

## THE WEEKLY PRINT

*Where is Peter Thiel on our issues?; The rabbi bringing ritual objects to Jewish refugees inside Ukraine; Drew Friedman goes underground; Observance of Sigd, a Jewish holiday long kept in Ethiopia, is spreading in the U.S.; Aaron Samuels bridges gap between 'artist' and 'entrepreneur' with new VC fund; Israelis get on board to test driverless buses; and These archivists are sifting through endless boxes of paper to preserve a century of American Jewish philanthropy.*

NOVEMBER 23, 2022

## Where is Peter Thiel on our issues?

*The isolationist venture capitalist was one of the top spenders in the 2022 midterms, with mixed success*

By Matthew Kassel

In the early fall of 2021, Peter Thiel, the billionaire tech investor and GOP megadonor, was holding court in a private dining room at a San Francisco hotel. The occasion was an exclusive dinner reception for a group of young conservative activists, and soon enough, their conversation turned to a speculative game of geopolitical matchmaking.

Gathered around the dinner table, the attendees had been wondering if they could identify a real-world “promised land” where the tenets associated with an emerging movement known as national conservatism, which promotes a confrontational style of right-wing populism now gaining traction in the Republican Party, might find the best chance of flourishing, according to a person who was present for the discussion.

Thiel, who is sympathetic to the movement, weighed in with a series of quick judgments as his dinner guests put forth a few possible destinations ranging from

Europe to the Middle East and beyond. When the search eventually landed on Israel, which is recognized as a fountainhead of national conservative sentiment, Thiel was dismissive and “blew it off,” recalled the attendee, who spoke with *Jewish Insider* on the condition of anonymity to describe the private exchange. The country, Thiel reasoned, was just too precariously situated.

In some ways, the emphasis on self-preservation was fitting for an eccentric Silicon Valley mogul so consumed with his own mortality that he has quixotically vowed to “fight” death. Born in Germany more than two decades after the destruction wrought by World War II, Thiel, who is now based in Los Angeles, holds at least three passports and helped found a libertarian nonprofit that aspires to build floating cities in international waters. He has long been fixated, it seems, on outsmarting the apocalypse.

It would not be surprising, then, if

Thiel had expressed reservations over the prospect of relocating to a small Middle Eastern country in a region of hostile enemies openly seeking its destruction. Despite a personal sensitivity to security concerns in the region, however, Thiel’s candid assessment of Israel raised some broader questions over Middle East policy that he has not addressed publicly, even as his views on a range of issues have become increasingly relevant following an election in which the venture capitalist invested more heavily than ever before.

He did so while backing a handful of like-minded federal candidates who, by varying degrees, embraced somewhat outré approaches to international engagement that embody a sharp break from the traditional Republican foreign policy order — which Thiel seems particularly eager to disrupt.

A spokesperson for Thiel did not respond to requests for comment from *Ji*.

During the midterms, Thiel's significant financial contributions placed him among the top political spenders of the cycle. Within GOP circles, the donations drew hopeful speculation that he was positioning himself to become a successor to Sheldon Adelson, the billionaire Republican kingmaker whose death, in 2021, left a major void in conservative fundraising. But the analogy overlooked at least one crucial distinguishing factor.

While Adelson was perhaps best known for his fervent commitment to Jewish and pro-Israel causes, Thiel, 55, is viewed as an isolationist and has shown little interest in the Middle East, except on the few occasions when he has publicly voiced criticism of American military engagement across the region. "I've never heard him say anything about Israel," said one conservative foreign policy leader who has conversed with Thiel about a diversity of subjects. "And Thiel is someone who likes to speak his mind."

Even if his money did most of the talking, Thiel's political investments were apparently driven, in part, by an aggressively contrarian worldview that represents a pronounced departure from the neoconservative wing of the GOP, which he had reportedly endeavored to weaken.

Last year, Thiel initiated a high-stakes venture to push the Republican Party rightward, backing two Senate prospects, J.D. Vance and Blake Masters, who are among the most high-profile avatars of national conservatism in American politics. Thiel, who contributed more than \$30 million between them, helped propel each candidate to competitive general elections with accompanying endorsements from former President Donald Trump.

The experiment ultimately yielded mixed results: Vance, the author of a popular memoir about his hardscrabble Rust Belt upbringing, claimed victory in Ohio earlier this month, while Masters, a Thiel protégé in Arizona, went down in defeat.

Though the project fell short, there is little doubt that Thiel's funding succeeded, at least partially, in muscling a fractured GOP even further away from the mainstream. In the Senate, where Republican leadership is now reckoning with an unexpectedly poor performance in the midterms, Vance is poised to assume office this January

alongside a newly elected Republican from Missouri, Eric Schmitt, who also benefited from Thiel's financial largesse, albeit to a lesser extent.

Both Vance and Schmitt were endorsed by a Thiel-backed incumbent, Sen. Josh Hawley (R-MO), who hopes to establish a rowdy coalition of nationalist Republicans who will challenge GOP orthodoxies on a range of issues, notably in the foreign policy realm. The triumvirate is aligned, for instance, in opposing continued military assistance to Ukraine, which is not a widely accepted position within the party.

Thanks in part to Thiel, the schism is likely to accelerate brewing divisions between establishment hawks such as Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-KY), the minority leader, and a rising vanguard of far-right conservatives such as Vance, an Iraq War veteran who has voiced skepticism of most international aid while advocating for a non-interventionist foreign policy approach that ostensibly prioritizes domestic interests over costly investments abroad.

"It's clear that there is more fluidity in the Republican Party than there has been in a long time," said Justin Logan, director of defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. "There has been change, it looks like there is going to be change, and it appears that Thiel is supportive of that change."

The change has also highlighted a separate and more subtle tension between opposing national conservative factions differing over the extent to which American aid should be allocated, if at all, to dependable allies, among other things.

To the extent that Thiel himself has articulated a coherent approach to foreign policy — and, his detractors argue, it is open to debate — he has mostly raised alarms over economic competition with China, while condemning U.S. interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan and other Middle Eastern countries as foolhardy experiments in American liberal expansionism.

"Instead of going to Mars, we have invaded the Middle East," Thiel said from the stage of the Republican National Convention in Cleveland six years ago, amid his emergence as a vociferous early Trump supporter. "It's time to end the era of stupid wars and rebuild our county."

Such views are widely shared among national conservatives, according to David Brog, the president of the Edmund Burke Foundation, a newly created public affairs institute devoted to advancing the movement in the U.S. and elsewhere.

In a recent interview with JI, Brog, a pro-Israel activist who also serves as the executive director of the Maccabee Task Force (an Adelson-funded group fighting antisemitism on college campuses), emphasized that national conservatives "all agree" the U.S. "has been far too quick to send our troops abroad to fight for the freedom and security of others." He said the movement advocates for "an approach that judges all foreign involvement by one and only one criteria: direct U.S. national interest."

Still, he noted that there are two different camps within the broader movement. The first camp, to which Brog belongs, recognizes what he described as "multiple foreign threats" and seeks to address them by supporting allies that "defend themselves by themselves and in the process secure U.S. interests abroad." He pointed to Israel, India, Japan and South Korea as "frontline allies" the U.S. should be helping. "We dare not withdraw from the world," Brog cautioned. "But I want to see our frontline allies take the lead in confronting shared enemies."

Those who claim membership in the second camp, Brog explained, are more focused on China while downplaying other threats such as Iran and Russia. "I admire their clarity on China," he said diplomatically. "We need to be focusing on the Chinese threat above all. But while we do so, we can't ignore the Middle East or Europe."

It is unclear if Thiel fits into either camp, even as some of his recent public speeches suggest he is likely more aligned with the second, as are the candidates he backed. Still, it can be difficult to discern where exactly Thiel stands on any one issue, not least because his foreign policy views have evolved dramatically over the past couple of decades.

During the Bush administration, for instance, Thiel was even supportive of U.S. foreign policy in Iraq, according to Max Chafkin's recent biography, *The Contrarian: Peter Thiel and Silicon Valley's Pursuit of*

*Power*. “In fact, he was obviously profiting from it,” said Chafkin, a columnist for *BloombergBusinessweek*, referring to Palantir Technologies, the software company Thiel co-founded in 2003 that contracts with the U.S. government. “Palantir,” he said, “grew out of the excitement within the Defense Department to do a better job of prosecuting wars in the Middle East.”

“When you start looking for total intellectual coherence with Thiel,” Chafkin suggested, “you’re not going to find it.”

Joshua Tait, a historian of American conservatism, echoed that view. “I think there are elements that can lead us to question Thiel’s commitment to nationalism or challenging the foreign policy establishment,” he said in an email exchange with *JL*.

Thiel, who once identified almost exclusively with libertarian thinking, has recently positioned himself as a fellow traveler within the national conservative movement, giving abstruse and occasionally incendiary speeches at annual conferences hosted by the Edmund Burke Foundation and signing his name to a starkly worded statement of national conservative principles.

The document, which was published this summer, promoted strict isolationism as a bulwark against “universalist ideologies” threatening “to impose a homogenizing, locality-destroying imperium over the entire globe,” among other things.

Thiel is also acquainted with Yoram Hazony, the Israeli-born political theorist credited with establishing an intellectual basis for national conservative thinking. In a recent email to *JL*, Hazony, who lives in Jerusalem and chairs the Edmund Burke Foundation, said he is “in touch” with Thiel but declined to comment further.

Meanwhile, Thiel’s apparent reservations over living in Israel, where he holds investments, have not kept him from visiting. In 2017, he met with Benjamin Netanyahu, who was then the Israeli prime minister, and spoke before an audience of tech entrepreneurs in Tel Aviv, where the PayPal co-founder and early Facebook backer praised the “startup nation” as an economic success story.

Thiel, a committed Christian, has otherwise expressed admiration for Israel

as an ideological project. In an interview with the Hoover Institution two years ago, the venture capitalist claimed to view the Jewish state, along with the U.S. and the U.K., as an ideal model of national self-assertion, standing athwart what he characterized as the twin threats of “Islamic Sharia law” and “Chinese communist” surveillance.

From a foreign policy standpoint, however, Thiel’s personal appreciation for the Jewish state does not seem to have been accompanied by any public assessment of the long-standing relationship between the U.S. and Israel.

Bonnie Glick, a former Trump administration official who served as deputy administrator of the United States Agency for International Development, said that shouldn’t be unexpected. “It feels like he and a number of the candidates he backs, their foreign policy concern isn’t about Israel and peace in the Middle East because that chapter’s been written,” she said of Thiel. “It’s really because of the Abraham Accords, which put to bed the question of the U.S.-Israel relationship.”

“Israel’s position is much better than it was 20 years ago,” David Azerrad, a national conservative leader who serves as an assistant professor at Hillsdale College’s Van Andel Graduate School of Government in Washington, D.C., told *JL*. “What does Israel really need from the U.S. right now beyond the \$3 billion” in annual aid “and the occasional vote at the [U.N.] Security Council?”

This past July, Vance marked his first visit to Israel with an unexpected campaign stop in Tel Aviv, where he attended a conservative conference and pledged he “will be as strong an advocate for the U.S.-Israel relationship as anyone.”

That doesn’t mean his statement was a reflection of Thiel’s views on Israel, claimed Ric Grenell, a former acting director of national intelligence in the Trump administration and a friend of Thiel’s. He said the venture capitalist will have “zero expectations about positions” once the candidates he supported take office.

“Peter’s investing in people that he likes, it’s not like he invests in people that he totally has to agree with 100% of the time,” Grenell told *JL*. “It is literally people that he knows, that he believes in, that he knows

are smart people, that are outsiders. And if there’s one thing that Peter believes, it’s that Washington has got to have professional experts from the outside that come in and bring different perspectives.”

A spokesperson for Vance did not respond to a request for comment.

“Politically, it is much more likely to me that there is genuine distance between J.D. and Peter because J.D. has not really been that close with Peter Thiel for that long, despite the shorthand,” said Teddy Schleifer, a reporter for *Puck* who has written extensively about Thiel’s involvement in the midterms. Whether his political contributions were a one-off or if he intends to invest again next cycle remains to be seen. In the meantime, “Thiel bought a house in Washington,” Schleifer told *JL*, “so it’s clear he wants to be involved to some extent.”

If anything, Thiel appears to be playing the long game on more than a few fronts, as the reception a year ago in San Francisco suggested. Taking stock of each country raised by the group of young conservatives at the dinner last fall, Thiel continued to give his assessments, analyzing the pros and cons of each option — including New Zealand, where he gained citizenship in 2011. While he had once described the country as a “utopia,” over dinner, he appeared to have changed his mind. It was overregulated and excessively liberal, Thiel argued, disapprovingly comparing the Pacific island nation to Marin County in California, according to the anonymous guest.

Hungary was another choice, in large part because Viktor Orbán, the country’s strongman prime minister, is revered within hard-right circles. Thiel raised characteristic concerns, however, over its proximity to an increasingly bellicose Russia.

He was more receptive, on the other hand, to the broader European Union. Thiel mentioned that he had been seeking Maltese citizenship in case national conservatism should, at some point, take root across the continent. ♦

# The rabbi bringing ritual objects to Jewish refugees inside Ukraine

*Rabbi Irina Gritsevskaia has traveled into Ukraine multiple times since the beginning of Russia's invasion in order to bring menorahs, Passover food and more to a growing community.*

By Ben Sales

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine began more than nine months ago, countless Jewish leaders have traveled to the region bearing duffel bags of medicine, clothes and hygienic products.

Rabbi Irina Gritsevskaia has been one of those couriers. But along with humanitarian supplies, her bags have been filled with items she considers spiritual necessities: stacks of *haggadot* for Passover, a *megillah* for Purim and, soon, dreidels and other goods for Hanukkah. One of her first trips into Ukraine came on March 16, as thousands were streaming the other direction across the border, to help a community on the Romanian border with a growing number of internal refugees celebrate Purim.

"I went for Purim because we helped a lot with financial help, with money, with food, renting houses, evacuation," Gritsevskaia, who was born in St. Petersburg and moved to Israel as a teenager, told *eJewishPhilanthropy*. "This time, we thought, there's also food for the soul that we need to provide."

Gritsevskaia, the director of Midreshet Schechter, a Conservative Jewish adult education seminary in Israel, has become the leader of an effort by her movement to aid Ukraine's Conservative Jewish communities, which serve hundreds of families across five cities, and support their refugees.

In total, the Schechter Institutes — her seminary's parent organization — together with the global Conservative group Masorti Olami have spent some \$400,000 on the

effort, helping thousands of refugees. The country's Conservative Jewish camp also relocated to Romania this past summer.

But beyond making sure the refugees are safe and cared for, that aid has also gone toward sustaining a burgeoning Conservative Jewish community in the western Ukrainian city of Chernivtsi, close to the border with Romania. While it's hard to say how much that community has grown, owing to the coming and going of refugees, community leader Lev Kleyman estimates that average synagogue attendance on Shabbat has roughly doubled — drawing 50 or 60 people to a Saturday morning service now, as opposed to 20 or 30 before the war.

Along with bringing ritual objects to the Chernivtsi community — Gritsevskaia has traveled there for Purim, Passover and Yom Kippur, in addition to trips to help get refugees out of the country — her initiative has fundraised the building of a new Torah ark for the congregation.

"One of the things that you understand in those places is that sometimes that's what our holidays are about, to bring happiness to places where it's hard," Gritsevskaia said. "It is not going to end soon, it's a long, long process we have to go through... One of the most important things, [to] me, for people in Ukraine to understand is that they are not alone — whatever is going to happen."

Kleyman said that for some refugees, joining the community has proven an adjustment. Some were not accustomed to taking part in Jewish observances at all. Others had never encountered egalitarian Judaism. And the community includes people who are exploring Jewish conversion as well.

"We had a lot of Jews who were attending their first Purim" celebration, Kleyman told *eJP*. "We still have refugees who [say], 'Until the war started, I didn't understand why people believed these things, why they kept Shabbat. Why do they not use their phone on Shabbat?'...But when they got here, they said, 'Now I understand what a community is for and what people believe.'"

Now, a typical week in the community includes a schedule of classes throughout the week — ranging from a seminar on Jewish history to Jewish conversion classes to conversational Hebrew, to help those preparing to move to Israel. On Friday nights, community members gather for services and dinner, with some staying as late as 11 p.m. to sing together and play games. There's also a lunch on Saturday afternoon following services, which is largely attended by refugees. Kleyman said there's been little if any tension between the existing community and the new arrivals.

"I can't remember anyone who didn't want to help," Kleyman said, adding that members of the community who lived in Chernivtsi before the war now feel that the refugees "are already part of our community. They live in Chernivtsi. They're one of us."

Kleyman and Gritsevskaia likewise said they haven't had compunction about spending money on ritual objects as opposed to saving it for humanitarian needs. Gritsevskaia said her ferrying of Jewish supplies is a response to demand. In addition to the dreidels, she will be bringing gifts for children, smoked meat and a warming plate the community can use on Shabbat. Before her trip, others will be bringing the community menorahs, candles,



kipot and winter items such as sweatshirts and blankets. Those goods, in turn, will be repackaged and sent to other Ukrainian Conservative communities.

She'll also be running a training for counselors in the local Conservative youth group, and may visit another city in addition to Chernivtsi.

"The basics is to help people to survive, right?" Gritsevskaia said. "But the moment you have it, it's actually about having the

spirit and it is very important to the people. They decided it's important and that's why we are there to provide it."

When she first entered Ukraine in the early weeks of the war, Gritsevskaia said she was scared, as "We were basically the only people to cross the border in[to] Ukraine, and many, many, many people — basically women and children — were going toward our direction." But she's gotten used to the trip as the war has progressed.

Now, she and Kleyman are both worried about how the community will survive the winter, as Russian attacks have interrupted the country's utilities. Kleyman said that Chernivtsi now alternates giving homes electricity and water throughout the day, but can't provide both at the same time.

"We are trying to have all our enterprises running notwithstanding the situation," Gritsevskaia said. "We just hope we'll have electricity." ♦

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## Drew Friedman goes underground

*The illustrator's newest book spotlights 101 of the world's top cartoonists*

By Matthew Kassel

In his new book, *Maverix and Lunatix: Icons of Underground Comix*, Drew Friedman, the renowned illustrator and portrait artist, gives readers an intimately rendered look at 101 of the most influential cartoonists associated with the transgressive underground comics (or comix) movement of the late 1960s and 1970s.

The list includes such well-known figures as Art Spiegelman, R. Crumb, Harvey Pekar and Harvey Kurtzman in addition to cult artists like Nancy Burton, George DiCaprio, Jay Lynch and Diane Noomin, who died shortly after the book was published last month by Fantagraphics.

Friedman, 64, was too young to participate directly in the movement itself but views the era as a sort of creative guidestone. "The whole aesthetic really appealed to me, like these people who just put anything down, no matter how over-the-top it was," he told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview, adding: "That's the direction I wanted to go in with my work."

Friedman, a former longtime contributor to *The New York Observer*, has written and illustrated a number of books, including *Jewish Comedians*, *All the Presidents* and *Heroes Of The Comics: Portraits Of The Pioneering Legends Of Comic Books*. But *Maverix and Lunatix* may be his most personal yet.

"Drew is at a point now where he is no longer a 'cartoonist' but an astute master of portraiture," the comedian and podcaster Marc Maron writes in the book's foreword. "Each painting reveals the soul and grit and humor of the subject with just a hint of the grotesque humanness that defines us all."

Friedman discussed with *JI* his illustrations and how he whittled the list of artists down from a pool of about 3,000 possible subjects, among other things.

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

***Jewish Insider:*** I'm by no means even

*an amateur expert on this topic, but I have to say I didn't know, like, three-quarters of the people in this book. Not that I didn't find them interesting! How did you put this group of artists together? You mention in the intro that one particularly exhaustive tome 'lists over 3,000 artists who contributed to underground comix.' It must have been difficult to whittle it down to 101.*

**Drew Friedman:** You mentioned that you weren't familiar with a lot of the people in the book. I actually wasn't either. I mean, there's about 10 or 15% of people who either I hadn't heard of or I was vaguely aware of, but I just rediscovered them, or their work, at least — most of them were forgotten. I rediscovered their work and realized, like, there's some really good quality and this stuff should be at least reexamined or rediscovered. So I wanted to include some of those people, and there's a few names like Harry Driggs and Andy Martin and Buckwheat Florida, Jr. — can't get a better

name than that — and people who didn't do a lot of work for underground comics, but the quality of the work just really stood out to me. The other thing was, people who I wasn't crazy about years ago when I was younger — either I was indifferent to it or I just didn't like it — I reexamined a lot of that and discovered I do like it now. I really see the talent there, and even if the subject matter maybe is a little too drug-related or sex-related just because that's what everybody was doing, the quality of the artwork stands out in a lot of cases. So it was like a discovery process for me, especially with the obscure people, and that was more interesting for me to include those people rather than the obvious choices like, you know, Robert Crumb and Art Spiegelman.

There was a list of 3,000 artists, and I wanted to whittle that down to 100, which I did, and I think I included everybody who was pretty essential to that movement. Then the list grew to 101 when I discovered one artist really late in the game who I thought I needed to include.

**JJ:** *What was his name?*

**Friedman:** Jim Evans. He didn't do a lot of work, but he did some essential things, and used some really good artists in some of his stuff. Then he just stopped doing comics altogether and switched gears.

**JJ:** *If I'm not mistaken, you wrote and illustrated this book throughout the beginning couple of years of the pandemic?*

**Friedman:** Basically, the whole thing was my lockdown book. I started like a half a year before COVID, but then when the lockdown hit, all I basically worked on was this book. My wife and I didn't go anywhere, we didn't visit anybody, we didn't socialize, we didn't travel to New York. In a selfish way, that was a good thing, where I could just really concentrate on this book and give it extra detail, which, hopefully, you can see in many of the portraits where I really go intense into the backgrounds on some of them — just to try to capture that era of the late '60s, early '70s, just to give people a sense of what it was like and what it looked like aside from just the people.

**JJ:** *What does this book mean to you personally? You've done collections on Jewish comedians, American presidents and other early comic book visionaries.*

**Friedman:** I did the two books of people who worked in the comic book business in the '30s and '40s, when that business started booming and *Superman* went through the roof and all these young artists joined in. They were looking for artists back then — all these young, mostly Jewish artists in the New York area. There was this new industry built up, and I wanted to celebrate that era. Then after that, the comics become less interesting to me until the underground comix start. The thing is, when I discovered them, I was only nine years old, and they were for adults only, so I was breaking the law, essentially. But they were just thrilling to me when I first discovered them, especially the work of Robert Crumb, in *Zap Comix*, and certain other artists. They just blew me away. I couldn't believe what I was looking at, and I wasn't prepared for them either. I was in love with *Mad Magazine* and things like that in the '60s, when I was a kid, and that was kind of risqué and kind of dangerous, I thought, at the time. But the underground comix just blew the lid off of everything and just set me on a different career track as far as where I wanted my artwork to wind up.

**JJ:** *So this material is more directly related to your profession.*

**Friedman:** Yeah, well, the whole aesthetic really appealed to me, like these people who just put anything down, no matter how over-the-top it was — and a lot of it was overly sexual or misogynist, some of it was racist, and even artists admit that. But I just liked the free-spirited, over-the-top, it's like, whatever they have in their mind, they put it on paper, and a lot of it was really lousy, a lot of it was pretty good, and some of it was just great and stands the test of time. That just really appealed to me, and that's the direction I wanted to go in with my work, with the comics I did early on and then my work in general, where I just want to, like, baby-step over the line sometimes, though not as much as I used to. I wanted to be part of that world.

**JJ:** *As you mentioned, a lot of the early comic book artists were Jewish. Do you have a sense of the Jewish ratio, for lack of a better phrase, in the underground comix world?*

**Friedman:** I tend to do counts of things, and I actually did a count of all the Jewish people in the book. There's a dozen altogether. Some of them are famous, like Art Spiegelman, Harvey Pekar and Robert Crumb's wife, Aline Kominsky. There's a few others, but most of them are kind of obscure. But it was a very welcoming environment, underground. It's like, if you wanted to contribute to them, you did. People weren't in it for the money. There wasn't a lot of money being made then, maybe later on when people could sell their artwork. It was just an egalitarian movement where people were just welcome to take part. There were some Black contributors, there were Spanish contributors. There were a bunch of women. I think the important thing was that all the men had to have long hair... But one of the things I got tired of was just drawing, like, *OK, I'm starting a new one, and this one has not only long hair, but a long beard.* I want my next book, whatever it is, just to be bald men. I want to take a break from that.

**JJ:** *Well there are some very distinguished bald men. I'm sure you'd have lots of subjects to choose from.*

**Friedman:** I've drawn many of them over the years.

**JJ:** *Diane Noomin, who's in your book, was Jewish, right?*

**Friedman:** She was Jewish. She just died recently. Bill Griffiths' wife. That was very sad. She was super talented. She was one of the more talented female underground comix artists and one of my favorites. She had a great, great sense of humor and she was terrific. Actually, since I finished this book, four of the people in the book have died and about six others died as I was working on it. At one point, I got paralyzed. *Am I responsible for these people dropping dead?* I don't know why I would be, but it dawned on me. I thought about that.

**JJ:** *Was your dad — the author Bruce Jay*

*Friedman, who died two years ago — a fan of these artists?*

**Friedman:** I don't think he was much aware. I mean, he was aware of Robert Crumb's work only because the media picked up on it in the late '60s. My brothers and I collected comic books, and he didn't take much of an interest in that. He was happy that we were interested in certain things, but I don't think he really focused on that stuff too much. He didn't really watch the same TV shows I watched or anything like that. He was in his own world, mostly working on what he was writing at the time. But like I say in the book, when I was nine years old and discovered these comics in the back of a bookstore in Manhattan, I was just trying to figure out how to purchase them because you had to be 21 to buy them. That was tricky, plus I had no money anyway. So I just made a little pile of them and stuck them in the books that my dad was purchasing that day, and he bought them assuming they were just comic books, which they were, and that's how I started my obsession — my collection.

**JJ:** *Did you show these illustrations to any of the subjects themselves?*

**Friedman:** No, not really. I went to Art Spiegelman's apartment in early 2020, right before COVID hit. I wanted to show him the progress of the book, so I brought a couple of the original pieces in, including Crumb, and his take on the Crumb was he looked at it and said, 'Heroes of the underground comics.' I took that to mean I wasn't drawing Crumb heroically at all. I was just drawing him low-key. He's not even connecting to the viewer. He's just sketching or about to sketch into his sketchbook. In the books I did earlier, I portrayed some of these guys heroically because that's what they did, they drew heroic superheroes.

**JJ:** *What were you going for with this book?*

**Friedman:** I wanted to really capture what they look like. People refer to me as a caricaturist. I don't see that; there's some slight exaggeration going on, I know that. But I didn't want to poke fun in any way, and

I wanted to present that world during that era. So there was no sarcasm, and I actually put as much time into the artists whose work I didn't like as much as the artists whose work I really love. I spent a week on the Robert Crumb portrait, but I also spent a week on several other portraits of artists who I'm not going to name.

**JJ:** *Have you heard from any of the artists since the book was released?*

**Friedman:** I've heard from several of the people I drew, and they're really very happy with the way I drew them, especially Trina Robbins. She wrote me an email after she saw the book and said, 'You know, when I heard you were doing this book, I was really nervous that you were going to make me look ugly, you were going to make me look old and wrinkly, and you made me look beautiful.' She wanted to buy the artwork, which was sold, but I was really happy to hear that kind of thing.

**JJ:** *Did you work from photographs?*

**Friedman:** Photographs are pretty important. I'll assemble photographs of these people and then rearrange them and create my own background, change bodies, all that stuff. But some of the photographs are really hard to come by because a lot of these people were just not photographed very much, if at all. And there's one artist I had to leave out of the book altogether, because I just couldn't come up with anything. But a guy like Buckwheat Florida Jr. — his real name is Bucklee Bell — he lives in Thailand, he's still around, he's in his 80s. I've actually been in touch with him a little bit, because he's also thrilled with the book and that he was included. He thought he was forgotten, and there he is in the book. He's delighted by that. I've heard from some family members, too, of some of the deceased people saying, 'Oh, my God, I can't believe you included my dad, it's so great.' But yeah, photo references are really hard to come by in a lot of cases. I really had to do a lot of digging, and in some cases, I had to contact family members, which I don't normally like to do. Occasionally in the past people have been like, 'Oh, Drew Friedman, you're the guy who draws those liver spots

and things.' It's like, 'Yeah, but I'm not gonna be a wise guy this time. I promise you, I want to be respectful.'

When I was about to do this, my reservation was that I didn't love all the artists' work. So I had lunch with Robert Crumb in 2019 and I mentioned that to him, that dilemma I was having. He says, 'So what, you don't have to love everybody you draw.' And that made perfect sense, because God knows, I've drawn Donald Trump many, many times since the '80s, for *Spy* magazine, before anybody in New York even knew who he was. So that's when I finally committed to doing the book.

**JJ:** *Are you still doing work for newspapers and magazines?*

**Friedman:** Very rarely. I'm not opposed to it. But it just doesn't really appeal to me working with an art director, and I really want to concentrate on what I want to work on the most. I've been doing these books for the last two years, and it's hard for me to go back.

**JJ:** *What else are you working on?*

**Friedman:** I'm trying to take a little bit of a break, but that's hard for me because I get restless after a day or two of not working. I just released a Kurt Vonnegut print, and I have a bucket list of people I want to get to, and that's what I'm doing now. I did a new portrait of Weird Al Yankovic, which is about to come out as a book cover early next month.

**JJ:** *More long hair.*

**Friedman:** Not only long hair, but braided. I don't know how he does it. That hair was just over the top. I think that hair took me longer to do than the rest of the cover. It took like two days. I also have a new anthology coming out with Gilbert Gottfried on the cover, sort of my mini-tribute to Gilbert, who was a pretty good friend. If it was possible to be friends with Gilbert Gottfried, somehow I was his friend for a number of years. I've drawn him a few times. I honestly don't even know if Gilbert was aware of what I did, aside from the drawings of him, because I used to go on

his podcast, and he'd say, 'My favorite artist Drew Friedman is here.' I honestly don't think he really knew what I did aside from the five drawings I did of him, which is fine by me.

**JJ:** *To jump back to the subject at hand, do you think there's anything readers can draw from the underground comix movement today?*

**Friedman:** Most of the stuff that came out during that era, I don't think could see the light of day today. There's this whole cancel culture thing going on, and Robert Crumb has been a target of it. In some cases, I could kind of see where they're coming from, but in my mind, his work is just so brilliant. Not all of it, and he freely admits he went over the top and went too far in

so many cases, but he stands by his work. It's like, he had these thoughts in his head, he was going to put them on paper, and he wasn't going to edit it himself or hold back, and I really respect that. I can't do the same. I don't see a lot of that stuff — it could still come out, I suppose — but I don't see that whole underground comix movement having any traction these days. You know, I'd be surprised. ♦

NOVEMBER 22, 2022

## Observance of Sigd, a Jewish holiday long kept in Ethiopia, is spreading in the U.S.

*Sigd means “prostration,” stems from verses in the Biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah, falls 50 days after Yom Kippur, and is centered on the themes of acceptance of the Torah, connection to God, community gathering and yearning for a return to Jerusalem.*

By Ben Sales

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

As a child in the village of Ambover, Ethiopia, Michal Avera Samuel remembers spending the day before the holiday watching her mother prepare *injera*, the Ethiopian flatbread, and *dabo*, a thick, spiced bread, for the festive meal. Sometimes they would wash their white garments in the river near the village; other years, they would buy or make new clothes for the occasion.

On the morning of the holiday, they would bathe, and adults would fast as the entire community ascended to a designated space to hear a reading from a holy text. Following the ritual, they would sing, dance and partake of the food together.

If this sounds like it has many of the features of a Jewish holiday — albeit one

that many Jews may not quite recognize — that's because it is one. The holiday that Samuel celebrated as a child, and that she has continued to mark as an adult in Israel and now in the United States, begins tonight and is called Sigd.

Ethiopian Jews have observed Sigd for centuries. Now, Samuel and others hope Jews across the globe will begin to celebrate it as well.

“It's the day that we are celebrating the culture and heritage of the Ethiopian Jews in Israel, in a very positive way,” said Samuel, the former CEO of Fidel, an Ethiopian-Israeli advocacy organization. “Jews globally are so diverse that today, there are so many different assets that different communities have, and this will only bring richness to their community.”

Sigd, which means “prostration,” stems from verses in the biblical books of Ezra and

Nehemiah, falls 50 days after Yom Kippur and is centered on the themes of acceptance of the Torah, connection to God, community gathering and yearning for a return to Jerusalem. Traditionally, the day begins with a fast, during which the community ascends a mountain together. There, they pray and listen to a reading of the Torah in *Ge'ez*, an Ethiopian liturgical language. After the service, they descend to a festive meal replete with singing and dancing.

Ethiopian leaders and their partners who are bringing Sigd to a wider audience are doing something that is at once obvious and radical. On one hand, nothing could be more straightforward than teaching Jews about a Jewish holiday whose traditions and rituals have been kept for time immemorial.

On the other hand, for the vast majority of American Jews, and many Israelis, who don't know about Sigd or have never



celebrated it, the effort to spread its observance has the effect of adding a holiday to a Jewish calendar that appeared fixed. Moreover, it takes place in the Jewish month of Cheshvan, also known as Marcheshvan, which many Jews (erroneously) believe has no holidays.

And unlike holidays such as Israel's Independence Day or Holocaust Remembrance Day, which were created to mark events still in living memory, Sigd is not a recent addition but rather a holiday with origins in the Bible that has been observed for generations.

"We are celebrating it because it comes from the Torah... which is for all Jewish people," said Bezawit Abebe, a research fellow at Be'chol Lashon, an organization that raises awareness of Jewish diversity. "The fact that you talk about Ethiopians preserving a Jewish holiday all these years, [which] kept them together while they faced antisemitism in Ethiopia, is a good thing to teach kids so they for sure know these people are Jewish and they kept themselves as Jews."

Owing to the efforts of Ethiopian-Israeli activists, Israel has recognized Sigd as a national holiday beginning in 2008. Be'chol Lashon has arranged speakers in a dozen schools, synagogues and community centers across the United States to teach Jews about Sigd, though not all of the events will be happening on the holiday itself as it abuts Thanksgiving. The organization, which has a budget of under \$1 million and six employees, has made promoting Sigd a focus of its work.

The Jewish Agency for Israel has also created a "Sigd-in-a-Box" digital resource that teaches about the origins and rituals of the holiday, in addition to including recipes for its traditional foods, samples of Ethiopian music and a list of speakers who can discuss the holiday.

But even as they hope more Jews celebrate Sigd, Abebe and others hope observance of the holiday extends beyond an opportunity to eat Ethiopian Jewish cuisine or listen to the community's music. Rather, they hope the focus stays on the ritual, and feel Jews of all backgrounds should keep its customs and take its messages to heart as they would those of Passover or Purim. Many also see it as a day to celebrate and

commemorate the history, culture and sacrifices of Ethiopian Jewry.

"[People] see us as weak, [that] we've been saved, Israel brought us — 'Say thank you,'" said Avishai Mekonen, an Ethiopian Jewish filmmaker who is now making a movie about Ethiopian Jews who fought to bring their community to Israel before the Israeli mass immigration operations of the 1980s and 1990s. "They don't know the story. They don't know about the community that survived 2,500 years."

Ethiopian Jews have continued celebrating Sigd in Israel, gathering annually for the holiday's rituals at Armon Hanatziv, a south Jerusalem neighborhood with a promenade that overlooks the city. Samuel, who now lives in Ohio, is also teaching Jews in Columbus about the holiday, discussing its history and customs at a synagogue, Sunday school and Jewish day schools.

She has brought traditional festive clothes for the kids to wear and, at one school, cooked traditional food with students, in addition to teaching them about the history of Ethiopian Jews more broadly and their long journey to reach Israel.

At its core, she said, the holiday is about "how [we're] connecting with God, connecting with the Torah, how it's meaningful and kept us believing that we would reach Jerusalem. The whole thing really gave us a strong identity to do what we did, to begin walking from Ethiopia to Sudan and then to come to Israel."

Samuel and other Ethiopian Jews, along with Rabbi Ruth Abusch-Magder, Be'chol Lashon's education director, want Jews across the country and world to mark Sigd, even if, in many cases, there may not be a local Ethiopian Jewish community that can teach the holiday's customs. Abusch-Magder, however, encouraged communities that are learning about the holiday to include a Zoom program with Ethiopian Jews.

"The observance of the holiday has to recognize both of those pieces," Abusch-Magder told eJP, referring to paying tribute to Ethiopian Jewish history and observing Sigd's rituals. "To just do prayers and not recognize that the prayers come from a place and a community would also be somewhat ridiculous."

Oneschool that has embraced the holiday is the Epstein School, a Jewish elementary

and middle school in the Atlanta area. This year, a bulletin board in the hallway features pictures and information about Sigd observances, and students cooked *injera*, watched how Ethiopian coffee is brewed, saw a traditional Sigd outfit, heard from Ethiopian Jews about the holiday and learned about the holiday's connection to the stork, whose northward migration symbolized the return to Jerusalem.

But Idit Bendavid, Epstein's director of Hebrew and Judaic studies, said that the Sigd curriculum does not make a point of encouraging kids to celebrate the holiday at home.

"The goal for us is to expose the students here to a Jewish holiday that they are not familiar with, and to learn from the holiday and to learn from the traditions of the holiday about another Jewish community, and to add to their own Jewish identity," Bendavid told eJP. "Being Jewish is not one thing, and as you expose yourself to so many ways of celebrating, you learn more about yourself."

Those promoting the observance of Sigd understand that it may take a while for broad swaths of Jews to naturally include the holiday on their calendars. But they do hope to witness one change: No one, they say, should claim that there are no Jewish holidays in the current Jewish month.

"The way we think is shifting — saying we don't have a Jewish holiday in Cheshvan," Abebe said. "Maybe this is the Jewish holiday in Cheshvan that all Jews celebrate." ♦

# Aaron Samuels bridges gap between ‘artist’ and ‘entrepreneur’ with new VC fund

*The poet, community leader and startup founder steps into a new role as managing partner at Collide Capital*

By Gabby Deutch

When venture capital firm Collide Capital launched last month with the announcement of a \$66 million fund, its managing partners could’ve pointed to any number of business successes between the two of them when explaining why they decided to get into the VC world: Harvard and Stanford MBAs, stints at Bain and Goldman Sachs and founding and leading a media company.

But for Aaron Samuels, the real answer to where he started his career is not in the pages of an economics textbook or a business school case study. It’s poetry — and, in particular, his writings about his experience as a Black Jew. He has experimented with the art form for the better part of two decades, leading to two books (and a third on the way), and performances in venues such as New York’s Lincoln Center.

“I oftentimes wonder what 13-year-old Aaron would think about 33-year-old Aaron, and it’s funny, you see the threads early on in childhood, for what you’ll become, but you don’t always make sense of it until it’s happening in the moment,” Samuels told Jewish Insider in a recent Zoom interview from his Los Angeles home.

“I think from a young age, community was always the most important thing to me, and it was specifically the communities that I came from, which was the Black community, the Jewish community and specifically the Jews of color community,” Samuels continued. “So if you asked me at age 13, ‘Aaron, would you be working on something that involved the empowerment of communities you care about?’ I would have said, ‘Absolutely,’ whether it’s through using creativity, through using art or through using the tools of business or the tools of capital.”

Community-building has been at the heart of Samuels’ career. He is best known for co-founding Blavity, a media company geared toward Black millennials, and AfroTech, a networking platform and conference for Black entrepreneurs and tech workers. (This year’s conference, which took place earlier this month in Austin, Texas, drew more than 25,000 attendees.) His co-managing partner at Collide, Brian Hollins, had more VC experience, and joined Collide after making several seed investments in startups.

At gatherings like AfroTech, Black founders kept approaching Samuels with the same question. “They often say, ‘Thank you for the panel discussion,’ or ‘Thank you for the resources, thank you for the mentorship, but there’s really just one thing that we need. We need you to cut the check, and we need the capital,’” Samuels recalled. “That was a big part that was missing from the equation.”

Startups run by women and people of color tend to have a significantly more difficult experience raising capital. In 2021, just 1.3% of all venture and growth equity financing went to Black-founded startups, according to Crunchbase. Women-led startups received just 2.3% of VC funding in 2020, Crunchbase reported. Collide hopes to help start changing these figures.

Unusual for a new and unestablished fund, Collide’s \$66 million fund has the backing of several major institutional investors. It is anchored by the University of California’s endowment, and it also received significant investments from Amazon, Alphabet and Twitter. Other limited partners in the fund include Bank of America, Citi and Northwestern Mutual.

Collide is not an impact fund, meaning

it is not investing only in startups with particular social-minded goals. But it does intend to focus on startups led by women and people of color. The types of companies that Collide plans to support include enterprise software-as-a-service (SaaS), supply chain infrastructure and consumer technology geared toward the Gen Z set. (“When Gen Z comes into dominance, what is the Slack of 2030?” Samuels asked.)

Samuels sees a throughline from his childhood, growing up in what he described as a “queer, multiracial, multiethnic havurah group” in Providence, R.I., to the work he does now in the business world.

“If you asked me, would I be a venture capitalist? I would have told you I have no idea what a venture capitalist is, and it was definitely a windy path to get here, through the poetry world and then through consulting and through product and through being a founder,” he said. “But it’s no surprise that I’m now still working on projects for the empowerment of underserved and underrepresented communities.”

As he has navigated the business world, Samuels has always remained close to the Jewish community. Samuels created and lived in the first-ever Moishe House for Jews of color, in L.A., and he sits on the board of the Jewish progressive advocacy group Bend the Arc. In 2016, at the group’s first major national conference, Samuels did a poetry reading on the main stage.

“It really resonated with folks. He shared insights through his poetry into his identity and experience as a Black Jewish person,” said Jamie Beran, Bend the Arc’s CEO. “He’s really influenced the national conversation about how to be a more racially just and inclusive Jewish community.”

In 2020, Samuels co-wrote an open letter

to Jewish organizations, urging them to work to fight racism in Jewish communities by investing in community leaders of color and committing to racial justice initiatives. The letter, which was signed by thousands of individuals and dozens of synagogues, independent minyans and other Jewish groups around the country, kicked off the “Not Free to Desist Campaign,” an ongoing project calling for change within Jewish communities.

“I think a lot of people expect results overnight. But it’s a long — it takes years. It’s a lifetime of work,” said Rachel Sumekh, who led the open letter with Samuels and founded the nonprofit Swipe Out Hunger. “I think that the conversation was started in a way that we are moving beyond just having committees, where we’re saying, What are the actions we’re taking? What are the commitments we’re making? I see the conversation moving forward.”

Samuels collaborated with Reboot and Hillel International to produce a reading of his 2021 poem “Forgiveness,” about experiencing Yom Kippur, and the elaborate security common at many American Jewish synagogues, as a Black Jew. The

short film toggles between brief recordings of Black Jews of all ages as they showcase their Jewish identity, with Star of David necklaces, yarmulkes or prayer shawls, as Samuels recites his poem.

“I walk, covered in white, to the temple steps. I walk past four police officers. I see their weapons. How they make the community feel safe. I ready my body to pray,” Samuels says, his voice strong and solemn, warm and inviting. “I walk through the metal detector, and I am buying candy in a new neighborhood. I exit the metal detector and I am asleep in my own bed. This is my place of worship. These are my people.”

This poem, Samuels told *J*, is “about how, as an entire Jewish community, there are things that perhaps we need to ask forgiveness for, and the video focuses specifically on racial injustice that is within the Jewish community that the Jewish community is adjacent to.”

Writing gave Samuels an outlet to vent his anger as a kid — both his parents are clinical psychologists — about racism, sexism and homophobia. Today, he stills writes, although anger is no longer the only

emotion he is dealing with. “It allows me to, in some ways, have an external hard drive for my feelings,” he explained, although it’s hard to imagine when Samuels has the time. (Sumekh, who also lives in Los Angeles, pointed out that every time she goes to the beach with Samuels, he brings his laptop.)

Besides, it’s not like he’s a starving artist anymore. But earning a living was never what drove Samuels to write.

“Poetry is a medium that opens us up to interpretation and opens us up to be playful, and so to have a poet in the VC and the entrepreneurial tech space is a gift because he’s bringing the way he thinks as a poet into that space,” said Caroline Rothstein, a poet who has worked closely with, and performed with, Samuels.

“In some ways, I think that the entrepreneurial journey and the artistic journey have a lot of overlaps,” Samuels noted, “in that both artists and entrepreneurs see their job, in many ways, as to look at the world, and then ask themselves how they can slightly bend it to make it a little bit different, and hopefully better, or at least more interesting.” ♦

NOVEMBER 27, 2022

## Israelis get on board to test driverless buses

*Four bus lines and an assortment of companies are gearing up to give autonomous public transportation a pilot run*

By **Melanie Lidman**

*The article first appeared in The Circuit.*

**Y**ou’re going to a New Year’s party. It’s a rainy night. The twisting suburban bus route is unfamiliar so you make your way up front to figure out where to get

off. One problem: There’s no driver to ask.

That’s among the many challenges that await Israelis in 2024, when the government starts a NIS 61 million (\$17.7 million) pilot program to test autonomous buses carrying passengers in actual traffic. Four Israeli bus

companies and several international tech companies will examine how driverless vehicles can be integrated into the urban public transportation system.

Autonomous buses are already being used in limited capacities on hospital

campuses in Israel and in the United Arab Emirates on Yas Island, home to the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix. Qatar was planning to have Volkswagen's driverless buses ready for the World Cup soccer championship, though the initiative didn't pan out.

Until now, driverless public buses were considered mostly a novelty. Dubai, the Qatari capital of Doha and many other cities around the world have autonomous metro rail systems, which are easier to run because they operate on their own designated tracks. But public buses drive on regular city streets crowded with other vehicles, pedestrians and cyclists, which all behave in unexpected ways. As the technology and sensors for autonomous vehicles go up in quality and down in price, more cities are exploring options to use driverless buses as part of the existing transport network.

"We understand that the future is going in that direction, and we need to have a vision," Nir Ron, the head of innovation at Israel's Egged bus company, told *The Circuit*. "The technology is already there, it's about integrating it to work for public transportation." Ron noted there's also a worldwide shortage of bus drivers and companies are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit new drivers, a challenge that could be addressed in part by automated buses.

Egged and three other Israeli bus lines — Dan, Metropolin and Nateev Express — have signed onto the pilot and will be working with Karsan from Turkey, Adastec from San Francisco, Applied Autonomy from Norway and EasyMile and Navya, both from France. The Israeli government is funding half of the two-year pilot program.

Ami Appelbaum, chairman of the Israel Innovation Authority, said one of the challenges is determining national regulations with the Transportation Ministry, so companies know what kinds of testing and checks driverless buses must undergo before taking to the streets with passengers. Earlier this year, the Israeli parliament passed a law that will allow autonomous shared transportation on Israeli roads that carry passengers without drivers. This law paves the way for initiatives like Mobileye's driverless robotaxi ride-hailing service, which the Israeli company hopes to start testing in Israel and Germany

in the coming months.

There are more than 600 Israeli startups working on smart transportation, including tech behemoths like Waze, a navigation app with real-time traffic updates; Moovit, a public transportation planning app; Optibus, which helps cities optimize bus routes; and HopOn, a mobile ticketing app that allows riders to pay fares with their phones. The number of autonomous vehicle startups is increasing by more than 25% each year, according to Appelbaum.

Israeli companies involved in the bus pilot are Ottopia, Imagry and Engimatos, which are developing different aspects of autonomous driving software. Also Via, which currently runs the ride-hailing shuttle service Bubble with the Dan bus line in Tel Aviv. Israeli companies involved in smart transportation raised more than a billion dollars in 2021, Appelbaum added.

Over and above the bus initiative, Israel is also examining the viability of drone air transportation and will soon begin tests of pilotless planes carrying human passengers, Appelbaum's office said.

Egged, which is working with French autonomous bus company Navya, is now wading through the bureaucracy to import the first Navya prototypes to Israel, Ron said. The first buses are expected to arrive in the country midway through 2023, and complete at least six months of testing in a closed facility in Jerusalem before they will bring the buses on public roads. At the beginning of 2024, if all goes according to plan, some of the buses could be rolled out as driverless shuttles on large campuses, such as universities or hospitals. Utilizing the buses for public transportation will take additional testing.

For the pilot announced this month, each partnership has chosen one existing bus route as their trial route for the driverless buses. Egged chose an urban route through Rishon Lezion, a dense suburb of Tel Aviv. "It's a very busy route through crowded streets where the bus never goes faster than 10 to 12 kph, so it's really hard to ask a bus driver to drive this route all day," said Ron. "But there's a huge demand for this route."

Tal Raviv, a professor and head of the Shlomo Shmelzer Institute for Smart Transportation at Tel Aviv University, said autonomous buses will be much more

effective if they accompany a major overhaul of the current bus system. "The way lines are built in the [Tel Aviv] metro region, so many of the lines are like spaghetti, with really long lines that aren't very frequent," he told *The Circuit*. The winding routes through neighborhoods were designed to try to reach the maximum number of people, but there's a tradeoff. "When buses try to come closer to your house, the frequency goes down," he said.

A more efficient system could deploy small, driverless electric buses inside the neighborhoods as "feeder buses," ferrying passengers to a network of major bus routes that are more direct and come much more frequently, said Raviv. He envisions a future where a passenger could order an autonomous bus to stop at their house, just like one would push a button for an elevator, to take them to the main bus line. That would allow bus companies to concentrate their efforts in increasing the frequency of a few main lines, rather than scrambling to find drivers to increase frequency of dozens of long, snaking routes.

There are a number of challenges that still need to be addressed, in addition to the regulation. One is protecting the buses, both physically and virtually. Ron said he is worried about vandalism to the buses, where, perhaps, someone riding alone late at night could try to cut a cable or otherwise damage the bus, causing it to lose control. Another major fear is protecting the buses' virtual network from hackers, who could remotely disable brakes or gain control of the bus. For that reason, the buses will communicate on a separate network and not on the same internet that is available to the public, he said.

There's also the question of getting the public on board with driverless buses. Although driverless vehicles are expected to be safer one day than human drivers, it can be challenging for people to trust a massive steel vehicle trundling down busy city streets with no driver at the wheel.

"It is definitely a cultural question," said Raviv. "But I know personally I don't have an issue with it. I'd much rather get on a driverless bus than worry if the driver slept enough or already had their coffee." ♦



# These archivists are sifting through endless boxes of paper to preserve a century of American Jewish philanthropy

*The American Jewish Historical Society's philanthropy collection comprises the equivalent of nearly 8,000 boxes of paper.*

By Ben Sales

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

Some of the most important work that Tamar Zeffren and Melanie Meyers do involves sifting through file cabinets in drab, labyrinthine rooms and discarding copies of documents.

Their mission: to preserve a record of how American Jewish philanthropy has evolved over the past century and beyond. As staff members at the American Jewish Historical Society, they are charged with safeguarding and expanding an archive of American Jewish foundations, nonprofits and charitable societies that collectively comprises thousands of boxes of documents, taking up stack after stack in a backroom of AJHS' museum in lower Manhattan.

"Those records also say as much about the individuals who are doing the giving, who are identifying the needs, and I think that that's a very valuable piece of the story that understandably isn't always foregrounded," Zeffren, the museum's director of archival partnerships, told eJP during a tour of AJHS' stacks, adding that many philanthropists may not have thought to preserve a record of their giving process. "It seems self-absorbed to think, 'Wait a minute, this work should be documented, because it's a vital piece of a bigger conversation.'"

The collection is trying to preserve that conversation, and its latest major addition is the archive of the Natan Fund, which was founded 20 years ago and has provided seed funding for several of the most well-known Jewish nonprofits of recent years, such as the environmental group Hazon and Sefaria, the digital Jewish text library.

The Natan collection comprises nearly three dozen linear feet — a unit roughly akin to a box of paper at Staples or, say, Dunder Mifflin in "The Office" — and is mostly taken up with meeting minutes and successful and unsuccessful grant applications. It took one archivist about five months to sift through the papers, discard those that were irrelevant to the collection and organize it. While the final cost for that project, which Natan is funding, has not yet been determined, AJHS estimates that a project that size would cost between \$40,000 and \$50,000.

"We felt we had this unique insight and treasure of how entrepreneurs were thinking about the challenges and opportunities of modern American Jewish life," Adina Poupko, Natan's executive director, told eJP. "If everyone keeps all their papers secret and hidden, then future generations will be missing out on a really critical piece of our story."

All told, AJHS' philanthropy collection comprises nearly 8,000 linear feet, anchored by several collections from large institutions, many of which are defunct or have changed their form and name over the decades: The National Jewish Welfare Board, the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, the Avi Chai Foundation and the UJA-Federation of New York. The UJA collection, at 2,200 linear feet, took a team of six archivists four years to process, from 2011 to 2015.

The museum was founded in 1892, and one-third of its 15 earliest collections were charity archives whose names put the contemporary Jewish organizational alphabet soup to shame, including one

called the Committee of Americans in Aid of Starving Jews in South Russia from 1900, or the National Committee for the Relief of Sufferers of Pogroms. The museum's oldest philanthropy archive is called the Purim Association, which goes back to 1865, and documents a ball held annually on Purim for the benefit of causes such as the welfare of Jewish orphans. The motive behind those collections, said Meyers, was to portray the Jewish community in a positive light.

"These guys, who also were very interested in history and education, felt that the best way to combat this antisemitism was to show that Jews had been in America since before we even called it America, were as patriotic as anybody else, not new here at all," said Meyers, AJHS' deputy director and chair of collections. "A lot of the earliest collections, honestly — you're showing the best parts, you're showing people collecting money and doing good for others, you're showing the Colonial families who fought for the American side, not so much for the English side, although we have a little bit of that, too."

The impetus for collecting philanthropic archives has since evolved, for both the museum and the donors who are giving over their papers. Lila Corwin Berman, who chairs AJHS' Academic Council, said that a philanthropist's desire to be remembered, and to contribute to history, may clash with the risk inherent in allowing others to pore over private documents. But she said that adding to the historical record is good practice for foundations that strive to be transparent.

"The question of what would compel one to give it all away and allow their

practices and procedures to be archived, and at least to an extent an open book, I think has sort of been up in the air,” said Corwin Berman, a professor at Temple University and the author of *The American Jewish Philanthropic Complex*. “It’s really, really important to continue to make the case to philanthropies that they should be working toward transparency today, and they should be working toward transparency in the future.”

No matter how much access organizations provide to their records, there are some files that the museum’s archivists

do not preserve. Personal information about employees, generally, is outside of AJHS’ purview, and the museum has yet to archive any of the endless petabytes of emails sent between and within Jewish charities.

“We do not take HR or personnel records... people’s social security numbers, photocopies of their passports, sometimes, depending on your personnel record, you know, disciplinary action, any number of things — healthcare information,” Meyers said. “Those are the kinds of things, [if] we find them, we send them back or we destroy them.”

More broadly, AJHS and the foundations it works with recognize that the work of archiving, as with everything else, is moving to the digital realm. To prepare for that process, Natan is storing everything on an ever-expanding Google Drive. And future archivists should be prepared to do some more sifting. The fund rarely erases documents, Poupko said.

“Everything has been digital since 2015 and we do not delete things that could be important in the future,” she said. “We basically don’t delete. We just keep paying Google more to increase our drive.” ♦