

THE WEEKLY PRINT

The White House gelt peddler; Hanukkah comes to Audrey Gelman's Six Bells; Brazilian database records, historian cast doubt on Santos' claims of Jewish ancestry; 'Fragile Beauty' exhibition connects Jewish artists with the environment; Meet the L.A. rabbi who found a national stage for her support of the Iranian protests; How 'GirlWithNoJob' raised \$50,000 on Instagram for Holocaust education in one day; Dead Sea rebounds from pandemic slump as tourist magnet for Jordan; and UAE offer for Israeli insurer paves way for more deals, minister says.

DECEMBER 20, 2022

The White House gelt peddler

Hartford philanthropist Henry Zachs came to the White House Hanukkah party armed with his own gelt: 200 \$2 bills

By Gabby Deutch

Some lucky guests at Monday night's White House Hanukkah party walked away with two types of gelt: the traditional chocolate kind, and a \$2 bill handed to them by Henry Zachs.

The philanthropist and telecommunications pioneer from Hartford, Conn., knew just two other people at the event. But the bespectacled 88-year-old, wearing a navy-and-white striped shirt and a navy bowtie with white polka dots, didn't mind.

He went up to anyone in the room — except the president, though Zachs swears he would have if he had gotten closer to Joe Biden — and offered them a rare \$2 bill.

"I went to the bank and I got 200 \$2 bills. I didn't know that there would be 500 or 600 people there, so I gave those bills out," he told *Jewish Insider* in a Tuesday phone

call. He had just four left at the end of the night.

Zachs is not a major political donor (although, he points out, he was part of the Trinity College Young Democrats when he was a student there in the early 1950s), so unlike many others in the room, he was not used to schmoozing with the Washington set. But he said Biden's speech was "superb." Zachs had only been to the White House once before, on a tour more than three decades ago.

But in Hartford, his hometown, Zachs is a familiar figure. He sits on the board of nearly a dozen nonprofits, and he started a major project called Endow Hartford 21, encouraging area organizations to create endowment funds.

The roots of Zachs' gelt tradition can be traced back to an unlikely source: an oyster

house. The owner of Honiss Oyster House, a once-iconic Hartford culinary institution that has since closed, would give out silver dollars or \$2 bills to young visitors on Hanukkah. Zachs brought the tradition to his family, and has given out \$2 bills to his grandchildren for years. Last night was the first time he took the practice into the outside world.

"There wasn't a single person that said, 'Oh, I don't want the money. I don't take money.' There only was one congressman, he says, 'I can't take it.' That I understand," Zachs said with a laugh. He does not remember which member of Congress it was. ♦

Hanukkah comes to Audrey Gelman's Six Bells

Gelman, the former chief executive of the Wing, commissioned a small but meticulously curated selection of Hanukkah items to accompany the Christmas offerings now on sale

By Matthew Kassel

On a recent gloomy morning in brownstone Brooklyn, Audrey Gelman, the former chief executive of the women's co-working space, the Wing, was snugly ensconced in her country-inspired homewares store, the Six Bells, where a festive assortment of holiday trappings made for a welcome distraction from the imminent prospect of mid-December rain.

The shop, which opened eight months ago in Cobble Hill, had undergone an intensive Christmas-themed makeover for its first holiday season, replete with dark-red ribbons, coniferous garlands, cheerful stockings, glistening silver bells and a sumptuously appointed Christmas tree, among other things.

"We really doubled down on the holiday stuff," Gelman, 35, told *Jewish Insider* last Thursday before opening hours, sitting at a large wooden desk near the back of the store.

The yuletide decor was in keeping with the Six Bell's bucolic atmosphere, even if Gelman, who described the revamp as a "jewess' lifelong dream" in a tongue-in-cheek Instagram post last month, doesn't celebrate Christmas herself — and never had a tree growing up. "No way," she said, dismissing the idea as preposterous. "My dad's a cantor."

In a heimish nod to her Jewish roots, Gelman commissioned a small but meticulously curated selection of Hanukkah items to accompany the Christmas offerings now on sale, including hand-painted ivory taper candles, hand-decorated gingerbread cookies shaped like the Star of David and a blue-and-white porcelain menorah sourced from the English pottery company Spode, which maintains a Judaica collection.

"It sold out immediately," Gelman proudly said of the menorah, which cost \$160 and was available in-store as well as online. "Then we reordered a bunch and those sold out, and we reordered again, and those sold out. So we don't have it."

For Gelman, it was particularly gratifying that the menorah had been among the shop's "best-selling holiday items," she said. "We cast a wide net trying to find different gifts and Judaica that felt like it fit in with the rest of the aesthetic of the store," she explained. "There's obviously a lot of Christmas stuff, which is really, really fun. But people have definitely been buying the Judaica, too."

"I think we're going to double down on Hanukkah next year," Gelman suggested. "I'm excited for that."

The Jewish festival of lights, which commenced on Sunday evening, has always been a "really big deal" for Gelman. "Latke-making was just an awesome kind of conveyor belt, like every member of my family doing something different," she said. "It's been fun to introduce my son, so far, to making latkes and *sufganiyot* and the traditional part of it that's so important, I think, to family."

Gelman, who lives in Brooklyn with her husband, Ilan Zechory, a co-founder of the music annotation site Genius, and two children, was raised in a religious household on the Upper West Side, and regularly went to synagogue on Fridays and Saturdays. "As a toddler," she recalled, "I would sit on the *bima* with my dad when he was doing services."

"He has a really beautiful voice," she said of her father, Irwin Gelman, who served as a cantor at the Conservative Synagogue of Fifth Avenue in Greenwich Village. He now

serves at Congregation Beth Abraham in Buffalo.

Would she ever consider playing cantorial music in the Six Bells?

"It's a great idea," Gelman said earnestly, as Ella Fitzgerald's brassy rendition of "Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!" — written and composed, like many Christmas standards, by Jews — purred from the speakers. "I feel like klezmer would be great."

On a more serious note, Gelman said she has long been motivated by a personal commitment to Jewish representation as the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors on her father's side. "It's really important to me," she said. "That's a big part of my Jewish identity."

Had that impulse influenced Gelman throughout her career?

"That's a good question. I mean, I worked for Jewish elected officials and I worked in politics in New York," she mused, alluding to her previous role as a widely respected publicist for Democratic politicians such as Scott Stringer, the former city comptroller. During her time leading the Wing, the now-shuttered women's coworking behemoth Gelman co-founded six years ago in New York, "we celebrated Jewish holidays in a sort of communal way," she added.

In June 2020, Gelman resigned from the Wing amid accusations that the company had mistreated employees of color, saying her decision was "the right thing for the business and the best way to bring the Wing along into a long overdue era of change."

It was an especially jarring reversal of fortune for Gelman, an ambitious young executive who, before her abrupt departure, had been heralded as an embodiment of female empowerment. The Wing, which

ceased operations this past August, had more than 10,000 members and established outposts across the country and internationally, while raising more than \$100 million in venture capital investments.

But with the drama now more than two years behind her, Gelman acknowledged that she has been enjoying a “different pace” in her new position. “Scale is really intense, and massive growth of a company is its own experience,” she said, casually dressed for the interview in a patterned wool sweater, blue jeans and leather boots. “It’s been really, really nice to embrace a sort of a slower, more thoughtful approach to growing a company but also get to be really creative.”

Gelman has leaned into her enthusiasm for antiquing since she opened Six Bells, which takes its name from an English pub in South Oxfordshire of personal significance to the newly minted shopkeeper. “Definitely the hunt is really, really fun, and there’s all sorts of funny antique mantras, like ‘the bigger the pile, the bigger the smile,’” she said with amusement. “I feel very connected to everything in the store because we’ve either found the brands, or some of it I’ve just bought myself.”

When *JI* visited late Thursday morning, Gelman was eager to highlight an antique menorah, which was on display among the candles and cookies. Was it a limited edition? “Very limited,” she said with a laugh. “One of one.”

It is too soon to say if the business is profitable, Gelman told *JI*, because it has been open for less than a year. “It’s doing really, really well and certainly exceeding our expectations,” she allowed.

While Gelman had assumed that most orders would come from New York and Los Angeles, she was pleasantly surprised to be proven wrong, she said. Roughly 60% of the store’s online customers have come from outside those states, including far-flung locales such as the Midwest as well as Alabama and Tennessee, according to Gelman.

Still, Gelman said she feels no “immediate rush to grow, grow, grow,” even as she is now in the early stages of exploring the possibility of establishing Six Bells offshoots, which she would only characterize as “store-based and not store-based.”

“The thing I’m excited about with it is,

I love growing companies, and so this is no different,” Gelman said. “But it’s just a very different approach.”

One way the shop itself differs from others is its playful focus on a fictional parish of undetermined vintage called Barrow’s Green, which Gelman invented as the imaginary inspiration for the Six Bells’ rustic offerings. The small village is populated by an eccentric group of archetypal townspeople, who are depicted in a cluster of oil paintings that hang from a wall in the store.

Culled from Gelman’s personal art collection, the pictures portray, among others, a “town gossip,” a “mystery writer,” a “parlor maid” and a bespectacled rabbi, Haskel Frumkin, whose black skullcap, long white beard and slight scowl suggest an air of bemused authority.

“I definitely wanted him to have a place in all of this,” Gelman said of the rabbi. “He’s just got a vibe.”

What was his backstory?

“The idea around him is he struggles to get a minyan but manages to do it,” she explained, referring to the quorum of 10 Jewish adults required for prayer services. “He’s very focused on restoring this old synagogue that has fallen into disrepair in the village and creating sort of a vibrant congregation there.”

Did Gelman envision the village — featured in an interactive guide on the Six Bells’ website — as a kind of *shtetl*?

“That’s the thing,” she replied. “It’s like, *shtetl* means little town, and obviously, Jews have always historically been very comfortable in small villages. I wanted to create the idea that there was a rich Jewish life in the village.”

So how many Jews live in Barrow’s Green?

“I’d have to look up the exact number of families that belong to the synagogue,” she told *JI*, without breaking character as the town’s unofficial historian. “We never have an exact date, and it’s supposed to live in a time that is open to interpretation and also a specific place. But it’s obviously many, many, many decades ago, more than a half-century ago, and you probably wouldn’t find many Jews in a village like that.”

In a seemingly cruel twist, the rabbi is placed on a wall overlooking the Christmas

tree, a squat but voluminous spruce festooned with silver tinsel and assorted holiday baubles, including hand-blown egg ornaments that Gelman discovered on a trip to Austria this summer, just before the birth of her daughter. “I got to go to the Holocaust museum there and see a lot of Jewish history,” she recalled. “And also found Christmas ornaments.”

The rabbi, it turns out, is a fan of the ornaments as well, at least according to an “interdenominational” village gift guide published in a fake newspaper, *The Green Evening Chronicle* — printed versions of which are available at the Six Bells.

“He does a lot of interdenominational services with the local vicar, so I think he is very interested in building a community that mixes both Christianity and Judaism in the village,” Gelman said, before concluding: “This is all obviously completely fictional.”

But for Gelman, such diversions are no doubt part of the appeal. “The world is crazy,” she said softly, looking out over her compact domain from behind a pair of tortoise-shell glasses. “It’s very relaxing and sweet in here.” ♦

Brazilian database records, historian cast doubt on Santos' claims of Jewish ancestry

A New York Times expose prompted a closer look at the congressman-elect's claims

By Matthew Kassel

In his campaign materials and on the trail, George Santos, an upstart Republican elected to Congress last month on Long Island, wove a compelling family narrative, tracing his maternal grandparents' flight from Jewish persecution in Soviet Ukraine to Belgium, where, he has claimed, they fled the Nazi occupation before settling in Brazil.

"It's a story of survival, of tenacity, of *grit*, as we like to call it," Santos, 34, said from the stage of the Republican Jewish Coalition's annual leadership conference last month in Las Vegas.

But with key elements of Santos' background now under increased scrutiny — including his résumé, education and finances — the harrowing immigrant tale and claims to Jewish heritage he sold to voters have also been called into question amid new revelations uncovered by *Jewish Insider* that show major discrepancies in his family story.

Brazilian records from a national civil identification database reviewed by JI reveal that Santos' maternal grandmother, Rosalina Caruso Horta Devolder, was born in 1927, and is unlikely to have immigrated from Belgium in 1940, as Santos has previously claimed. If that were the case, she would have left Europe around the age of 13. But Santos has said his grandmother and grandfather were married before they fled Belgium to Brazil, casting doubt on his timeline.

It is likely that both Santos' grandmother and her mother — Alzira Saint Anna Caruso, according to additional Brazilian records seen by JI — were born in Brazil. His maternal grandfather, Paulo Horta Devolder, was, "by all indications, Brazilian," according to Fábio Koifman, a historian at the Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro who specializes

in the entry of foreigners into Brazil between 1937 and 1945.

While his story has varied on the different occasions he has told it, Santos has most frequently said his grandfather, who was born in 1918, escaped Stalin's persecution when he fled Ukraine in the 1920s and met the woman who would become his wife in Belgium. But Koifman, who recently assembled an extensive genealogical record of Santos' family, the details of which he shared with JI, said there is "no evidence that he was born in Ukraine or that he was Belgian or came from Belgium."

Among the foreigners who entered Brazil in the years after World War II, only two were named Devolder, according to Koifman. They arrived separately in 1948 and 1955 respectively, and only lived in Brazil temporarily. "I didn't find any during the war," Koifman said.

If anyone in Santos' family tree immigrated to Brazil from Belgium, it was his maternal great-grandfather, Leonardo Antonius Ludovicus, a Belgian engineer. The father of Santos' maternal grandfather, he was born in 1863 and arrived in Brazil at the end of the 19th century, according to Koifman. In Brazil, he became Leonardo Antônio Horta Devolder, incorporating Horta from his father's family and Devolder from his mother's side. He died in 1951.

"George has an interesting family history with nice and important people," Koifman said in an email exchange with JI. "I suspect he doesn't have the slightest idea of this, for that reason he invented ancestors."

The *Forward* also reviewed genealogy websites that show Santos' maternal grandparents were born in Brazil, as was his mother, Fatima Devolder, who died in 2016 at a hospital in Queens, according to an

online obituary. Santos has been less specific about his Catholic father, Gercino Antonio dos Santos Jr., who was also born in Brazil, saying only that he "comes from Angolan roots," which JI could not corroborate.

Meanwhile, none of Santos' maternal ancestors "suggest any closeness to Judaism," Koifman said. "All were baptized, married and buried according to Catholic rites and traditions. Most of them were born, lived and died in the city of Niterói, with a certain concentration in the Santa Rosa neighborhood from the mid-1950s."

Near the end of the election, however, Santos freely identified as Jewish, placing himself in a somewhat rarefied position to become the next — and only — Jewish Republican member of New York's congressional delegation as Rep. Lee Zeldin (R-NY) prepares to retire at the end of the current term.

Though he has described himself as a practicing Catholic, the congressman-elect expressed a personal sense of connection to his purported Jewish heritage. "Whether my mother's Jewish background beliefs, which are mine, or my father's Roman Catholic beliefs, which are also mine, are represented or not," he explained in an interview with JI shortly after the midterms, "I want to represent everyone else that practices every other religion to make sure everybody feels like they have a partner in me."

But personal and professional acquaintances of the congressman-elect say they have no awareness of his connection to Judaism, and mainstream Jewish organizations in New York haven't met with him. In addition, Jewish residents of Niterói, a tight-knit suburb of Rio de Janeiro, tell JI they have no recollection of interacting with his mother, who lived there. His maternal

grandmother, Rosalina, who died in 2010 from a pulmonary infection, is also buried in a Catholic cemetery in Niterói.

Fatima appears to have identified as Catholic as well. In several posts published to Facebook before her death, she frequently commented with the Portuguese equivalent to “amen” above various religious sayings as well as select images of a cross, an angel and the Virgin Mary, among other things.

Santos did not respond to a request for comment from *JI* on Monday, nor did a spokesperson for his campaign.

Joseph Murray, a lawyer for Santos, said he was unable to address a range of questions on Monday evening, insisting that he would “respond in due course.”

“We are preparing our response to this very suspicious shotgun style of allegations, but we are not going to respond in a piecemeal fashion,” Murray said in an email to *JI*. “I am sorry if that does not help you with your deadline, but you have to understand our perspective that by responding to some (easy ones) but not all allegations right away, will undoubtedly create a story within a story, as to why we chose to respond to some and not all right away.”

He said he would “be sure to discuss” *JI*’s inquiries with Santos.

In a statement to *JI*, Matt Brooks, the chief executive of the Republican Jewish Coalition, said the RJC is “aware of the claims being made against” Santos and has “reached out to his office directly to ascertain whether they are true,” adding: “These allegations, if true, are deeply troubling. Given their seriousness, the Congressman-elect owes the public an explanation, and we look forward to hearing it.”

It was only just a couple of months ago, if not earlier, that Santos appears to have first characterized on his campaign site his mother’s family’s immigrant journey through a Jewish lens. “George’s grandparents fled Jewish persecution in Ukraine, settled in Belgium, and again fled persecution during WWII,” the site says.

Santos had initially only written that his mother “was born in Brazil to Belgian immigrants” who “fled the devastation of World War II Europe,” as he had also specified when he launched his first House campaign in 2019. But on or before Oct. 14

— roughly three weeks before the election — he updated that language to include new details about “Jewish persecution” and fleeing Ukraine, according to archived screenshots available on the WayBack Machine.

While it is not entirely apparent when Santos himself began identifying as Jewish, news accounts suggest it was somewhat recently.

“I’m a free thinker,” he said in an interview with *Politico* this past August, just before the Republican primary. “I’m Latino, I’m gay, I’m Jewish. I do what I want. I don’t fit in the boxes that they want me to fit in.”

Poised to become the first openly gay representative from Long Island, Santos handily defeated a Jewish Democrat, Robert Zimmerman, in New York’s redrawn 3rd Congressional District, which is home to a sizable Jewish population and mostly covers the North Shore of Long Island. His eight-point victory flipped a swing seat held by outgoing Rep. Tom Suozzi (D-NY) and helped deliver a narrow Republican majority in the House.

After the election, Santos discussed his own relationship to Judaism in somewhat more depth. “As I always joke, I’m Jew-ish,” he told the *Jewish News Syndicate* in a video interview last month. “I’m very proud of that heritage,” he added. “I might not be a practicing Jew, but I’m still at heart.”

On Sunday, Santos appeared with Zeldin at a private RJC event on Long Island to celebrate the first night of Hanukkah. “May this Festival of Lights bring peace, good health, and prosperity to all,” Santos tweeted, adding a photo in which he was pictured lighting a menorah and wearing a yarmulke.

During the election, Santos said he built close relationships with members of the Persian Jewish community in Great Neck, which has traditionally been conservative. “That’s my second home,” he told *JI* last month. “They’re fantastic to me. I go to Shabbat with them, I go to temple with them.”

But such goodwill apparently had its limits. In mid-October, Santos caused some tension when he showed up uninvited to a private reception hosted by the Iranian American Jewish Federation of Great Neck, according to a person familiar with the event

who asked to remain anonymous to discuss a sensitive matter.

Santos’ presence at the intimate gathering in Kings Point, where participants included a county legislator and local mayor, was a potential source of concern because the IAJF is a nonprofit organization that seeks to remain neutral in political races and typically avoids engaging with candidates close to elections, the person said. “Santos was a candidate who was not in office and shouldn’t have been there,” the person explained.

Santos made no mention of that dynamic when he shared photos of his appearance at the IAJF reception on Twitter, writing that “many members are worried about crime and inflation” and vowing to “have their back in DC!”

The person familiar with the IAJF event speculated that Santos had been informed of its existence by Mehran Hakimian, a local political activist who is said to have helped broker introductions between Santos and Persian Jews in the district, who make up a significant voting bloc. Hakimian, who donated to Santos’ campaign, sits on IAJF’s advisory board and is a leader within Great Neck’s Mashadi Jewish community.

Reached by phone on Monday evening, Hakimian seemed reluctant to explain his connection to Santos. He declined to clarify his relationship with the congressman-elect and, somewhat surprisingly, said he was unaware if Santos was Jewish. “He has never told me this in person,” Hakimian said, claiming that he had “never asked him directly.”

“I did not speak to him about it,” Hakimian said in a brief conversation with *JI* before abruptly hanging up. “I did not have a direct conversation with him about it. I never told anybody that he’s Jewish or not. But I don’t know. I really don’t know. I heard him saying it to other people. I’ve heard of him saying it to other people.”

In a follow-up text, Hakimian also denied having notified Santos of the private IAJF event, saying he “did not attend the event” himself and “did not urge anyone else to attend.”

Earlier this month, Santos drew criticism for his appearance at a New York Young Republican Club gala in Manhattan where a number of right-wing extremists were

present, including the anti-immigrant publisher Peter Brimelow, whom the Anti-Defamation League has labeled a white supremacist.

Charles Lovett, a spokesperson for Santos, told JI last week that the congressman-elect “did not interact with Mr. Brimelow, nor does he share his views.”

“As the son of immigrants, in addition to being bi-racial himself, George Santos has been outspoken against political violence, white supremacy and antisemitism,” Lovett said.

In the interview with JI, Santos said he views the prospect of a nuclear deal with Iran, which is widely opposed among Persian Jews, as inherently antisemitic because it

lends legitimacy to an authoritarian regime. “I think the largest crime that we can talk about when it comes to antisemitism and the threat to Israel is any kind of negotiation with Iran,” he said.

Santos said he had visited Israel “four times” but did not provide details about the nature of the trips.

Meanwhile, Santos has yet to engage with the broader organized Jewish community in New York.

The Jewish Community Relations Council of New York hasn’t had “any contact with” Santos, a spokesperson for the organization, which represents the Jewish community to New York government officials and counts more than 50 local

Jewish groups as members, told JI on Monday.

The Jewish Community Relations Council of Long Island, a department of the JCRC-NY, also has “yet to meet with” the congressman-elect, according to Mindy Perlmutter, the group’s executive director.

“I’m connected with the community,” Santos told JI a day after the midterms. “They know I’m there for them without me having to campaign on it, because it’s common sense, second nature, and I’ve always been a part of the community.”

Additional reporting contributed by Jewish Insider’s Capitol Hill reporter Marc Rod and managing editor Melissa Weiss. ♦

DECEMBER 20, 2022

‘Fragile Beauty’ exhibition connects Jewish artists with the environment

The combination of eco-inspired works by Mira Lehr, Lauren Shapiro and Beatriz Chachamovits is running through spring at the Jewish Museum of Florida

By **Tori Bergel**

Miami, known for its vibrant nightlife, bustling art scene and beautiful beaches, is also ground zero for sea level rise. With the same vigor, city officials are scrambling to find ways to elevate homes, build earthen berms and erect tall sea walls, while simultaneously organizing a weeklong showcase of artistic excellence — making it the perfect spot for an exhibition of three artists whose work calls attention to the problems facing the environment.

Mira Lehr, Lauren Shapiro and Beatriz Chachamovits are no strangers to the dichotomy. Separately, the three Florida-based artists create pieces that merge the beauty of nature with its harsh realities, but have come together to paint an even more

powerful picture with their newest joint exhibition, “Fragile Beauty.”

Showing through April at the Jewish Museum of Florida in Miami Beach, “Fragile Beauty” combines the trio’s individual works into a larger message about the changes happening to the planet and its struggling ecosystems. The exhibition had its official opening on Dec. 4, the final day of Miami Beach’s annual Art Week.

The seven-day event, which this year culminated in the 20th anniversary of Art Basel Miami Beach earlier this month at the Miami Beach Convention Center, brings local and international artists together for a celebration of works along the city’s coastline.

Though their collaboration was put

together by the museum, Lehr, Shapiro and Chachamovits are happy to be spreading their message together.

“Women have been thought of as nurturing, which fits in so well with the concept of protecting the planet. I am very pleased to be showing with two other female artists who are sensitive to the environment and who are helping focus attention on it and help protect it,” Lehr told *Jewish Insider*.

“As women, we have a more natural connection with the earth just because of how our body is, how we think, how our process is,” Chachamovits told JI. “We give birth, our body changes just like nature itself to create something new, and that relationship is really deep. So in a way, three female artists that are working in the

same role, [coming] together to create an exhibition, I feel that it always makes the voice louder of the situation that needs to be dealt with or seen...that's ultimately, I think, what we all want to see, the change that we're asking for."

Lehr, who was featured in two other exhibitions during Art Week Miami Beach in addition to "Fragile Beauty" — a group show titled "The Miami Creative Movement" at the Center for Visual Communication in Wynwood and a solo show at Rosenbaum Contemporary Gallery in Boca Raton — has been a prominent figure in the art world for over five decades. At 87, her work has shown in over 300 solo and group exhibitions, and been featured in museums and galleries across the country, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and the Smithsonian Museum of American Art in D.C. She's been profiled by the *Miami Herald*, *New York Times* and is the subject of a career-spanning monograph *Mira Lehr: Arc of Nature*.

Lehr's career, however, has not been without its challenges. Born in Brooklyn but raised in Miami, Lehr remembers the antisemitism she faced after moving from central to northern Miami Beach, which was predominantly Christian.

"I was asked the first day of school what my religion was and when I replied 'Jewish,' a bunch of kids said, 'Oh my God, another one!' When walking home from school, a kid shot a bobby pin into my ear and said, 'Let's get rid of the Jews,'" she recalled.

While experiences like those made Lehr "frightened and very conscious of being a minority," she added that they also made her more empathetic, empowering her to fight for social causes like climate change and fair publicity for women in the arts.

In 1960, Lehr co-founded Continuum in Miami Beach, a co-op gallery aimed toward highlighting female artists — Lehr told *Hamptons Art Hub* that in the Southeast at the time, women in art were all but ignored.

"We all hated being here," she told *Hamptons Art Hub* in 2015. "This was the boonies, nobody paid attention. Being a woman artist at that time was difficult. I thought, 'I'm just doing this because I love

when I'm learning. Whatever happens, happens.'"

Out Front Magazine described Continuum to be a "space for women to learn and expand their work on the realms of creation." The gallery closed in the early '90s after operating for 30 years.

A self-described eco-feminist, Lehr's first foray into using art for environmental awareness was in 1969, when she was chosen, along with one other artist, to aid in Buckminster Fuller's "World Game" planet sustainability project.

"Fuller's 'Spaceship Earth' vision was about the earth having a finite amount of resources, which cannot be resupplied," Lehr said. "This was a year before the very first Earth Day was celebrated in 1970, and it was the year we sent a mission to the moon. I learned about linked and interconnected systems, which underscored the need to protect the planet, the necessity of guarding the planet's resources, and of putting our energies towards doing more with less."

"As I have made my way in this world, being Jewish has made me more sensitive to working on subject matter that promotes the message of wholeness, justice and peace. I have found, and continue to explore my voice, and speak up for doing what is right. Cherishing and protecting the environment is something that is 'right,'" Lehr said.

Lehr has three pieces currently on display as part of "Fragile Beauty": "Sacred Dreams," which was donated to the museum as a permanent installation, "Mangrove Sculptures" and "Below the Surface."

"The suspended resins of the large-scale aerial installation 'Sacred Dreams' are lit by the lovely stained glass windows all around and bathed in the natural sunlight that streams in, creating an ethereal experience. The strength and interconnected roots of the 'Mangrove Sculptures' installation, along with the luminous, swirling energy of 'Below the Surface,' combine to evoke an appreciation of the connection among air, earth and water," Lehr said.

"These works hopefully cause viewers to not only reflect on the structure and integrity of the pieces, but to expand their thinking about structure, integrity, and cohesion of the planet," she added.

Shapiro, an artist-in-residence at the Bakehouse Art Complex in Miami, began working with sculpture over 15 years ago while getting her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Florida Atlantic University. The 38-year-old went on to get a master's in ceramics from the University of Miami. Her work has been featured in a number of solo and group exhibitions, and has received several awards, including a grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts in 2019. She has appeared in publications such as the *Miami Herald* and *Architectural Digest*.

Combining art, science and technology, Shapiro creates her work alongside ecologists, learning from them and subsequently helping "communicate their research to the public" via her installations.

"If you look at my work, you'll see a lot of geometry and patterns and repetition instances, and these are all largely inspired by the hidden geometries that you see in nature and the idea that everything is connected," Shapiro told JI.

"My pieces for the show are a new series of objects that incorporate some of these 3D scans of corals that were loaned by scientists in the field...and they're kind of hand-built with these geometries and these objects that when you turn on a light they illuminate, so they're actually light sculptures," she said.

For Shapiro, presenting her work at the Jewish Museum of Florida felt like a reconnecting of sorts to the community she grew up in as a child.

"I grew up with a more traditional family, I had a bat mitzvah, been to Israel, I was very much integrated with the Jewish community when I was younger," she said. "Then as I've gotten older, I sort of haven't been as involved in many, many years, so it's nice to kind of be in touch with my roots, especially for art. This is the first time I've ever done anything like this for this community, so, it kind of makes me feel at home."

While her exhibition sculptures, a series of "Crystal Coral Lamps," make use of the techniques she has become known for, Shapiro's interest in the environment began much earlier.

"I was born and raised in South Florida, and we spent a lot of time outdoors in

nature, and nature has always been kind of a prevalent theme in my work as a professional artist,” Shapiro said.

Since then, she has traveled to places like Brazil and French Polynesia to learn about their ecosystems, but is currently focused on bringing attention to ecological changes happening closer to home.

“When I got out of grad school, I wanted to take that vocabulary that I developed and turn my lens on to the greater landscape of Miami, and to kind of thinking about the issues that we’re facing here,” Shapiro said. “We’re ground zero for sea level rise. Our city is built essentially on zero feet of sea level, so we’re gonna go under, or rather nature’s gonna start taking back the beach, essentially. I’m really interested in how people and nature can live more in tandem, more in harmony, because nobody wants to live in a barren wasteland. Everybody wants nature around us, so thinking about how we can critically solve problems and come together to sort of advocate for these types of issues.”

Shapiro clarified that her “Fragile Beauty” installation is not a call to action — as some of her others have been — but meant to inspire people “to make work, or to make art, or to be creative, or to use creativity.”

“I think people get very overwhelmed when they think about climate change. They feel like they’re helpless,” she said.

“Art has the power to inspire people and harness people’s emotions, because people don’t care about things that they don’t understand. Or rather, they don’t understand things they don’t care about, and vice versa. So when people see something that inspires them or makes them feel something, they’re more apt to care about it and want to protect it,” Shapiro added.

Originally from São Paulo, Brazil, Chachamovits moved to Miami four years ago. Her work has appeared in numerous solo and group shows, including at the National Museum of Rio de Janeiro, and has been featured in *Vogue* and National Geographic’s education platform. She is the recipient of an artist grant from The Village of Pinecrest, and wrote and illustrated a

handbook of marine life.

“Beatriz and I have known each other for many years and we’re good friends,” Shapiro said of sharing an exhibition with Chachamovits, a fellow resident at Bakehouse. “She’s assisted me in some of the installations that I’ve done when she first got to Miami a few years ago, and I’ve helped her with some of her stuff as well. We share a lot of commonalities, common friends and common themes in our work, so her and I are pretty close.”

“Working with Lauren is always awesome,” Chachamovits, 36, agreed. “This is not the first exhibition that we [have shown] together as well, and so having her and having this in our lives, I love it. I love [it] because we’re both ceramicists, we’re both environmentally oriented artists — she has her own way of doing things and I have my own way of doing things, but the way that that sum comes together, it’s really powerful. So, every time that we have a chance of working together or just exhibiting together I jump at it, because I think that in many ways our work complements each other and it creates an exponential understanding of the process and all the [problems] that [are] happening in the environment.”

Chachamovits’ art focuses on the decline of the earth’s coral reefs — with particular attention to what scientists say are their three main causes of deterioration: coral bleaching, ocean acidification and plastic pollution — a cause she literally swam upon.

While sketching seaweed around the island of Ilha de Boipeba during a trip through Bahia in Northern Brazil, a stranger came up to Chachamovits and asked if she had ever drawn the island’s corals, bringing out a pair of snorkels and offering to show them to her.

“He took me to this other beach, and we dove into the ocean and went to this part of the ocean that is filled with rocks, very close to the coast...he pushed me into the ocean and shoved me inside of this tiny little cave, and this cave was the most magical, most magnificent thing I’ve ever seen in my life,” Chachamovits recalled. “It had little openings on the roof so the light of the sun would shine through it, revealing and obscuring lights and shapes and forms. The cave was like 360-covered in corals and tiny fishes swimming from side

to side. I could see a spotted ray just laying on the sand in the bottom and tiny critters moving around...that day changed me forever. I was so amazed by the beauty and the shapes and the textures and the form and the movement, and how harmonious everything was and connected to each other — that interconnectivity that happens inside of the blue ocean that is so visible. It really hit a nerve, and when I got out of it I was like, “Why isn’t anyone talking about this?”

“We spent the whole day going in and out of that cave, and he took me to another spot to see bigger corals...and that changed me forever in such a deep way that I felt, because of this experience and because of this feeling that I had inside of me, I felt like that is my life’s purpose. If no one is talking about it, I’m going to talk about it,” she added.

Born to a Jewish family, Chachamovits mused that it makes sense she would be drawn to the ocean — and more specifically corals — having come from such an interconnected community.

“A coral in itself is a bunch of polyps joined together to form a being, and I feel like that represents very much what Jewish culture is,” she said. “We all come together to form a bigger body, a bigger understanding, a bigger community, and in that sense...I’m seeing really this connection between the ocean environment and the interdependence and the symbiosis that exists, that is so vivid and is so strong, inside of the ocean.”

“Maybe that is what brought me so close to it, because I felt that in my whole life. I felt that symbiosis, I felt that interdependence, I felt that collectivism and the communal part of it. And so, in that sense I would say that there’s a very clear bridge between what is a coral and what is a Jewish community,” Chachamovits added.

“Being Jewish is something that is beyond you. It’s your identity. When you are Jewish you will always be Jewish, there is nothing or no one or anything that can take that away from you,” Chachamovits said.

Her “Fragile Beauty” installation, “To Kill With Water,” is a performative piece made up of three aquariums in different stages of acidification. The first contains a collection of clay-based coral sculptures. The second contains the same sculptures, which

Chachamovits will cover with water — the clay will dissolve slowly over time, mirroring the effect ocean acidification has on the world's coral reefs. The third aquarium contains shapeless mounds of clay in murky water, acidification's final stage.

"I feel like one of my biggest roles is to plant a seed of love for the ocean," Chachamovits said. "I really want people

to understand that the way that we walk around the planet and the way we walk about our lives, and the choices we make, all of them influence our environment."

"I would love for people to understand, in the deepest way, that we're all connected to the water and we all need the ocean to exist and to survive [on] this planet. There is no life without water, and corals are the

most important and most fragile ecosystem that we have, because they hold 25% of all life in the ocean and they're less than 1% of coverage in the whole ocean. So it's an important thing for us to realize how beautiful, magical and important they are," she added. ♦

DECEMBER 22, 2022

Meet the L.A. rabbi who found a national stage for her support of the Iranian protests

Rabbi Tarlan Rabizadeh was a lead organizer of local action in support of the demonstrations, and was recently invited by Lizzo onto the stage of the People's Choice Awards.

By Jay Deitcher

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

When Rabbi Tarlan Rabizadeh began serving as vice president for Jewish engagement at Los Angeles's American Jewish University (AJU) on Aug. 15, she had no idea where the rest of the year would take her.

She never expected to emerge as a national figure for speaking out against the Iranian crackdown on protesters, and never expected to be recognized at the People's Choice Awards as a leading advocate in support of the uprisings. She was an Iranian American rabbi trying to act on a gut feeling: that she couldn't sit silent as her people suffered.

One month after she started the job, she found out about Mahsa Amini, the 22-year-old who was detained by Iran's morality police on Sept. 13 for improperly wearing

a hijab, and who died under suspicious circumstances soon afterward.

Rabizadeh didn't see coverage of it on the cable news shows she watched; instead, she learned the way many Iranian Americans did: via social media. She was scrolling through her Instagram when she was overwhelmed with shock. "There's a video of [Amini] in the detention room," she recalled. "She's walking, and suddenly she has to lean against a chair and then she can't hold on and she just collapses to the floor. And then the next images that we see are of her in a coma in the hospital, and then she's declared dead three days later... Just for having a piece of hair showing, or some people say it's because a piece of her ankle was showing. This poor kid."

Rabizadeh knew that responding to a human rights uprising half a world away wasn't part of her job description. Her responsibilities at AJU included monitoring

the community mikvah and directing the university's Maas Center for Jewish Journeys, which, according to its website, "champions those too-often relegated to the periphery of Jewish life, guiding them through a suite of interconnected programs that enrich their Jewish journeys," such as the school's Introduction to Judaism Program.

"When you start a new job, you gotta be careful with your first ask," she said, but she knew she needed to use her platform to help, so she walked into the office of her boss Jeffrey Herbst, the president of AJU, and said, "I think we need to put something together for Iran." She recalls him answering, "No question. What are you thinking?"

Since then, Rabizadeh has been active in organizing people in L.A.'s large Iranian Jewish community and beyond to support the protests. On Dec. 4, AJU hosted the Baraye Iran (Farsi for "For Iran") forum

featuring leading Jewish and non-Jewish Iranian advocates, organized by Rabizadeh and 14 other Iranian leaders in L.A. Later in the month, the university hosted a conversation with Iranian-American journalist and women's rights activist Masih Alinejad, titled "The Woman Whose Hair Frightens Iran."

"I don't label myself as anything," Rabizadeh said. "You want to call me an advocate, just describe what I'm doing, which is really highlighting and amplifying the plight of these Iranian people that are being killed and raped on the daily and executed in broad daylight?" She added that her activism, "has nothing to do with my job description, except that I'm a Persian rabbi... and someone had to do something."

When it came to organizing the Dec. 4 event, said Matthew Nouriel, community engagement director at the organization Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, "She's the one who pulled all of this together. She's the one who contacted everybody, and was like, 'Let's figure something out.'"

Rabizadeh was born in Los Angeles in 1985 to Iranian immigrant parents who had been studying in the United States during the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and felt they could not return after Ayatollah Khomeini took power.

"They left all of their belongings to neighbors, many of whom were Jewish and [had] stayed behind," Rabizadeh said. "Most of my family assumed they were going to go back. One of my great aunts tells a story of hiding a lot of jewelry and belongings behind a wall [that] they then plastered over. God knows what happened to it."

Rabizadeh's surname means "descendant of rabbis," and since she was a teenager, Rabizadeh knew she wanted to become one. "I'm trying to go back to a kind of Judaism that I was raised with that no longer exists," she said. "A lot of that has to do with the Persian kind of Judaism that I was raised with — this kind of feeling of opening your heart and talking to God and having it be messy, sitting with your grandmother [in] the synagogue and learning from her what it means to ask God for whatever you want in life."

Although Rabizadeh is an ordained Reform rabbi, her background blurs

denominational lines, and she has fond memories of growing up in the community formed between women in their section of the Orthodox synagogue. She considered Conservative rabbinical school before deciding it wasn't for her, and appreciates the freedom of choice Reform Judaism offers.

"I grew up in a very insular, Persian Jewish community where, directly or indirectly, people always told me what to do," she said. "And I just didn't want that for my Judaism. I wanted to create my own meaning. And it so happens that I am kosher. I don't consider myself a Reform rabbi. I don't really care for denominations. I chose one because you always have to choose a box in order to become a rabbi. In fact, my dad calls me a closeted Orthodox Jew. I think on some level, he's right."

She added, "Most Persians aren't Reform, Orthodox. People ask me, 'Oh, your grandparents were Orthodox?' They're not Orthodox. They're just Jewish. The idea is that you try to follow as many *mitzvot* and as many Jewish traditions as possible. And that's it. I remember growing up we would say all the blessings for Shabbat, and the Lakers game would be muted in the background, while my grandpa was singing. So it's a very peculiar world, the Persian world. We all went to synagogue in the morning and then we went to lunch at a restaurant afterwards. I can't really explain my people, but I'm very proud of the fact that they don't conform to a box."

Rabizadeh's career as a Jewish professional began at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, where she obtained her master's in Jewish education, followed by rabbinical ordination in 2018. She has worked at The Kitchen, a Jewish congregation in San Francisco; the Milken Community High School; and as director of student life at the University of California, Los Angeles Hillel. She is the first Reform rabbi that AJU, which has ties to the Conservative movement, has hired.

"Her hiring is a signal that we want to be open to the entire Jewish landscape," Herbst told eJP. "We think she's realizing the promise of making sure that we're as open and as welcoming as possible to the entire Jewish community, the entire increasingly diverse Jewish community."

Los Angeles is often affectionately referred to as "Tehrangeles," as the home of the largest Iranian Jewish community in America, with more than 50,000 Persian Jews living there, according to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, as well as the largest Persian community outside of Iran.

"What's happening in Iran is important to Jews because Jews care about human rights," Herbst said. "It's also important because what happens in Iran affects the Jewish community that still live there, as well as the very significant number of Iranian American Jews who have ties to Iran. And, of course, what happens in Iran has a huge effect on what happens in the Middle East. [Rabizadeh] was in the ideal spot to do some very important programming."

Before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran had a Jewish community of more than 100,000, but today there are an estimated 9,000 to 20,000 Jews still in the country. Rabizadeh said that in Iran she fears she would be murdered for being a rabbi, and said that visiting Iran under its current regime has never seemed like an option for her.

"In Judaism, when someone dies, you're not supposed to look at their face," she said. "You're supposed to always remember them alive. And I just never wanted to go see this country the way that it looks."

Some of her distant relatives remain in Iran, and other Iranians have contacted her, begging for help. She tells them to escape whichever way they can, even if it means leaving their property behind.

"Find a way to get out," she tells them. "Just find a way to get out. Mentally prepare yourself. Don't worry about the money. You don't have a life. There's nothing else to worry about."

With internet shutdowns and bans on foreign press making it difficult for news to get out of Iran, Rabizadeh said she feels that Iranian Americans are "filling a void." They are telling horror stories they hear from family back home and translating news coming from within Iran. "For the first time in history. I think we are primary resources, just because we're Persian and [Iranians] trust us," she said.

Sometimes, she feels as if much of the Jewish community is silent about what's happening in Iran. For more than a month,

few rabbis spoke about it. There weren't vigils or events held outside of Los Angeles. "Is it racism?" she wondered. She gets frustrated thinking that some Jews may not speak up against the Iranian government because they are afraid they would be called Islamophobic.

"You have to be able to call out crime," she said. "This is not a time to be politically correct. People are dying."

Recently, she has seen more Jewish leaders reaching out to her, wanting to help. Jonathan E. Blake, the senior rabbi of the Westchester Reform Temple in Scarsdale, N.Y., dedicated each night of Hanukkah to an Iranian who died during the struggle. Rabizadeh has been booked for speaking engagements in New York, L.A. and Georgia. Non-Jewish organizations are reaching out to her, too, hoping for her to speak about what some are calling the new Iranian revolution. Other Iranian organizers have reached out to her about appearing at protests, but she can't attend because many

are held on Shabbat; she says organizers haven't been receptive to changing the dates.

And yet, Rabizadeh has managed to appear on one of the largest possible platforms. Two weeks ago, at the People's Choice Awards, Grammy Award-winner Lizzo brought her up on stage and recognized her as one of the women advocates who "deserve the spotlight." Lizzo credited Rabizadeh with being "committed to building a bridge between Jewish people of all colors and backgrounds, and as an Iranian-American, she is fighting to amplify the plight of the Iranian people."

"She pours a great deal of passion into every project that I've seen her take on," Rabbi Adam Greenwald, a former executive at AJU and the rabbi of Congregation B'nai Israel in Tustin, Calif., told eJP. "I think by living out her truth and her passion and speaking for her people, that is an invitation for others to feel similarly empowered."

Rabizadeh said she often asks herself "What would Esther do?" Rabizadeh said

that like Esther, who lived in ancient Persia, many Iranian Jews outside of the country "are alone, and I'm alone, and we're all alone and trying to figure this out. Only history is going to tell, should we have done better, could we have done better in this time. But the fact [is] that [Esther] really thought hard and long about how to twist the head of the king to help save an entire people. It's a lot of pressure."

That pressure sometimes turns to guilt, she added.

"I feel like a fraud," she said, her eyes dampening. "Like, I'm just sitting here from my living room, just posting [online]. What the hell am I doing?"

She attempted to brush away tears. "It's a lot," she said. "It's really painful. You have to have a Shabbat [away] from it. And at the same time there's just nothing you could do. All I'm doing is yelling at people to amplify, because I'm hoping that it'll fall on someone's desk and someone will know what to do." ♦

DECEMBER 22, 2022

How 'GirlWithNoJob' raised \$50,000 on Instagram for Holocaust education in one day

"I had a feeling once the interview came out, people would be so taken with Mark and his story and they would be like, 'What can I do to help?'" Claudia Oshry said.

By Ben Sales

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

On her Instagram feed, which boasts more than 3 million followers, Claudia Oshry, aka "GirlWithNoJob," usually documents her personal life, pop culture and other topics that appeal to

her audience, which is mostly made up of millennial and Gen Z women who live in cities such as New York or L.A.

But as of Wednesday afternoon, Oshry's most recent post featured a different offering: an interview with Mark Schonwetter, who survived the Holocaust by hiding with his mother and sister in the Polish forest. In the

interview, which has been viewed close to a million times, the 28-year-old influencer and the survivor discussed his memories of living in hiding, how he remains optimistic and his annual tradition of frying latkes with his family.

"The video was essentially meant to be more inspiring than getting really

dark,” Oshry, who also hosts a podcast with her sister, told *eJewishPhilanthropy* on Wednesday. “A great way to not eliminate, but hopefully diminish a lot of the antisemitism and hate that’s being perpetuated in the culture right now is by Holocaust education.”

The post has racked up likes and positive comments, but one result that Oshry didn’t expect was for her two-minute video to become a boon for Schonwetter’s eponymous foundation, which funds Holocaust education in public schools. Seeing the response to the video, Oshry decided to put a link to a fundraiser for the foundation at the top of her profile. Within the first 24 hours, it raised more than \$50,000 from more than 1,800 donors, with an average donation of roughly \$27.

“A lot of the time, people who listen to my podcast from all over the country are

really not even familiar with Judaism,” Oshry said. “Listening to the podcast is their first interaction with a Jew. So I take that responsibility very seriously, and I had a feeling once the interview came out, people would be so taken with Mark and his story and they would be like, ‘What can I do to help?’”

The video is part of a series, called “Eight nights, eight stories,” produced by Daniella Greenbaum and Rachel Kastner, that recruited eight influencers and celebrities to post Jewish content during the eight nights of Hanukkah. Kastner and Greenbaum were also producers on a series of videos about the Holocaust by influencer Montana Tucker.

Other nights of their Hanukkah project feature content including: A conversation between author Bari Weiss and Tiffany Haddish; influencer Danielle Bernstein

talking with Holocaust survivor Tova Friedman; and former NFL player Julian Edelman discussing the eight most Jewish sports moments. Bernstein as well as influencer Moti Ankari helped conceive of the project.

“It is celebs, and increasingly content creators on Instagram and TikTok, who make the biggest impact,” Greenbaum told eJP. “When confronting rising hatred against Jews, or any other societal ill, it is these voices that can make the biggest difference.”

Asked by Oshry about the importance of teaching young people about the Holocaust, Schonwetter said, “If we teach the young generation that we don’t want to live in hatred and we don’t want to create hatred between us, then maybe we will avoid the hate.” ♦

DECEMBER 18, 2022

Dead Sea rebounds from pandemic slump as tourist magnet for Jordan

Treacherous sinkholes have not deterred visitors seeking desert sun and medicinal mud baths at the lowest point on earth

By Saeb Rawashdeh

The article first appeared in The Circuit.

Jacqui Taylor Basker, an art historian from lower Manhattan, loved making annual trips to Jordan to teach college classes and visit the Dead Sea, where the desert air and mineral-suffused water provided relief from asthma and annoying skin conditions.

After two years in which COVID-19 kept the Hashemite kingdom closed to most outsiders, Basker has now come back to

soak up the winter sun at the lowest place on earth. She was unprepared, however, for the extent to which some of her favorite beaches have turned into a moonscape of craggy rubble and salt-encrusted sinkholes.

“I was shocked,” she told *The Circuit*. “The Dead Sea is a great Jordanian treasure and must be protected for everyone.”

Because of damage caused by industry and government policy blunders, the Dead Sea has shrunk by approximately one-third over the past five decades. The retreating

waters have left underground cavities that periodically cause roads, trucks and buildings to collapse into gaping holes.

The treacherous terrain, though, has not deterred visitors from abroad, who often arrive on European charter flights that deliver them to the desert spas and medicinal mud baths for which the Dead Sea is famous. During the first nine months of 2022, some 3.6 million foreign tourists visited Jordan, already beating government targets for the whole year. Dead Sea hotels

reported 80% occupancy, rising to 96% on some weekends.

“Regardless of the environmental issues at the Dead Sea, all the hotels are packed,” Hatem Bataineh, sales manager for the Crown Plaza hotel chain in Amman, told *The Circuit*.

Before the pandemic, Jordan hit a tourism record in 2019, recording 5.4 million foreign visitors. That plunged to 1.2 million in 2020 when COVID-19 surfaced and borders closed around the world.

Marking the lowest point on earth at 1,430 feet (430 meters) below sea level, the renowned body of water is bordered by Jordan, Israel and the West Bank. Jordan and Israel have reaped benefits from the Dead Sea’s distinction as a natural wonder, drawing tourists from around the world to float on its hypersaline surface – 10 times saltier than the ocean – and seek the dermatological benefits of its rich mineral content. The Palestinian Authority hasn’t managed to turn its 16 miles of Dead Sea coastline into a tourism moneymaker, in part because of disputes with Israel over granting construction permits, and partly because of the difficulty of attracting private investment to the conflict-hobbled West Bank.

All three have also been stalemated in trying to stop the Dead Sea from disappearing and repair at least some of the damage that chokes the Jordan River, its only source for replenishment. Just last month, Jordan and Israel signed an agreement in Egypt at the U.N.’s COP27 climate conference, expressing their intent to build wastewater plants and reduce pollution in the river they share,

restoring some of its flow to the Dead Sea.

The once-rolling Jordan River has shrunk to just 7% of its capacity from the 1960s, when both countries diverted the water for national irrigation projects. In turn, the water level of the Dead Sea drops four to five feet per year, leaving it some 15% shallower than in 1970.

“It’s not irreversible,” said Christian Siebert, a hydrogeologist at the Helmholtz-Center for Environmental Research in Leipzig, Germany, who does fieldwork at the Dead Sea. If the two countries were to open their major upstream dams, he told *The Circuit*, “the situation would tremendously relax.”

The Dead Sea was a critical early source of state income for both Jordan and Israel, whose companies — ICL Group and Arab Potash Co. — became world-leading exporters of fertilizer and pesticide ingredients extracted from the water. Mud masks, exfoliating creams and cosmetics made from Dead Sea minerals line pharmacy shelves and duty-free shops in both countries.

To harvest the lucrative minerals, both companies subdivided the lower portion of the Dead Sea into evaporating pools that run in parallel across the midwater border and built massive processing plants on opposite banks. Over more than 60 years of business, the water depletion from the industrial operations, together with the throttling of the Jordan River, has left broad patches of dry land so that the frontier can be traversed by vehicles.

The water gap has also played havoc on the surrounding land in both Jordan and

Israel, with thousands of sinkholes opening up that have required the closure of beaches and roads. Once-bustling resorts have had to move inland or shut down entirely as snack bars, changing rooms and gas stations disappeared into the gaping holes, some as deep as 35 feet. Farmers on Jordan’s western shore in Ghor Haditha can no longer use tractors on their tomato fields because of the fragile earth.

“The surface collapses and swallows everything above,” Siebert said. “Cars, roads, buildings — whatever.”

Efforts to rehabilitate the Jordan River or find new sources of water to replenish the Dead Sea have been stymied by politics and cost. While Jordan signed a peace agreement with Israel in 1994, relations remain chilly and joint projects frequently stumble.

Extensive plans for building a channel south to the Red Sea that would bring water flowing into the Dead Sea tripped over its \$11 billion price tag. Dubbed the “Dead-Red Canal,” it accompanied another failed plan known as the “Dead-Med” project that would have piped water in from the Mediterranean.

Among the activists pushing the government to take action is Amman radio personality Mona Naffa Nazzal, who says the Dead Sea is a pillar of Jordan’s national identity. Foreign visitors find it irresistible to bring home the iconic photo in which they are floating on their back and reading a newspaper or a book that stays dry because the water’s salinity won’t let them sink.

If the Dead Sea dries up, she said, “this photo will be lost.” ♦

UAE offer for Israeli insurer paves way for more deals, minister says

Foreign Trade Minister Thani Al Zeyoudi tells The Circuit that economic activity with Israel will probably reach \$10 billion well ahead of schedule

By Jonathan H. Ferziger

The article first appeared in The Circuit.

While regulators scrutinize a bid from the United Arab Emirates for Israel's largest insurance company, the Gulf state will be looking to broaden its interests in the Israeli financial services industry, Minister of State for Foreign Trade Thani Al Zeyoudi told *The Circuit*.

Al Zeyoudi said the offer last week from a consortium led by Abu Dhabi-based ADQ for a controlling stake in Israel's Phoenix Group was "just another signal that relations are going to grow." Israeli insurers, financial services companies and fintech startups are among the most attractive candidates for partnerships and acquisitions, he said.

In a video interview from his office in Abu Dhabi, the UAE's capital, Al Zeyoudi also said he expects ties between the two countries to strengthen under returning Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. He said the free-trade agreement that the UAE and Israel ratified on Dec. 11 would likely reach its goal of generating an annual \$10 billion in bilateral economic activity by 2026, two years ahead of the ministry's earlier projections. Two years after the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan signed agreements to normalize relations with Israel, he said more Arab countries are getting ready to engage with the Jewish state.

"There is a growing appetite across the region for collaboration and cooperation," Al Zeyoudi said. "There are now six countries in the Arab world that have recognized Israel and the benefits of these ties will accumulate as trade flows increase. Obviously, we cannot decide for other countries because it's [a matter of] sovereign rights. But I'm sure

through these engagements and the results from our economic and bilateral trade, it's a signal to everyone how important and how powerful this cooperation is."

In his own efforts to understand the Israeli financial services market, Al Zeyoudi said he developed a warm relationship with Samer Haj-Yehia, chairman of Bank Leumi, Israel's largest lender. Haj-Yehia, an Arab citizen of Israel, was a surprise speaker in October at the mammoth Future Investment Initiative conference in Saudi Arabia, even though the two countries do not have diplomatic relations. Al Zeyoudi first met the banker during a meeting with Israeli business leaders in Dubai on Sept. 15, 2020, the day the Abraham Accords were signed in Washington. "Since then, the relationship is very close with him," Al Zeyoudi said. Haj-Yehia, who also spoke at conferences in the UAE last month, acknowledged through a Leumi spokesman that he has met with the Emirati minister and declined to comment further.

Al Zeyoudi, 40, who was previously minister of climate change and the environment, studied at the University of Tulsa in Oklahoma for a bachelor's degree in petroleum engineering. He earned an MBA at the New York Institute of Technology and later went to the SKEMA Business School in Lille, France, for a PhD in strategy, program and project management.

In the insurance deal, Al Zeyoudi said ADQ, a holding company owned by the Abu Dhabi emirate, is prepared to confront concerns expressed in Israel about foreign control of Phoenix, the largest manager of employee pension funds. The investment group it leads signed a term sheet last week with Phoenix's controlling shareholders, U.S. investment firms Centerbridge Partners

and Gallatin Point Capital, to buy between 25-30% of the company's shares for as much as \$800 million.

"It's all been studied very well and thoroughly from both sides," he said. "No deals will be signed without the full picture [being] put on the table, being discussed, being tackled, and then we move on to the next level."

The Marker, an Israeli financial newspaper, called the proposed sale "an irresponsible and unprecedented act of folly" because it gives the UAE too much power over the pension savings of Israeli citizens. A 2017 bid by China's Fujian Yango Group to buy control of Phoenix was withdrawn after it was rejected by Israel's Capital Market, Insurance and Savings Authority.

If ADQ's offer is accepted by the regulator, the deal would be one of the biggest between the UAE and Israel since the Abu Dhabi sovereign wealth fund Mubadala bought a 22% stake in an offshore Israeli natural gas field last year for \$1 billion.

"It probably won't be approved easily and it won't be a quick decision," said Nimrod Goren, president of Mitvim, the Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, and a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute in Washington. "There will be attempts to put all sorts of safeguards around it," he told *The Circuit*.

Regarding Netanyahu's comeback, Al Zeyoudi said the UAE has grown used to Israel's frequent government transitions and doesn't expect political changes to interrupt growth in trade between the two countries. Some Israeli investors have expressed concern that cabinet members in Netanyahu's proposed government who want to annex the West Bank will reignite conflict with the Palestinians.

"Believe me, this will not affect the economy because everyone wants the numbers to grow," Al Zeyoudi said. Netanyahu "was part of the initiation of the Abraham Accords and I'm sure he will make sure of its success."

In the interview, Al Zeyoudi touched on how the collapse of FTX has affected the UAE's efforts to promote itself as a world center for cryptocurrency trading and research.

"Obviously there's concern when a high-profile business appears to have violated its customers' trust in this way," he said. "It offers a clear signal about the need for

regulations, consumer protections, proper law and international conventions in the sphere."

Given his experience as environment minister and a previous post as the UAE's representative to the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), which is based in Abu Dhabi, Al Zeyoudi said he's looking forward to next year, when his country plays host to the U.N.'s annual climate change conference, COP28.

Beyond his desire to showcase cooperation between government and private industry in converting to sustainable energy sources, Al Zeyoudi said the UAE

will also highlight the deal it brokered in which Jordan will provide solar energy to Israel in exchange for water from an Israeli desalination plant on the Mediterranean. The three sides signed a memorandum of understanding last month at the COP27 conference in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt.

"We're looking forward to bringing the world here," he said. "Sustainability is embedded with us as a nation. We have diversified our economy and diversified our energy mix. This is the story that we want to bring to the table, to discuss the real impact and the practical actions that we have taken on the ground." ♦