Railway*. "In the north, the railway was repaired and by 1921, regular services were running between Damascus and [Jordan's southern city of] Ma'an," Nicholson told *The Circuit*. "The southern line was also patched up and occasional trains ran through to Medina."

Until the Syrian civil war over the past decade made travel too dangerous, the Hejaz ran passenger service between Amman and Damascus, while the line south of Amman was utilized to carry phosphate from mines near Ma'an to Aqaba. But instead of stimulating regional trade, urban development and agriculture, the railway stagnated and became a neglected relic of the past.

Because of the war, the Syrian portion hasn't been included in current plans for the railway's restoration. Still, Nicholson said, "there has been some talk about the possibility of restoring the main line back to use." The central argument against the revival of the railway is the availability of other forms of transport, such as air and road travel, he added.

A renewed Hejaz would require that the decrepit railbed be completely replaced with modern infrastructure and has been under Jordanian government review for 11 years. Prime Minister Bisher Khasawneh said last year that the government is looking

for private investors as partners because it doesn't have the money to fund the whole project, which would include a link between Amman and the Red Sea port of Aqaba.

Across the border from Jordan, Israel started pitching its "Tracks for Regional Peace" initiative in 2018 to connect Israel with its Arab neighbors. It sought to promote the plan two years later when the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain agreed to normalize relations through the U.S.-brokered Abraham Accords.

The idea was to use the new railway Israel built between Haifa and its eastern town of Beit She'an, extend it to the Jordanian border and connect to an overhauled Hejaz. From there it would cross into Saudi Arabia and end up in Dubai connecting the Mediterranean with the Persian Gulf. The regional railway network would transport cargo and tourists, providing a regional network that would include Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and the other member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Annual trade flow through the land bridge, it was estimated, could reach \$250 billion by 2030.

If relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia change and rail links became acceptable, the project would still face significant challenges, said RAND's Egel.

"First, I am not convinced that it is economically viable, given the availability of cheap transport options by water," Egel told *The Circuit*. "It would expand options for the eastern GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] nations to export to Saudi Arabia and Israel, and it would create a second option for transport if the security situation degrades in the Gulf of Aden" – the sea passage between Yemen and Somalia.

Egel said he would be surprised if such a railway became a key component in regional transport of goods given the alternatives. "It would undoubtedly provide a security hedge, but an expensive one," he said.

"Building a railway link will lower the transport costs associated with trade, but it will not impact the restrictions on trade and movement of people that Jordan and the Palestinians face," Egel said. "The primary impediment is political. If the railway link was augmented with bilateral free trade agreements or a multilateral

[free trade agreement] with Jordan, the benefits to Jordan could be large. Benefits to the Palestinians would be much harder to obtain, as their external trade is controlled by Israel," Egel said.

Steve Monroe, a political scientist at Yale-NUS College in Singapore, said the free trade agreement signed by the UAE and Israel in May could spur ambitious projects like the railroad.

"The UAE is one of the few places today with capital to invest in Israeli firms and Bahrain will also benefit from greater trade with Israel," Monroe told *The Circuit*.

Meanwhile, the idea of a rail network connecting Israel and the Gulf states through Jordan remains on the drawing board. Building the transnational route would require a thorough regional political realignment at a cost of tens of billions of dollars. The saga of the last century indicates that won't happen soon.

"It comes up from time to time," said Ben Moore, an Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman. "If we sign for peace, it could be considered." ♦

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## 'Thinking of Polishness in different terms': New book examines Poland's Jewish revival

*In 'Resurrecting the Jew,' Geneviève Zubrzycki explores the ongoing reckoning with Polish national identity and its complex relationship to the Holocaust*

By Matthew Kassel

To outside observers, the ongoing revival of Jewish life in Poland, of all places, may seem like a kind of perverse fad, not least because the movement has largely been animated by non-Jewish Poles who are increasingly communing with Jewish history through such acts of philosemitism as visiting klezmer clubs, studying Yiddish, attending Jewish festivals and wearing yarmulkes.

"Sometimes, when North Americans or Western Europeans hear about the Jewish revival in Poland, they think it's all fluff," Geneviève Zubrzycki, a professor of sociology at the University of Michigan who has closely observed the phenomenon for years, said in a recent interview with *Jewish Insider*. "I think they are very wrong."

In her new book, *Resurrecting the Jew: Nationalism, Philosemitism and Poland's*

*Jewish Revival*, Zubrzycki contends that this engagement represents a deeper and more meaningful reckoning with Polish national identity and its complex relationship to the Holocaust, which has long been actively suppressed by the right-wing governing party. "I think that it is a very important process of this kind of examination of Polish history, the difficult parts and all," she said. "It's important for thinking of Polishness in



different terms.”

Meanwhile, the populist Law and Justice Party, led by Polish President Andrzej Duda, has tried hard to control the conversation on its own draconian terms, vehemently rejecting what it describes as the “politics of shame” surrounding discussions of the Holocaust and passing legislation to criminalize accusations of Polish complicity in the Nazi genocide.

But while some observers have suggested that the efflorescence of Jewish culture is a reaction to such measures, Zubrzycki posits, in one of the central arguments of her book, that the dynamic is in fact the other way around.

“A lot of people think that Poles are doing this either as a form of expiation, of guilt, for example, or as opposition to the current right-wing populist government,” she told *JL*. “What I’m showing in the book is that, actually, the phenomenon has deeper roots than the current government.”

“If there is a reaction,” Zubrzycki added, “it’s actually from the populist government itself to this Jewish revival.”

Released this week and published by Princeton University Press, *Resurrecting the Jew* is the product of a decade of field research and extensive interviews with multiple subjects, including some Polish Jews who are now reclaiming their heritage in a country that was once home to the largest Jewish population in Europe.

The book will be published in Poland next month, when Zubrzycki is scheduled to give a lecture at the JCC in Krakow.

Zubrzycki, who directs the Weiser Center for Europe and Eurasia and is affiliated with the Frankel Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan, previously wrote about a different aspect of Polish-Jewish relations in her first monograph, *The Crosses of Auschwitz: Nationalism and Religion in Post-Communist Poland*, published in 2006. She completed her most recent book under the auspices of a 2021 Guggenheim fellowship.

In conversation with *JL*, Zubrzycki discussed the larger significance of Poland’s Jewish revival. “It’s clear that Polish society is more divided over those issues than ever,” she said. “It’s as if there’s two Polands.”

*The interview has been lightly edited and condensed for clarity.*

***Jewish Insider:*** *You started this book 10 years ago and have put a lot of work into exploring this subject. Was there anything in particular that first set you on this long and intensive path?*

**Geneviève Zubrzycki:** The book is, in a way, the companion to my first book about the non-memory of the Holocaust. The first book was about antisemitism and this kind of shock that Poles went through after the fall of Communism, when different narratives of World War II came about. In that book, I was interested, really, in Polish national identity and its relationship to Catholicism — and, of course, the “Jewish question,” quote unquote, came to be central to this. At the same time, when I was researching Polish antisemitism, nationalism, Catholicism, I encountered the beginning of a Jewish revival. I was in Poland at the time, and it was the first festivals of Jewish culture, for example, in 1990 and 1991. I was a graduate student then, and I was seeing this parallel move.

On the one hand, you have the Catholic church that’s kind of coming back with force. You have people reacting to new narratives of World War II, where the Holocaust is really anchored as a key historical moment. And on the other hand, you have people trying to recover their Jewishness and recover Jewish culture that has been destroyed and also silenced by Communism. So this new book is about that process of recovery. There are two kinds of lines. One is by Jews themselves, who are re-appropriating their identity; many people did not know they were Jewish or would not speak openly about this. So there is the revival of Jewish communal life itself, and then there are a lot of non-Jewish Poles who are increasingly interested in what happened to Polish Jews, and who are trying to commemorate and celebrate Jewish culture.

***JL:*** *Your book makes clear, notably, that non-Polish Jews represent a larger share of that kind of investment and interest, just by dint of there not being that many Jews in Poland.*

**Zubrzycki:** Exactly. In the book, I document the growth and spread of festivals

of Jewish culture, and there are over 40 in Poland. Obviously, these are not made solely or even primarily by Jews and for Jews. At one point, I didn’t go to Poland for five years, and when I went back in 2010, the festival of Jewish culture in Krakow that I had been attending for several years in the 1990s was like 10 days long and had 30,000 people. That was a shocking difference. There’s not a day where you open a newspaper or a magazine or something where there’s not a new book about Jewish life in Poland or Jewish culture. I became really interested in what Jewishness and Poland’s Jewish path means for non-Jewish Poles.

***JL:*** *What are the motivations for Jews themselves who are seeking active identification with their past — including some who didn’t know they were Jewish — and then, as a parallel, non-Jews engaging with Jewish culture through festivals and studying Yiddish and attending Passover Seders, for example. More broadly, are those groups interconnected or do they exist independently of one another?*

**Zubrzycki:** They exist independently, but they do intersect in some places. The revival of Jewish communal life in Poland is made possible by the fall of Communism, by the influx of resources, both human and material, to Poland to help Jews live a Jewish life — you have foundations that are there, they’ve founded Jewish schools, etc. You have that on the one hand, but one of my arguments is that there’s something going on in Polish society that is also making it possible for people who either were hiding their Jewish roots or did not know about them to learn about them and want to learn about them. There’s been a cultural shift in Poland where, basically, being Jewish is not necessarily a stigma, so that you don’t need to hide yourself as a Jew. And those festivals of Jewish culture — you know, the music, the novels, all of that, of course, and the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw — all provide this kind of cultural and social environment where someone is discovering that they have Jewish roots, for example, or knew already and could actually embrace them instead of hiding them further. That’s where they kind of interact. I’ve met and interviewed many

people who would be interested in Jewish culture, would go to those festivals, and then they start digging in, and they say, “Oh, well, my maternal grandmother was Jewish.” There’s a lot of that stuff. They are different phenomena, but actually they can support each other.

**JJ:** *You refute this notion in your book, but I wanted to bring it up for the purposes of our conversation. Alongside a new and growing interest in Jewish culture by non-Jewish Poles has been an effort by the right-wing governing party to impede criticism of Polish complicity in the Holocaust, including a libel law that criminalizes such discussions. But you argue that engagement with Jewish history is not — as one might reasonably assume — a reaction to the Law and Justice Party. Could you elaborate?*

**Zubrzycki:** A lot of people think that Poles are doing this either as a form of expiation, of guilt, for example, or as opposition to the current right-wing populist government. What I’m showing in the book is that, actually, the phenomenon has deeper roots than the current government — and that, if there is a reaction, it’s actually from the populist government itself to this Jewish revival. Although the Jewish revival begins in the late 1980s and starts its first steps in the 1990s after the fall of Communism, it really booms after the publication of Jan Gross’s book *Neighbors*, in 2000, about the murder of Jews by ethnic Poles, their neighbors.

This creates such a shock in Polish society, which becomes very divided over this issue. The more liberal parts of Polish society kind of want to reckon with that past, and learning about Jewish history and resurrecting Jewish culture is part of that reckoning — that, yes, Poles did this and we cannot hide these pogroms and that terrible history, we need to face up to that *and* we need to also kind of rediscover the Jewish past, the good and the bad parts of Polish history. And the right-wing government is not interested in that reckoning. They feel that this kind of critical examination of Polish history is a threat to Polish national identity. That’s what they’re really trying to suppress with laws, for example, and all

sorts of forms of censorship.

**JJ:** *Do you think that resistance is at all reminiscent of the opposition, say, to removing Confederate statues and otherwise more deeply reckoning with the legacy of slavery in the U.S.?*

**Zubrzycki:** It is a parallel. In the U.S., the reckoning with slavery is part of a process that has been going on for a long time, and Trump and right-wing white nationalism are coming against that movement to re-enshrine white nationalism. That’s something a little bit similar in the Polish context.

**JJ:** *It seems, at base, like a rejection of shame.*

**Zubrzycki:** It is, yes, and that’s what they call it. Law and Justice is saying we need to end this “politics of shame.” And that politics of shame was the recognition of Polish participation in some crimes against Jews during World War II.

**JJ:** *If your suggestion that the populist government is reacting to a surge of interest in Jewish culture is true, does that suggest Polish society is heading in a more pluralistic direction, even as the Law and Justice Party remains in power?*

**Zubrzycki:** I think it is slowly, incrementally becoming more pluralistic. Data supports that, when you look at younger generations. I mean, young Poles are not going to church as much as people of their age 20 years ago, for example. It’s not just that people at 20 typically don’t go to church; it’s that there’s something about the new generation that they’re becoming less interested in specific versions of Polish national identity. They tend to be more pro-E.U.; they tend to have traveled and worked abroad; they’re more secular; they’re more liberal than even their parents were at the same age. The Catholic Church is losing ground. And even though Law and Justice was reelected, it’s a populist government that’s successful because it does provide important provisions for the working classes, so they get their support. I think, yes, there is a movement toward more

pluralism over time. However, it’s clear that Polish society is more divided over those issues than ever. It’s as if there’s two Polands.

**JJ:** *How much does the commemoration of Jewish history have to do explicitly with the Holocaust?*

**Zubrzycki:** There has been a lot of commemorative activity over that, but also the argument that you cannot just commemorate the murders and the death, and that the Jewish contribution and Jewish life in Poland cannot just be restricted to only the murder of Jews in Europe. That’s why it’s going both ways. Some of the argument is that in order to understand what was lost, we need to understand what was. It’s understanding the music, the literature, the architecture. What’s interesting, too, and I tried to show in the book, is that it’s not just like a cosmopolitan, urban, elite movement. There are organizations that go especially to former Galicia — so, Eastern Poland — and school kids and their teachers prepare programs about their small villages that used to be shtetls. There’s a movement for local education, and recovering [the] Jewish history of a region is part of local education.

**JJ:** *Galicia in particular is an interesting part of the equation because Galician Jews were looked down upon by other Jews. My maternal grandmother’s family was from the region.*

**Zubrzycki:** Because they were poorer, right? So it was more like country Jews, in a way. It’s shtetl Jews. Although, when you think of Galicia, it’s also Krakow and now Lviv, even, in Ukraine. That’s a Polish Jewish town. That was Galicia.

**JJ:** *So there are a number of initiatives that extend beyond the metropolitan centers.*

**Zubrzycki:** Absolutely. And very important ones. A lot of educational initiatives in very small towns where students in middle school and high school are given assignments to basically learn about the Jewish roots of their towns. There’s no Jews left, but then they learn this, and I’ve been to sessions where they present their work. It’s very impressive.

**JJ:** *Has there been any resistance?*

**Zubrzycki:** I haven't heard of resistance. This is an incredibly popular program that's run by an NGO. It's not sponsored by the government, but it becomes part of the history program. For example, they send specialists on the history of Polish Jews who help the local teachers develop programs about the history of their small town, and then they build projects with the schoolchildren.

**JJ:** *One reason I ask is because there was a somewhat curious detail in your book about the far right's efforts to label its opponents as Jews, even — and perhaps especially — if they're not Jewish. What's going on there?*

**Zubrzycki:** That's what Adam Michnik, the editor-in-chief of Poland's most important newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, is talking about — that basically, in Poland, Jewishness can be imputed to someone regardless of their origins if you want to oppose them. You basically accuse your political opponent of being Jewish. He's talking about "magical antisemitism." It's not that someone is a Jew, therefore this person is XYZ; it's that I find this person with XYZ faults, and therefore that person must be a Jew. Though the Jewish community in Poland is small, you often have even right-wing figures who are turned into Jews by people to the right of the right.

**JJ:** *Do you think the epithet is functioning as a stand-in for, say, a kind of unwelcome foreign influence?*

**Zubrzycki:** In Poland, it's liberal socialism and capitalism that are Jewish. So people who want to embrace those values say, "OK, well, that's Jewish. I'm supporting Jewishness, because I want to be European. I want to be cosmopolitan. I want to be secular." They embrace the values that the right is rejecting.

**JJ:** *You're Quebecoise. Your father's side is Polish. You note in the book that you're not Jewish. But I thought it was interesting, as your own interviews suggest, that conceptions of Jewish identity are somewhat fluid among*

*Polish Jews due in part to a history of concealment.*

**Zubrzycki:** If I'm talking with my name in Poland, unless I'm in a Polish Jewish circle, they wouldn't think I'm Jewish. But if I was in a Jewish setting, where there's a lot of people who discover, by chance, that they have Jewish ancestry, then that was never taken for granted that I would be, you know, Catholic, for example. Because your name is not an indicator of your ancestry in Polish Jewish circles. So if I'm at the JCC and I'm interviewing people, some people have very Polish names, but, "Yeah, my grandfather changed his name," or, "Yeah, my grandmother was actually Jewish." They often assumed that I also had Jewish roots, and they would ask me, or American Jews would ask me, "What's your story?" "On what side?" "Are you Jewish?" They would ask me things like this because that's the reality of Polish Jews. Those who survived after the Holocaust, many of them changed their names or became secular or converted.

**JJ:** *In your book you outline different levels of engagement with Jewish culture and history. There are some cruder and perhaps even antisemitic figurines, like the "Jew with a coin," as you write. Then there's hip or more "casual" involvement like visiting a Klezmer club. You also point to a sort of "critical-introspective" tier as well as "empathetic versions of appropriation." There's clearly a diversity of engagement, but — if it's possible to quantify — which tier do you think has attracted the most participants?*

**Zubrzycki:** So the "Jew with a coin" and some of those representations are becoming part of folk culture. They're sold in the marketplace, and there's debate about what those mean, or whether they're antisemitic. There's some debate even among Jewish scholars. What I call empathetic or cultural engagement, there's a lot of people who are in that category. When you think of, for example, the JCC in Krakow, that is offering all sorts of programming to Jews and non-Jews. I mean, 95% of their volunteers are not Jewish. These are people who are deeply invested in supporting Jewish life in Poland. That's an interesting thing for me. Why do they do this? There are motivations behind

this. So I cannot tell you, per se, what the proportion is. For sure, it's easier to buy a cheap "Jew with a coin" than volunteering and giving 10 hours a week of your time to a Jewish organization.

But I'm not sure that's how we should think about the problem. When you think of what becomes visible and in the public sphere, the face of Poland is also changing with museums, with Jewish institutions, with these programs, with these public forums where people talk about difficult issues and Polish Jewish relations. It occupies a large, large chunk of Polish public life.

**JJ:** *What were some of the more unique stories you heard in your research and interviews, either with Jews or non-Jews?*

**Zubrzycki:** From the Jewish categories, you hear stories, very, very moving stories, of grandchildren, you know, snooping around and finding, for example, a grandmother's application to the German government to receive compensation, and the grandchildren had no idea that she was Jewish and no idea that she had been in a camp. You have stories of people learning on their grandparents' or parents' deathbeds that "I'm not your birth mother," for example, or one story of a grandfather who had a stroke and woke up speaking Yiddish. You have stories like that that are just unbelievable. And then you have stories from non-Jews who say, "Well, I heard about that pogrom in Jedwabne." That was one woman who was, like, 30 when I interviewed her, and she was in high school when she heard about this. She convinced her parents to drive all the way to that town, like 10 hours in the car, to see what that was about. She was from Galicia, from a small village, and then she decided to study Jewish studies and started to work at the JCC in Krakow. There are stories like this, of individuals who are building their life around this difficult reckoning and supporting the revival of Jewish communities in Poland.

**JJ:** *As you say in the book, as well, this kind of reckoning is somewhat unique among the former Eastern bloc countries. Hungary, for instance, which has a kind of tortured*

*history with the Holocaust, has a population of 100,000 Jews, larger than Poland's. But most public engagement with Jewish life appears largely to take place between the Jewish community and the government. In Poland, though, it seems more like an organic outgrowth of civic life rather than something sanctioned by the state.*

**Zubrzycki:** Right, absolutely. The Jewish community in Poland is much smaller, although there's potential for growth, because people are finding out that they have Jewish ancestry, and then they may decide that they want to explore that. When I went on a Birthright trip, all of them had Jewish grandparents; they'd satisfied the criteria, but most of them have never lived as Jews. They qualified because they have ancestry. But they're Polish. And then they're trying to figure this out. You know, how Jewish are they? And what does it mean to be Jewish?

**JJ:** *What was their experience of Israel like, having traveled with them through Birthright?*

**Zubrzycki:** It was different for many of them. I mean, it was an important discovery. The program lasts 10 days, and there's a sharp evolution. By the end, they had made solid relationships with each other. Some of them felt more Polish after, and some of them felt more Jewish. I think that the effect of a trip like this lasts over time. When they came back to Poland, they already had more baggage to kind of feel Jewish, so then some

of them might really embrace that.

**JJ:** *Among non-Jews in Poland, have you observed any recognition of Israel as a component of Jewish identity?*

**Zubrzycki:** Yes, but in different ways. They have things like days of Israeli culture and dance troupes that are about Israeli dance. There's also the knowledge among more educated people, for example, that Ben-Gurion was Polish. There's this feeling of, "OK, the birth of Zionism, it's Polish Jews." There's a feeling of pride that Poland also participated and that Polish Jews were big in the creation of that. With the current government there are some tensions, but in general, Poland likes to present itself as Israel's strongest ally in Europe, and certainly in the E.U. Even before the move to the right, it was a way also for Poland to carve its own place within the E.U. Now, we have direct flights to Tel Aviv for, like, 50 bucks from different Polish cities.

**JJ:** *What do you think outside observers generally tend to miss about Polish engagement with Jewish life and history?*

**Zubrzycki:** Sometimes when North Americans or Western Europeans hear about the Jewish revival in Poland, they think it's all fluff. I think they are very wrong. I think that this is an important movement. I'm not saying that it's a mainstream movement embraced by all of Polish society, but it's been going strong now for 20 years. It's not just in big cities, it's in small towns; it's in the

four corners of the country. And I think that it is a very important process of this kind of examination of Polish history, the difficult parts and all. It's important for thinking of Polishness in different terms. That's what I wanted to show in the book.

I do think that it's important to think about the lessons of this and to think about the implications of some of my findings and what that in-depth study can teach us, for example, about the U.S. and other places. You could think of Turkey, which has a complicated relationship with the Armenians. There's a lot of lessons to be taken from what's happening in Poland now, why this reckoning of the past is also occurring in the cultural sphere.

**JJ:** *You weren't born in Poland, but do you feel like your own interest in this subject, as a non-Jew, ties in at all to the movement itself?*

**Zubrzycki:** Of course, in a way. I mean, I'm not a right-wing Polish nationalist. And, for me, it was important to understand where that movement came from and why it's expressed that specific way. But the interesting thing, too, is that my first book was about the opposite, and you interview people who have very radically different opinions about that, and the role of the social scientist is to basically listen to them and try to understand how that works. But, you know, now my closest friends in Poland are part of this movement because I spent so much time with them. ♦



# This group wants to make Tulsa a hub for young Jews

*Tulsa, long a center for Jewish philanthropy, is now hoping to be a center of Jewish life.*

By Esther D. Kustanowitz

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

Heather Wilk's grandmother was born in Tulsa in 1895, before Oklahoma became a state, and her great grandparents were among the first Jews in the territory. But despite these ties, Wilk knew while growing up in the city that, in order to pursue a career in media and entertainment, she would have to leave for somewhere with more possibilities.

"With creative fields, anything outside the box felt impractical, if not impossible" in Tulsa, she told *eJewishPhilanthropy*. She moved to Los Angeles to become a producer and now serves as director of development at Red Entertainment, living in Park City, Utah. She is not alone: other Tulsa-raised writers who left their hometown for Hollywood include Cindy Chupack, who wrote for "Sex & the City" and "Otherhood," and Micah Fitzerman-Blue, whose credits include "Transparent" and "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood."

When Wilk returned to Tulsa last May — for the first time in a decade — joining a Jewish community initiative called Tulsa Tomorrow for a day of touring, the Tulsa she saw wasn't the Tulsa she remembered. The city was newly developed, with growing technology and creative sectors, a built-out arts district and a 100-acre community park called Gathering Place.

"I thought I had to leave to build something," Wilk told eJP. "I don't know if that's the case anymore."

Wilk hasn't made immediate plans to move back, but since Tulsa Tomorrow was founded in 2020, it has helped convince more than 50 people — men and women, couples, families and what its executive director, Rebekah Kantor, 31, calls "singular

relocators" — to move to the community, with a retention rate higher than 85%.

Bigger cities like Los Angeles, Chicago and New York get a lot of attention because they have "really strong identities... people, to some capacity, know what they're getting and what to expect," Kantor said, whereas regarding Tulsa, she added, "People need to actually come and see it's actually a real place, people live there. It has a thriving community. There are Jews that live in Tulsa. We actually pride ourselves on being the ones to open that door for people and consider a city that they likely never would have, if not for us."

According to the Jewish Federation of Tulsa, the city has approximately 2,000 Jews, including about 200 young adults.

In 2022, Kantor said, Tulsa Tomorrow has facilitated or influenced the relocation of 20 people: one individual, six couples and two families with preschool children. The adults among these "new Tulsans" range in age from 20 to their early 40s and originally hail from across the country, including from many states — like Florida, Arizona, Michigan and New York — with much larger Jewish communities.

Several work in the nonprofit sector and education, and some are working remotely. Another local nonsectarian organization, Tulsa Remote, has been successful in recruiting remote workers and digital nomads to the city by providing \$10,000 grants.

Tulsa Tomorrow's itineraries include sightseeing tours, as well as networking events with city leaders, developers and people whose careers relate to the participants' professional interests. The goal is to help prospective residents imagine their career path, and "put Tulsa on the map for young Jewish adults," Kantor said. This

includes showing them that the Jewish community is lively and welcoming.

"There is something really special about being in a small but mighty Jewish community where people really want to be genuine and helpful and make you feel like you're a part of something," Kantor said. "I think it's an overall spirit that people feel when they're in Tulsa. We introduce our visitors to city leaders, other young Jewish adults and Jewish community members. Our visitors get the chance to meet our clergy and have the chance to maintain relationships with everyone they meet."

Kantor sees the community's small numbers as a draw, not a detriment.

"I always thought it would be easier to be Jewish when living in a bigger city with more Jews, however I faced challenges finding my niche, or finding the right community for me," she said. "I often felt alone and like I was fending for myself, whereas in Tulsa, we are a very welcoming community [that] embraces new Jews. It's rare to not have someone welcome you to Shabbat dinner or invite you to an event."

It doesn't hurt Kantor's case that Tulsa's cost of living is 13-14% below the national average, according to NerdWallet, a company that helps people make financial decisions. The difference between Tulsa and bigger metropolitan communities with larger Jewish populations is stark. In Brooklyn, the median two-bedroom apartment rental can cost around \$3,500 a month, but a similarly-sized unit in Tulsa generally costs about \$675. And if a young family is looking to buy a house with room for children, a three-bedroom, two-bathroom home has a median cost of \$231,827, versus the approximate Brooklyn sticker price of \$1.3 million.

"We love that we're somewhat of a city



that's on the rise, but still under the radar, which makes it really approachable to young people," said Kantor. "If you are someone that wants to be able to own a home, and essentially feel like that you can create life savings for yourself without feeling like you're living paycheck to paycheck, this is a really great place to do that."

Much of the city's economy has revolved around the oil industry. According to the Oklahoma Historical Society, an oil strike at Glen Pool in 1905 — at the time the world's largest — transformed the city. By 1909, the Tulsa city directory listed more than 126 oil companies. When Oklahoma became a state in 1907, Tulsa had a population of 7,298. By 1920, the population boomed to 72,000 and the city had earned the title "Oil Capital of the World."

The oil industry has also created a significant amount of concentrated wealth. Tulsa is home to large foundations named for Jewish businessmen whose wealth came from oil and gas, like the George Kaiser Family Foundation (GKFF) and the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies.

The Schusterman Family Philanthropies, which is based in Tulsa, is known for its support of Jewish causes nationally and globally, but also supports projects locally — including creating the Jewish studies department at the University of Oklahoma in Norman, and funding the Charles Schusterman Jewish Community Center in Tulsa.

The GKFF focuses on providing self-fulfillment for children, and is a supporting organization of the Tulsa Community Foundation as well as Tulsa Remote. Much of the city's downtown development, including Gathering Place, was funded by GKFF, with an eye toward attracting young people and talent to grow the city. GKFF also bought the archives of a Jewish native son of the Midwest, Bob Dylan, and made the collection the centerpiece of the Bob Dylan Center in Tulsa, which opened in May.

Michael Basch, a Los Angeles native who works in finance and lived in London and New York before relocating to Tulsa about five years ago, called the small community "tight-knit... where everyone knows and checks in on each other."

"You're not one of many, you're one of a

few, and people are invested in each other's lives," Basch said. "I think it's very unique to Tulsa. I felt that the Jewish elders of the community — people in their 50s, 60s and 70s — have really gone out of their way to look after the younger, newer generation; they go out of the way to recruit Jews here and engage them all here, make sure they're happy and have friends, and when you're sick, people bring you food."

Basch first heard about Tulsa on a Reality trip, a Schusterman-sponsored initiative bringing leaders from a wide range of fields — chefs, authors, social justice activists, tech entrepreneurs and others — to Israel. A month later, Basch visited Tulsa for the first time. Four months after that, he relocated.

He became acquainted with the work of the GKFF on the Israel trip and also worked closely with the foundation in an investment and economic development role, which led to the birth of his current company, Atento Capital. The Reality trip was also key for him in another way: he met his wife through a Reality connection, and the pair now live in Tulsa with their two kids and a dog.

"Tulsa is a great place for young adults and families because it's a place where you can spend a ton of time with your family," said Basch. "People tend to do family-oriented things much more than in other places. It's also a place where you can really identify with purpose, and I think people who are purpose-driven are very much attracted to it."

Although Tulsa is a center of Jewish philanthropy, it has less Jewish religious infrastructure than other metropolitan areas hoping to attract young Jews. Congregation B'nai Emunah was founded in 1916 as an Orthodox congregation and is now a progressive Conservative congregation, reflecting demographic shifts among Tulsa Jews. Temple Israel, founded in 1914, serves the Reform Jewish community and Beth Torah Synagogue Chabad House is the community's sole Orthodox option. There are no kosher restaurants, although one new business in Jenks, a Tulsa suburb, called Cookies, Cakes and Jews, is the area's first Jewish-style bakery.

Kantor said that people her age connect Jewishly on a personal level and from a social setting rather than by joining a synagogue, so young adult Jewish life focuses on

potluck Shabbat dinners, happy hours and "other Jewish events and programs that have some religious affiliation, but aren't necessarily 'prayerful,'" she said. About 80 young adults "trickle in and out" of Jewish programming, she estimated.

Congregations manage the religious side of the city's Jewish programming and the local federation makes an effort to engage people of all ages through holiday-themed events and PJ Library, the free Jewish children's book service, she said.

Tulsa-curious folks who join Tulsa Tomorrow cohorts experience the city for an extended weekend with a local's perspective, Kantor said, visiting such places as Gathering Place, the Mother Road Market food hall, a Black history center called Greenwood Rising, and city events taking place during the trip, for instance, OktoberFest in the fall.

Participants pay only a small trip deposit: the rest, including hotel, flight, meals and activities, are paid for by the organization at an average cost of \$26,000 to \$30,000. Tulsa Tomorrow is an independent nonprofit that's unaffiliated with any particular synagogue or community organization, but gets support from a number of them in addition to private and public funding.

"We have individuals who simply live and breathe Tulsa, whether they're Jewish or not, who provide donations to us, whether it's yearly or every few years," Kantor said. "We don't allow anyone or any organization to give in excess of \$25,000, because we don't want there to be any kind of superiority of one person or organization over the other."

There's a big push to grow Tulsa beyond the Jewish community. The centennial of the 1921 Greenwood "Black Wall Street" Massacre — which destroyed 35 city blocks, injured more than 800, and may have killed as many as 300 people — prompted renewed interest in bringing Black entrepreneurs to Tulsa.

Another big supporter of Tulsa — and Jewish Tulsa, specifically — is the Zarrow family, which operates through a few separate foundations bearing its name. In 2020, the family decided to devote philanthropy to address disparities rooted in white supremacy and systemic racism.

The Zarrows also support the Jewish

community. The Zarrow Campus in Tulsa is a hub for Jewish life, housing the Tulsa Jewish Federation offices, the Charles Schusterman Jewish Community Center, the Mizel Jewish Community Day School,

the Sherwin Miller Jewish Museum — the only Jewish museum in Oklahoma — and the Tulsa Jewish Retirement and Health Center.

“The beauty in Tulsa,” Kantor said, “is

that we really do have all of the resources and the means to support a Jewish life throughout all phases of the lifecycle.” ♦

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## Meet the cycling activists taking on Jerusalem's hills

*While Tel Aviv is known as a city of bikers, Jerusalem has become much friendlier to cycling since 2020.*

By Melanie Lidman

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

The first time he rode his bike from his home in Jerusalem's leafy, central Rehavia neighborhood to Hebrew University atop Mount Scopus, Nadav Berger arrived sweaty, out of breath and exhausted after 40 minutes of intense pedaling.

But he rode again the next day, and the day after that, and soon he trimmed his riding time down to 25 minutes without any need to stop for water.

“That's the thing about riding in Jerusalem,” Berger, 27, told *eJewishPhilanthropy*. “At the end of the day, someone who tries to ride, if they're in pretty good shape, they will be successful. It could be that they will sweat a bit more or they will have to rest. But every rider that tries to ride, they'll get there.”

Berger is hoping to see more cyclists on the streets of Jerusalem this fall, as cooler temperatures and the Jewish holiday season usher in one of the best times of year to ride a bike in Israel. For secular Israelis, next week also offers the opportunity for the best biking holiday of all time: Yom Kippur.

The entire country shuts down for the holiest day on the Jewish calendar. Almost no one drives, save for emergency vehicles. That means thousands of bicycle riders can

seize control of roads normally jam-packed with cars and spend the day flying down empty highways or teaching their kids to ride in the middle of city streets. Bike mechanics work long hours in the days leading up to the holiday, tuning up thousands of bicycles that have rusted under the harsh Mediterranean sun.

Generally, Israel's capital of biking, both on Yom Kippur and otherwise, has been the Tel Aviv metro area, with its flat topography, seaside views, wide highways, large secular population and growing network of bike paths. But Berger and a collective of riders called Bicycles for Jerusalem have also been finding success promoting biking in Israel's actual capital — not just on Yom Kippur, but all year.

Jerusalem, with its steep hills, narrow streets, and patchwork of neighborhoods straddling geopolitical and religious conflicts, has typically not been the chosen destination of bike riders. But for years, Bicycles for Jerusalem has been beating on the door of City Hall, begging for meetings with the city's planners and trying to encourage more biking in the city.

It took a global pandemic for the group to finally get an answer. In Jerusalem, as in other cities across the globe, residents began looking for alternatives to public transit, and some turned to biking instead of taking the bus.

Over the past few years, the capital has slowly started incorporating more bicycle infrastructure and soliciting input from riders themselves. The openness to cyclists comes as the city is undergoing a massive facelift, with several large infrastructure projects, including an expansion of the light rail.

“The coronavirus pandemic focused the understanding that a healthy lifestyle must be encouraged, one that combines transportation that is greener and more accessible, while implementing good infrastructure for riding bicycles in the center of the city and throughout different neighborhoods, to connect people and allow them to move more safely and accessibly,” said a Jerusalem municipality spokesperson. “Integrating bike riding is part of the transportation policy of Jerusalem along with walkability, public transportation, rapid bus lanes, and increasing bus frequency.”

Before 2020, there were 30 miles of bike paths in Jerusalem, according to City Hall. But since then, the city has added 11 miles of paths, an increase of 34%. The Jerusalem Transportation Master Plan, a quasi-public organization that works with both the Ministry of Transport and City Hall to ensure holistic planning for public transit and infrastructure in the city, has called for 125 miles of bike paths across the city's 48

square miles. That still pales in comparison to Tel Aviv, which has 155 miles of bike paths in a city half the size.

One of the solutions Bicycles for Jerusalem successfully pressed the city to adopt is “tactical” bike paths, which can be integrated onto existing roads without making infrastructure changes. Creating a tactical path is generally as simple as painting new lane markings with bike symbols.

In the past, the city government would build bike paths separated from the road, which required extensive planning and construction. While such paths are considered safer, they’re also much more expensive and can take years to complete. Turning a three-lane road into a two-lane road with a painted bike lane can happen overnight.

“We went to the municipality and said, ‘Look at these cities that are doing this,’ and we really pushed it,” said Berger, the group’s spokesperson. “It took them about two years of planning, but they’ve started this year in Rehavia, the city center, and it’s going to connect to Katamon,” he said, referring to central residential neighborhoods.

“The importance of these paths is that it’s really easy to do them quickly and with minimal disruptions to the lives of the residents,” Berger added. Since Jerusalem has narrower streets, the tactical lanes are often created by removing parking, which can anger some car owners.

“We don’t think it’s the best bicycle infrastructure, but it’s really easy to do these paths as pilots,” Berger said. “You can try out the path for half a year, to see if it brings more riders, and how people react, and if it negatively impacts the residents. Then you can come to an agreement about where the best placement is for a path. It’s also really easy to go backwards and make the needed changes.”

The Jerusalem spokesperson said so far, the city had received a positive response to the tactical paths. “The tactical paths form connections with existing paths, and allow for transportation continuity in a cheap and immediate way,” the spokesperson said.

The city is also actively promoting bike infrastructure, both for daily use and for fun. On Sept. 9, the city opened a new bicycle-only tunnel through the hills near

the western neighborhood of Ein Kerem — part of a 26-mile cycling path around the outskirts of the city. The tunnel was originally built to transport wastewater in the 1990s, and was opened only once a year to bikers for a special around Jerusalem ride. After \$7 million of improvements, the tunnel is now open to bikers every day of the year. At a length of 1.3 miles, it is the fifth-longest cycling tunnel in the world.

And last year, Jerusalem launched its “Jerufun” bike sharing system, with 200 bicycles at 25 locations around the city. A little more than half the bikes are electric. Berger said the “Jerufun” bike sharing program is certainly welcomed by bike activists, but the program is plagued by user issues and there aren’t quite enough stations around the city to make it as convenient as Tel Aviv’s shared scooter apps.

“We want to see more cooperation with residents from the municipality, we want them to be more assertive and sure of themselves with the car owners,” he said, noting that motorists often oppose bike lanes that may replace parking spaces. “Even with all of the advancements, in many cases, whenever there’s a conflict, the municipality will still take the side of the car owners.”

Specifically, new plans for the light rail on major thoroughfares do not include separate bike paths, something Berger calls “a huge loss.”

The problem with bike lanes, Berger said, is a chicken-and-egg conundrum. If there aren’t a lot of daily bike commuters, the city doesn’t want to invest in infrastructure for a small sector of the population. But there won’t be more bikers in Jerusalem unless they feel safe riding. And for bikers to feel safe, they need more bike lanes.

Bicycles for Jerusalem has existed for 15 years and isn’t a registered nonprofit. Rather, its volunteer activists are friends who all care deeply about their impact on the environment — and avoiding Jerusalem’s notorious traffic. Many of its members are urban planners or mapping professionals, and are now invited to weekly planning meetings at City Hall to ensure that new infrastructure takes bikers’ needs into consideration. For example, because of Jerusalem’s hilly terrain, Berger explained, the easiest bike route is not necessarily the most direct.

“Now they’re really interested in hearing from us in the planning stages, because we’ll say to the municipality, ‘Don’t make a bike path here, it won’t make a big difference for riders, it’s a waste of money,’” said Berger, who works during the day as an online news editor for an Israeli news website. “This creates belief and trust with the municipality, because they see that we’re not just yelling ‘make more bike paths, make more bike paths.’ They know we want good quality paths.”

Bicycles for Jerusalem has also grown recently, drawing as many as 100 people to its monthly Critical Mass rides — a type of event held in cities around the world to advocate for more bike infrastructure. The critical mass rides can also turn into rolling parties on wheels, sometimes with costumes, lights or sound systems pedaling along.

Jerusalem can be an intimidating place to be a biker, between the hills and windy streets, Berger said, adding that electric bicycles have convinced more people to take the plunge, but mostly, it’s about gaining confidence.

“That’s the biggest power of the organization, that there’s a monthly anchor that’s also really, really fun,” said Berger. “People don’t have to be activists when they come, they don’t have to come ready to fight and make a change. They can just come to show solidarity and have fun. And then once they start coming, they stay to work together with us.” ♦