

## THE WEEKLY PRINT

*Ron Dermer: 'The lesson of the Holocaust is that the Jewish people need power'; General Atlantic doles out \$1 billion to maturing Israeli startups; The Year of Sophie Beren; How Jewish funders and organizations are approaching Israel's new government; Josh Shapiro to use Tree of Life Bible at Pa. governor inauguration; Through subsidized salaries, a program hopes to place women clergy at Orthodox synagogues; and How an uncommon group for Jewish fathers formed — and folded — in Connecticut.*

JANUARY 10, 2023

## Ron Dermer: 'The lesson of the Holocaust is that the Jewish people need power'

*Dermer said that his top two priorities as strategic affairs minister were ensuring that Iran does not obtain a nuclear weapon, and to "expand the circle of peace" between Israel and countries in the Arab world*

By eJewishPhilanthropy staff

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

At the 35th anniversary gala of the March of the Living, Israeli Minister Ron Dermer said that the lesson of the Holocaust is that "the Jewish people need power."

Dermer, who previously served as Israel's ambassador to the United States and now serves as the Israeli minister of strategic affairs, was the main honoree of the gala alongside his wife, Rhoda. The event, which took place at the Beth Torah Benny Rok Campus, a Conservative synagogue in Miami, also included a tribute to Rabbi

Yisrael Meir Lau, the former Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel.

"The Holocaust took everything away from the Jewish people. For the victims, it took away their property, it took away their dignity. It ultimately took away their lives," Dermer said. "But it is very important not to take the Holocaust itself away from the Jewish people. Because there has been an attempt in recent years to universalize the Holocaust, to turn it into another genocide, another massacre that happened. And I understand why people want to do that, because they want it to resonate with people outside of the Jewish community. I understand that."

He added, "What is the lesson of the Holocaust to the Jews? Is the lesson that we have to teach tolerance? Did we need six million to die to teach tolerance?... We didn't need the Holocaust to teach tolerance. The lesson of the Holocaust is that the Jewish people need power. That's the lesson of the Holocaust."

"Jews are uniquely uncomfortable with the idea of power because there's a price of power," he said. "You know what that price is? It's imperfection. When you are sovereign, you are imperfect. When you are a victim, you can be morally perfect. I would rather be sovereign and imperfect."

Speaking at the gala, Dermer recounted

an instance when, while serving as ambassador, he visited Majdanek, the Nazi death camp, which he called “the most surreal moment that I’ve had... in my entire life.” While outside the camp’s crematorium, he received a secure call from Israel’s and the United States’ national security advisers about an impending American airstrike in Syria and how Israel would be involved in the operation.

“While this call is happening, and while we were talking about who’s going to bomb what when, I had an image of a five-story

chimney to my left and a three-story mound of human ash to my right — the ultimate symbol of Jewish powerlessness — and here I was, privileged to be the ambassador of the sovereign Jewish state of Israel, speaking to the most important ally that we have.”

Dermer — who has served for decades as a close adviser to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu — said that his top two priorities as minister were ensuring that Iran does not obtain a nuclear weapon, and to “expand the circle of peace” between Israel and countries in the Arab world that grew through the

2020 Abraham Accords. He also hopes that Israel “will be the most important ally of the United States in the 21st century.”

“Prime Minister Netanyahu is determined to expand it and we hope to work very closely with the Biden administration,” Dermer said. “I think the policy towards Iran is a critical part of expanding that because I think it opens the space for Arab leaders to move into a public alliance with Israel as we face this common enemy together.” ♦

JANUARY 9, 2023

## General Atlantic doles out \$1 billion to maturing Israeli startups

*New York investment firm, among the global leaders in private equity, looks for next Mobileye while dipping into Mideast climate tech*

By Shoshanna Solomon

*The article first appeared in The Circuit.*

When Max August was a Harvard undergraduate, he scraped data from about 8,000 startups and 11,000 of their founders to complete a senior thesis on Israel’s fast-maturing tech scene that was supervised by former U.S. Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers.

Three years later, many of those same Israeli entrepreneurs are vying for the attention of the young investor, who has helped distribute close to \$1 billion on behalf of General Atlantic, one of the world’s biggest private equity funds. Most prominent of nine companies in the firm’s Israel portfolio is Mobileye Global, the Intel-controlled maker of self-driving technology that held an IPO in October and is currently valued at about \$25 billion.

After starting as an intern at the Park

Avenue firm, August was sent to Tel Aviv as an associate last year to scout investment opportunities, opening an office in the 61-story Azrieli Saron Tower where he can gaze over the Mediterranean coast. Alongside Alex Crisses, a managing director from New York who shuttles to Israel to close deals, General Atlantic last month recruited Yoram Teitz, who was managing partner in Israel at accounting powerhouse Ernst & Young, as a senior adviser. The team is overseen by Anton Levy, the firm’s co-president and chairman of its global technology group.

“Israel is moving from a venture-capital-only market to a later-stage market, where you’ll find bigger companies [and] entrepreneurs who have bigger visions,” Crisses told *The Circuit* in an interview. “As a global investor, we wanted to pick the locations that over the next five years will

have the most innovative technology. And we really do believe that Israel will be that.”

With \$73 billion in assets under management and 16 global offices from London to Shanghai, General Atlantic came late to the game in Israel, a tiny Middle Eastern country that has spawned the greatest number of technology startups per capita in the world. Termed a growth equity firm, General Atlantic held back until it saw a growing pattern of Israeli companies raising \$100 million and more in a funding round, an indicator of business strength. Similar criteria have drawn other global investment leaders including Blackstone, SoftBank and Koch Disruptive Technologies.

According to the Tel Aviv-based IVC Research Center, the number of Israeli companies valued at over \$1 billion – dubbed “unicorns” in Silicon Valley – rose from two in 2018 to 42 in 2021.

And if Israel was once known primarily for being a powerhouse in cybersecurity and software, Crisses said General Atlantic is looking at the next generation of entrepreneurs in fields ranging from financial services and healthcare to climate technologies.

In 2020, the firm led a \$210 million fundraising round for AppsFlyer, which uses data analytics to help marketing firms grow. It led two \$150 million rounds for HiBob, which assists mid-sized companies in managing human resources. In 2021, it co-led a \$543 million funding round for Transmit Security, which authenticates users without employing passwords.

Mobileye, which Intel bought for \$15.3 billion in 2017, is a model for what brought General Atlantic to Israel. It's "really defining the next chapter of the maturation of Israeli technology," August said. The firm agreed to buy \$100 million of Mobileye shares as part of the IPO.

General Atlantic also sees opportunity in Israel's growing connections with Arab countries, paved by the 2020 Abraham Accords that were signed with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco. "Israel has amazing technology to export," making it "a real beacon in the area," Crisses said in the joint interview with August on Zoom.

The arrival of General Atlantic and other world-leading firms reflects the "evolution of ecosystem" in Israel's investment market and gives it credibility as a country with a greater number of large tech firms, said Avi Hasson, CEO of Start-Up Nation Central, a

nonprofit group that promotes the country's innovation industry.

"Ten years ago, that list would have been very, very short... whereas now there are dozens of such companies in multiple sectors," Hasson, who was previously Israel's chief scientist, told *The Circuit*. Funds such as General Atlantic bring with them financial knowledge, operational expertise, best practices and international networks, all of which are "critical to the growth" of Israeli companies, he said.

August, 25, who grew up in New York City and attended Horace Mann, an elite, college-prep school in the Bronx, developed a connection to Israel at Harvard, where he studied economics. While there, he co-founded the "Israel Summit at Harvard," an annual campus event that connects students from more than 100 universities with the Jewish state. Summers, who was previously Harvard's president, and economics professor Paul Gompers served as advisers on August's thesis: "The Impact of Experience on Israeli Entrepreneurial Success."

General Atlantic is looking for further investments in Israel and will put money into companies that demonstrate a market growth opportunity and "real product-market fit," August said. Financial technology, life sciences, biotechnology and climate technologies are the firm's target areas for Israel.

General Atlantic closed on its BeyondNetZero fund last month, allocating \$3.5 billion to support entrepreneurs who deliver innovative environmental solutions

while creating durable growth businesses. "We're deeply focused on climate in Israel," August said. "We define climate fairly broadly, and so if you think about food tech, ag tech," and reusable materials, there are "a lot of companies that are already reaching a growth stage" and become ripe for investment.

General Atlantic does not divide its global investment budget by region. Funding for individual companies ranges from \$25 million to \$1 billion. A single investment committee decides which companies will receive the money, Crisses said. "We have a lot of confidence that... a number of those will come from Israel."

Politics in Israel and criticism of its new government under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu are unlikely to affect General Atlantic's investment plans, Crisses said. He also takes in stride the economic shakeout that has cut venture capital funding in Israel almost in half from 2021. Crisses pointed to the General Atlantic's steadfastness through political and economic turbulence in India, China and Latin America.

When the firm enters a region, it does so with "a lot of thought, a lot of preparation and with the desire to stay long-term and be part of the fabric of the community," Crisses said. "That's what we do in all the geographies we enter, and we're really passionate, personally and institutionally, about making that in Israel." ♦

# The Year of Sophie Beren

*A self-described 'unifier,' The Conversationalist founder and CEO is amplifying the Gen Z voice and helping young people break down barriers one difficult conversation at a time*

By **Tori Bergel**

Bringing matzah to school on Passover seems like a nonevent, but for Sophie Beren, whose goal in life is to break down echo chambers, doing so as a teen in Kansas was a first effort at bridging the gap she had long been feeling. Wichita, where she was raised, is not known for its large Jewish presence, however, and Beren's attempts at dialogue were often left unanswered.

"Growing up in Wichita, even though my whole life I resented [being one of the only Jews], could have actually been my greatest gift, because it taught me what it looks like to be surrounded with people who are different from me," Beren recalled to *Jewish Insider*.

Since then, Beren, 27, who like Superman left Kansas to better people's lives in the big city, has been on a journey to promote conversation between disparate voices, particularly among Gen Zers, whom she reaches through her nonpartisan educational platform, *The Conversationalist*, which she founded in 2019.

In the last two months alone, that journey has included a new content distribution partnership with Snapchat, a speaking engagement at a "GenZ, the News, and the World" panel hosted by the Italian Embassy in Washington, D.C., and a *Forbes* 30-Under-30 nod for Beren.

"It's just another reaffirmation of the incredible support that I have in our community, on our team, and just of this Gen Z ecosystem that we've been able to build over the last three years," Beren, who's now in New York City where *The Conversationalist* is based, told *JI* of her inclusion among *Forbes*'s 2023 education winners.

*The Conversationalist* has always been a labor of love for Beren; a purpose she furthered in college to amplify the

Gen Z perspective and counter negative stereotypes about her peers in the broader media sphere.

"There is a lot of skepticism and there are a lot of misconceptions about Gen Z, and so I almost feel like it's my duty to help ameliorate some of those fears and help showcase that this generation really has so much power," Beren said, citing Gen Z as "the most diverse generation to date."

"We're seeing that through a lot of data, and you know, election turnout, that young people do want to make their voices heard, and I just think we have all of the tools at our disposal. Whether it's the fact that we're considered the activist generation or whether it's because we're considering different career pathways and rejecting traditional institutions, I just think there's such an opportunity for this generation to disrupt the status quo in ways that we've never seen before," Beren said.

It's this faith in the generation that attracts many Gen Zers to Beren and her platform.

"There's a consensus that our generation is disengaged and we don't care about politics, we don't want to be involved, but I love how Sophie's going out there and trying to challenge a lot of the stereotypes and narratives that people like to write about our generation," said Ian Gates, a senior at George Mason University who serves as a member on *The Conversationalist* Community Leadership Board. "We're not monolithic. We're not lazy. We care about politics, and we are going to change the world."

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Growing up in a Midwestern Conservative Jewish household was a mixed

bag for Beren, who felt deeply connected to her Judaism through her family yet isolated from her peers.

"I think a lot of what I do today really resonates with my childhood in that I realized that so much of who I was at my core, being a Jewish woman, was something that no one around me understood," Beren told *JI* just before the new year. "I felt like people either didn't know how to broach that dialogue with me, or didn't care to, based on a lot of ignorance."

"Ignorance, even what we're seeing today in 2022 with this constant rise of antisemitism, I think prevents people from wanting to actually understand where people are coming from. And so for me, that ended up resulting in a lot of harmful jokes and really just made me feel like I didn't have a voice because I could never be like my peers," she added.

After living like a self-described "Froot Loop in a world of Cheerios," Beren immersed herself in Jewish life when she started at the University of Pennsylvania. The chance to finally be around other Jewish Gen Zers helped Beren gain confidence in her identity, until, during a seemingly insignificant walk through campus, she began to realize the benefits of having grown up in a diverse community.

"I kind of realized that every single person on campus was huddled in groups of people who were like them. And that's when I had to really look within and realize that because I was finally so happy to be around other Jews, I actually only surrounded myself with Jews...and I realized that there was this larger cultural potential issue that I wanted to explore," Beren recalled.

That introspection led Beren to *TableTalk*, an organization aimed at helping to facilitate meaningful conversations

among college and high school students with different worldviews. Beren discovered the group through a camp friend, who had started it at Emory University along with some classmates.

Beren jumped at the chance to bring the program to Penn and campuses across the country. She grew the organization from her own university, founding TableTalk Global and turning it into a fully fledged 501(c)(3) nonprofit that is active at over 80 schools.

Despite the successes she was achieving with TableTalk, Beren realized the organization wasn't fully addressing the issue she had noticed during that fateful walk through campus.

"I realized that campuses in and of themselves are echo chambers, and as much as I love connecting my local community on campus, I felt like there was this missed opportunity to connect people from our generation across the country," Beren said. "I really started to notice some differences between my friends from home while they were in college versus what I was seeing on my college campus."

"That was really what sparked my passion behind The Conversationalist and realizing that there's so much more I could do to bring our generation together outside of just a singular location," she added.

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Boasting a community of over 125,000 young people, The Conversationalist is made up of two parts: its POVz video content and the larger TC community, which operates from the messaging app Geneva — a platform similar to Discord.

"I think what we're creating here at The Conversationalist is something that every human being can connect to on some level. Whether it's having an experience [of ] not feeling heard, whether it's being in a challenging conversation and not knowing what to say, whether it's wanting to disrupt the status quo, I think that's what's so unique about our generation in particular," Beren said.

POVz, which stands for the Gen Z perspective, is the first-ever Gen Z talk show. On it, Beren tackles controversial topics with an open mind and an open ear — it's not about finding an answer, it's

about bringing young people together and merging their diverse perspectives into an honest conversation.

The show produces three types of content that it distributes across social platforms: POVz: The Show; POVz: Exclusivez; and POVz: On The Streetz.

The main show brings a group of Gen Zers together for a roundtable, moderated by Beren, on a timely and/or polarizing issue. Currently only the pilot episode has been released, which sees four 20-somethings discussing whether or not abortion is a human right.

POVz: Exclusivez are one-on-one conversations between Beren and a celebrity guest in the TC's New York studio, tailored to a particular subject that the guest wants to discuss — for example, one episode saw "Harry Potter" star Bonnie Wright talking about climate change.

"We always ensure that every single person coming onto the show understands why they're there, how we run the conversation, what the expectations and guidelines are, so that we're all starting on the same playing field," Beren said. "That's really helped us to make sure that we're achieving our mission and having dialogue for the sake of learning, understanding and growing, rather than belittling, arguing or trying to change someone else's mind."

POVz: On The Streetz are short Tik Tok-length clips where Beren, or another TC team member, goes around the country interviewing young people about anything from who they think the greatest musical artist of all time is to if states should have control over gay marriage — think Jimmy Kimmel's "Lie Witness News," but substitute Kimmel's ability to elicit humorous one-liners for Beren's generation of honest and sometimes controversial opinions.

"We're meeting Gen Z where Gen Z is at," said Jourdan Ivory, head of community at The Conversationalist. "I think the real power of The Conversationalist is that not only are we amplifying the [points of views] of Gen Z, but we're sharing points of views and perspectives that all generations have a perspective on as well. And I think our biggest thing as The Conversationalist is getting the conversation started."

Ivory, who joined The Conversationalist in March of 2022, applied for his job after

having seen Beren's videos on his social media feeds. Coming from a background in PR, he was hesitant about the change, but grew more sure about his decision after further researching the platform.

"I realized that this was the place that I really felt was meant for me," Ivory said.

The Conversationalist's other leg, its Geneva community, is in a way an amplification of the work being done through POVz.

Through the app, which Beren describes as a "perfect marriage between a Slack channel, a Facebook group, and a social network," Gen Zers from all time zones are able to connect and discuss the issues they're most passionate about. For more guided conversations, The Conversationalist hosts "And We're Live" events every Monday night for a 30-minute, no-holds-barred discussion on a surprise topic.

"We let people rant, we guide it with bringing in opposing perspectives and a variety of perspectives, and then at the end of the event after 30 minutes, we close the room so no one else can chat," Beren described. "So it's a really awesome format to get people there to get energized about really having these conversations at least once a week, and it's a chance for every young person to participate."

At its core, The Conversationalist's Geneva community truly is a community; members will just as soon have a frank discussion about race as they will get together over Thanksgiving for a friendly game of Kahoot!.

"It's a community. It's where we bond, it's where we get to know each other, it's where we have difficult conversations, but also it's a network for us too," described Bella Santos, president of The Conversationalist Community Leadership Board and head moderator on Geneva.

"We're dealing with this tension, but we're also like goofing off and having fun and sharing parts of our lives," Santos added. "I think that that is just as important to me as these people breaking their echo chambers and following our mission."

Beren's efforts to create The Conversationalist, which began as more of a blog, were bolstered by the social limitations put in place by the COVID-19 pandemic, when many turned to the internet for social



interaction.

Santos, who is a sophomore at Simmons University, joined in 2020, during her senior year of high school. At that point, only 1,000 or so people were in the Geneva group.

"We were all just talking 24/7. There was all these different Gen Zers of different backgrounds, different political beliefs, etc., and I just found it to be super enticing," Santos said. "That was like the most connection I had with people my age for a while during my senior year."

Of those early years, Beren said, "Young people needed a place to go."

"It wasn't just that they were feeling that their stories and their voices weren't being heard, but there was no place that would connect them with other people to voice them," Beren said. "Once we built that community through COVID, we realized that there was such an opportunity to actually now foster more of these conversations in a public way. So building the show I think really helped us achieve scale. Now, instead of just having our community located on the Geneva app where young people are chatting internally, we've now been able to bring those conversations to millions of people. Even just the ways in which we're seeing scale on social media, I think we've garnered well over 50 million views on Tik Tok, and we only started posting this content about a year ago, so it's been a crazy, crazy whirlwind."

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Bringing people together is only half the battle; the true difficulty lies in making everyone comfortable enough to open up, an area in which Beren, who describes herself as a "unifier," excels.

"Sophie takes great notes, she's a great listener, and she really knows what she's talking about when she's talking to you because she's genuinely in the conversation with you," Ivory said. "Second to that is that Sophie is a phenomenal relationship-builder, and I think it's because she really cares."

As a self-identifying "Zillennial" — a generational cusper straddling both millennial and Gen Z identities — Beren's identification with both generations, along with her upbringing in Kansas, gives her a best-of-both-worlds perspective, enabling her to better understand others' viewpoints.

"It's really just about learning what someone is and is not comfortable speaking about and kind of just guiding the conversation from there, and knowing how to really make someone feel seen and heard, because at the end of the day I think that's really what we all want," Beren said.

Beren's ability to understand people's boundaries and foster safe spaces has made The Conversationalist a place that is truly special.

"It's pretty much the only place that I can think of off the top of my head where there is diversity at a different level," Santos said. "There are different racial categories and different religions and different sexualities and genders or whatever it is, but there's also a diversity of thought... it's just a heightened level of diversity, because the only thing that's uniting all the people in The Conversationalist community is wanting to have difficult conversations."

"Her personality and what she gives to the team and she gives to our community and that she gives to the world, is so overwhelmingly positive and I think so many more people need to be like her,"

Santos added. "I also just think that, despite being such a hard worker that's so accomplished, I definitely think she's one of the most vulnerable people, which I really appreciate because I feel like a lot of bosses and CEOs don't open up quite as much as she does about how she feels and what she's struggling with and what she wants and what her visions and goals are."

More than anything, Beren wants Gen Zers to know the true power they hold.

"I'm a Gen Z super fan, and I think it's personal to some degree in that I know what it feels like to feel silenced or to be a young person that feels that their voice doesn't matter," Beren said. "I think more than anything, I want to make sure that every young person out there can really harness the power of their unique voice, because I think when we do so, we can then help other people break outside of their echo chambers and use their voice for good."

"I hope that The Conversationalist can really be the incubator to that, so that young people can go out and help unify the world," she added. ♦

# How Jewish funders and organizations are approaching Israel's new government

*Funders and organizational leaders in the U.S. and Israel, speaking to eJP, said they're largely taking a "wait-and-see" approach to the government*

By Ben Sales

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

When he looks at Israel's new government, Honeymoon Israel co-CEO Avi Rubel isn't afraid that its proposed policies on religion, minority rights or other issues will alienate the core funders of his organization, which brings young Jewish or intermarried couples on group trips to the Jewish state. And when it comes to participant recruitment, the program has a waiting list.

But he does worry that the policies of the new right-wing government may dissuade people who could be new donors, but who instead decline to engage with Israel.

"We have funders who are concerned about whether Israel and North American communities are drifting too far apart, but mostly that points to the need to put even more emphasis on doing the work that we're doing," he told *eJewishPhilanthropy*. "The people who are already committed to Israel, they've been dealing with this for years. There might be some people at the margins who say, 'I'm done with this place,' but there are new people who we might want to bring in, which becomes even harder."

Funders and organizational leaders in the U.S. and Israel, speaking to eJP, said they're largely taking a "wait-and-see" approach to the government, which is led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and was sworn in on Dec. 29. They said they are keeping their eyes on which proposals from the coalition partners become enacted into law, and which promises do not come to fruition.

"A lot of our partner organizations on the ground, and all of us, are not yet clear exactly what [elected officials] are going to

be doing, and where some of their promises are going to be delivered or are going to fall short," Sheila Katz, the CEO of the National Council of Jewish Women, told eJP. "When new governments and coalitions come into place, it's always this in-between period of knowing what the campaign promises are, if you will, versus seeing what policies are in place... It makes it a little harder to organize until you know exactly where things land."

She added that some of her organization's partners are taking part in anti-government protests, and said, "When elected officials say they want to take away our rights, we have to take that very seriously and we have to organize."

The government has begun to advance some of its proposed reforms. Justice Minister Yariv Levin unveiled a far-reaching plan last week that would limit the power of the Supreme Court, changing the way its judges are appointed and allowing the Knesset to override most of its decisions to strike down laws. Public Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, of the far-right Otzma Yehudit Party, issued orders this week to stop protesters from blocking roads and asked police to take down Palestinian flags.

NCJW and other organizations that fund and partner with Israeli groups say they have no plans to change their allocations. Lonnie Nasatir, president of the Jewish United Fund, Chicago's Jewish federation, told eJP that much of its funding in Israel is focused on aiding immigrants from Russia, Ukraine and Ethiopia, as well as supporting nonprofits serving the southern coastal city of Kiryat Gat, and that those remain priorities for the organization.

He added that JUF's annual Israel trip for eighth graders next month will have approximately 500 participants. (Separately,

a source at Birthright told eJP that that organization is seeing record registration for its trips, and that the change in government has had no effect on fundraising at the moment.)

"What we're thinking of is not abandoning any programs, but really leaning into making sure that we're investing in Israeli society, making sure that our partners on the ground are thinking about these issues, making sure that we're doing all we can locally to bring as many young people to Israel as possible," he told eJP. "All of these things are going to continue regardless of politics."

Jewish Funders Network CEO Andrés Spokoiny told eJP that that view is echoed among many of the members of his organization. He said that if funders oppose this government's policies, that could be "a driver of more engagement."

"There is a minority, I would say, that opted for despair, but I think that the majority are, thankfully, doubling down on engaging," Spokoiny told eJP. "And engaging doesn't mean supporting all the government does. It means being true to your values and funding the areas that you care about."

That also appears to be the approach of Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America. Its president, Rhoda Smolow, and CEO Naomi Adler told eJP that when they meet with representatives of the government, they will focus on "reminding them of our pivotal role as the owner of Hadassah Medical Organization and youth villages in Israel and... advocating for health, the U.S.-Israel relationship and women's empowerment."

Nasatir said he may speak out if the government takes action on issues of religion and state, such as restricting either

who is eligible for Israeli citizenship or Israeli conversion policy. In 2017, Nasatir's father and predecessor, Steve Nasatir, said JUF "will not be hosting any member of Knesset that votes for" a bill that would have increased the power of Israel's Chief Rabbinate over Jewish conversion. The bill was shelved.

Lonnie Nasatir told eJP he endorsed a letter, signed by the leadership of the Jewish Agency for Israel, the Jewish Federations of North America and other groups that expressed "deep concern regarding voices in the government on issues that could undermine the longstanding status quo on religious affairs that could affect the Diaspora."

"If there are going to be some issues that come down the pike that we think are going to inflame or potentially set back relationships between Israel and the

Diaspora community, we will exert our voice when appropriate," he said, adding that such protest doesn't indicate a lack of support for Israel. "I don't think we'll be shy as a collective to voice our concerns... There are certain things that you can be certain are going to be hot buttons for us, and we want to make sure you talk to us and we're at the table."

Supporters of the government have taken a different view, including Rabbi Pesach Lerner, a member of the Jewish Agency for Israel board of governors and the executive vice president emeritus of the National Council of Young Israel. Together with another member of the board of governors, Steve Rosedale, Lerner wrote a letter to Netanyahu disavowing the Jewish Agency letter and declaring their "unreserved support for the policy of the government you lead."

"Many of the members of the Jewish communities in Israel and across the world share the joy regarding the establishment of a strong nationalist government," wrote Lerner and Rosedale. "They, like us, support your coalition and are praying for the government's success."

Spokoiny said that even funders who support the government recognize that it may make Israel's "case more difficult to explain or advocate for with certain constituencies." But he said that across many of JFN's members, there's a recognition that connection to Israel goes beyond its government's policies.

"For any Jewish organization in the mainstream, disengagement from Israel is disengagement from yourself," he said. "We're not going to disengage." ♦

JANUARY 12, 2023

## Josh Shapiro to use Tree of Life Bible at Pa. governor inauguration

*The Bible, which was on the bima at the Pittsburgh synagogue during the 2018 shooting, is one of three Shapiro will use at Tuesday's inauguration*

By Gabby Deutch

When Josh Shapiro is sworn in as Pennsylvania's governor next week, he will take the oath of office on a stack of three Hebrew Bibles, including one that was on the bima, or prayer platform, at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life synagogue during the 2018 mass shooting that killed 11 worshippers.

"It was regularly used on Shabbat mornings, and would have been used that fateful morning, but the services were abruptly interrupted by gunfire," Rabbi Jeffrey Myers, the spiritual leader at Tree of

Life, told *Jewish Insider*. "The Bible survived without any damage and Tree of Life is honored by its presence at the inauguration."

On the campaign trail, Shapiro's Jewish identity played a prominent part in his pitch to voters. One campaign ad showed his family having Shabbat dinner, which he pledged to continue in Harrisburg. In his stump speech, and in his election night victory speech, Shapiro quoted from *Pirkei Avot*, or *Teachings of Our Fathers*: "No one is required to complete the task, but neither are we free to refrain from it," he told a

cheering crowd in November.

Shapiro, Pennsylvania's outgoing attorney general, will also use the same family Bible he has used at each swearing-in since he was first elected to the Statehouse in 2004, a spokesperson for Shapiro confirmed to JI.

The third Bible — a copy of "Readings from the Holy Scriptures for Jewish Soldiers and Sailors," which was given to soldiers when they entered the military — belonged to Herman Hershtman, a World War II veteran who earned a Purple Heart and Bronze Star



on D-Day. Hershman, who died in 2013 at age 88, attended Beth Sholom Congregation, the same suburban Pennsylvania synagogue that Shapiro attends. The Bible is on loan from the Weitzman National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia.

A group of four interfaith leaders — Community Leader Shamshul Huda of

Lansdale's North Penn Mosque, Rabbi Greg Marx of Maple Glen's Congregation Beth Or, Monsignor Stephen P. McHenry of St. Anthony of Padua Parish in Ambler and Rev. Charles W. Quann of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Spring House — will deliver the invocation at the inauguration.

Shapiro "does not [go to my synagogue],"

Marx told JI at Shapiro's election night party in November. "I go to his synagogue, because he is a man that represents my values. He speaks to my heart. He speaks to my soul. And he speaks to what I believe America should be." ♦

JANUARY 12, 2023

## Through subsidized salaries, a program hopes to place women clergy at Orthodox synagogues

*The initiative is named after the biblical judge Deborah and created by the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance and Micah Philanthropies*

By Esther D. Kustanowitz

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

One of the challenges that Rabbi Barry Dolinger found himself with when he arrived at Congregation Beth Sholom in Providence, R.I., in 2011 as part-time rabbi (and part-time attorney) was the diversity of observance among the synagogue's 60 or so families. The community was small, but, Dolinger told *eJewishPhilanthropy*, "It felt very robust because everyone was very committed."

There were several other more traditionalist Orthodox synagogues in the area, but Dolinger called Beth Sholom a "big tent shul for anything that wasn't Haredi."

That tent included several subsets of the American Orthodox community, he added, including but not limited to "centrist Orthodox, to right-wing Modern Orthodox, to left-wing Modern Orthodox, to post-Orthodox, ex-Orthodox."

One potential point of contention among those subgroups was the question of women's leadership in Orthodoxy,

a movement that traditionally has prohibited women from leading services, chanting Torah in synagogue or receiving rabbinic ordination. Over the years, as the community started to grow, some Beth Sholom congregants became interested in women taking on clergy roles. This was especially true, Dolinger said, of younger families, some of them with teens.

"The people who were most active and newly active really wanted it," he recalled, adding, "We really wanted to empower the people who were getting involved." A segment of the congregation that he called "a more traditional older guard," meanwhile, objected to breaking with more classically Orthodox norms.

This debate set the congregation on the road toward the Devorah Scholars, an initiative launched in 2019 to bring female clergy into Orthodox congregations. The initiative is named after the biblical judge Deborah and created by the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance and Micah Philanthropies.

Devorah Scholars perform a number of

community functions, including delivering sermons, teaching classes and giving lectures to the synagogue membership and the broader community. They also offer pastoral care and counseling and contribute to youth and adult education.

"Time and again, we hear from women and couples who hesitate to seek out male spiritual guidance on personal matters," Daphne Lazar Price, executive director of JOFA, told eJP. "Having women leaders in paid positions that recognize and validate their value and qualifications dramatically shifts the dynamics on both sides of the *mehitza*," the divider that separates men and women in Orthodox synagogues. She added, "It sends a clear message that the synagogue is intentionally considering women's needs."

Clergy who are supported by Devorah Scholars span the spectrum of Modern Orthodoxy: Some have ordination that is equivalent to a traditional Orthodox rabbinic degree, or *semicha*, while others are graduates of advanced degree programs that are not framed as rabbinic ordination.

The first cohort of five scholars, which launched in 2020, included three graduates of the New York-based Yeshivat Maharat, which confers full ordination on its graduates; one scholar with a master's degree in Talmud who is also graduate of Midreshet Lindenbaum in Israel, whose website states that "women have the same right, ability and capacity as men to participate fully in the Jewish world"; and one graduate of Yeshiva University's Graduate Program in Advanced Talmud/Tanach Studies, in which students can study for up to three years and earn a master's degree. All three members who are in the second cohort, which launched last year, are graduates of Maharat. Additional funded congregational hires are pending. The initiative provides support to the scholars for two years.

Micah Philanthropies funds one-third of the scholars' salaries and their congregations pay the remaining two-thirds. The first cohort of scholars was employed part-time with salaries of up to \$30,000. For the second cohort, the synagogues received grants from the foundation ranging from \$10,000 to \$33,000 per year for up to two years of funding, meaning that each congregation would match its grant with \$20,000 to \$66,000 per year. In total, full-time scholars received salaries approaching \$100,000 each. Some of the part-time scholars worked remotely.

"Each congregation's leaders understand their own community's needs better than we do," Lazar Price said. "We leave the hiring process to them, as well as the breakdown of how much of the Devorah Scholar's leadership is demonstrated in person versus online."

Non-Orthodox denominations have ordained women for decades, and the question of whether Orthodox synagogues should hire women as members of the clergy has been a pressing issue for the community since 2009. That year, Rabbi Avi Weiss of the Bronx neighborhood of Riverdale, New York, ordained Rabba Sara Hurwitz and founded Yeshivat Maharat, which trains Orthodox women clergy on par with men. Other Orthodox programs in Israel also offer women ordination.

But large parts of the centrist Orthodox world — as well as virtually all Haredi Jews — oppose the notion that women can receive

rabbinic ordination, which historically has been the province of men. In 2015, the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America prohibited the ordination of women rabbis, and two years later, the Orthodox Union, a U.S. umbrella group, published a Jewish legal ruling barring women from serving as clergy in its member synagogues.

Before Devorah Scholars was created, Congregation Beth Sholom assessed its members' comfort with women serving as clergy. Thanks to the efforts of former congregational president Brauna Doidge, the rabbi said, the congregation brought in women scholars for one-off events, a test of the community's possible reaction to having female clergy down the road. Over the course of various programs, the leadership and congregation tried to pinpoint their comfort level with that idea, and identified other ways to be more inclusive of women — including adding more women to the ritual committee and establishing a greater measure of gender parity in the congregation's board.

"What we also saw is that people were really excited about the women we brought in," Dolinger said. "Even some of the people that were more critical, would say 'Look, I'm not really for this, this is not my style, it's not what I like, and it makes me uncomfortable. But I see how much it excites this other 60% of the shul.'"

All of these experiences helped build the foundation for the synagogue's next conversations about the Devorah Scholars, he said, "because we had an experience to compare with, as opposed to some imaginary thing that could be kind of fearful to people."

The mission of the Devorah Scholars dovetails with that of Micah Philanthropies, which is based in western Massachusetts and run by husband and wife Jeremy and Ann Pava. (Coincidentally, the Pavas' daughter and daughter-in-law are both also named Devorah.)

Micah Philanthropies is also named after the biblical book of the same name, which contains a verse that is integral to the foundation's approach, Ann Pava told eJP, quoting, "'He has told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.' We try to

really put that front and center of everything that we do," Pava said.

Pava said that the initiative is meaningful to her in part because in her experience, people often feel more comfortable consulting with someone of the same gender.

"It takes away the embarrassment factor," she said. "There are some things that in a million years, me or other women like me would not go to our rabbi with a question [about]. But you wouldn't hesitate to go if there was a woman who you could confide in."

Another important role for women clergy, she said, is to provide a welcoming and caring community on the women's side of the *mehitza*, which she said can feel neglected.

"There is this incredible sense of camaraderie that goes on in the men's section," Pava said. "The rabbi says hello to everybody when they come in, and the *gabbai* says, 'Would you like an *aliyah* today?', and people shake your hand. And the women come in and they're sort of sitting by themselves in the back."

Her synagogue, the Young Israel of West Hartford, Conn., now employs Ruthie Braffman Shulman, a Devorah Scholar from the first cohort, as the inaugural Young Israel community scholar and *yoetzet halacha* (or Jewish legal advisor). Braffman Shulman "greeted and shook hands and welcomed everybody as they walked in, in the same way that men are getting welcomed when they walk into a shul," Pava said. She added that when there are female clergy on the women's side of the *mehitza* "to sing with you and to celebrate and to talk to your family members, and to tell everybody what page you are on... it makes a huge difference. And I never thought about it until I saw what a difference it made once it was happening in synagogues."

Braffman Shulman, who studied in Yeshiva University's advanced Talmud program, remembers similar incidents at other synagogues where she worked. At one, she encouraged a newly engaged woman and her family to dance in celebration, mirroring the dancing already underway on the men's side of the sanctuary. At another, she made sure the chairs in the women's section were rearranged to make their side

less cramped. “The women were being left out, or their comfort was not considered,” she told eJP.

Braffman Shulman added that serving as a female clergy member “can be very lonely work,” but said that the Devorah Scholars program provided a natural community of colleagues to confer with and share ideas.

“Usually we’re working in a heavily male space and I do talk to and bounce ideas off of other male rabbis, but not other women in this area,” she said. “Having the Devorah scholarship was so lovely, to have a women’s cohort to talk about similar issues that we might be going through, challenges and the ups and downs and sharing our successes as well. It was a wonderful resource for connection, support and networking that previously I really didn’t have.”

When Beth Sholom applied for the Devorah Scholars program, the congregation had grown to about 90 families, and Dolinger — who was “not quite full-time,” in his words — needed help. When the synagogue board found grant money for a staff position — together with funding from the Devorah Scholars — synagogue leadership was able to persuade people who might have felt lukewarm about the idea of women’s leadership to approve the hire because it provided help for Dolinger.

The synagogue has concluded its term with the Devorah Scholars program, but is keeping the female clergy position it created, Dolinger said. The leadership found a family to endow a part-time women’s clergy position for the synagogue moving forward.

“It wasn’t as bad as opponents feared

it might be,” Dolinger said. “And it really did inspire attendance, engagement, enthusiasm — people that belonged but weren’t excited about coming got excited about coming. And it catalyzed other changes.”

The synagogue began hosting women’s *megillah* readings, has called women to the Torah on Simchat Torah and more.

“While the female clergy we’ve brought to the synagogue have connected with all our members, in particular they’ve served as new models of leadership to the women and girls in the community,” said Doidge, the synagogue’s immediate past president. “Our female clergy have invigorated our women’s ritual experiences, and propelled us to create new and meaningful rituals for women in an Orthodox setting.” ♦

JANUARY 10, 2023

## How an uncommon group for Jewish fathers formed — and folded — in Connecticut

*Fathers First launched in September 2008 and stopped meeting eight years later*

By Jay Deitcher

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

When Rabbi Dovid Hordiner pitched the idea for a fathers’ support and study group to his boss, Aviva Deren, the founding director of Gan Yeladim Early Childhood Center, a Stamford, Conn., Chabad school, she thought it would bomb.

“I wanted to see people who were working for me succeed,” Deren told *eJewishPhilanthropy*, “and to give them room to make their own decisions and their own mistakes. And my thought about this group to begin with was, ‘What can we do

to let Reb Dovid down gently? This thing is going to crash. There’s no way this is going to work.”

But Hordiner, who also has three master’s degrees in subspecialties of education and child development, pressed on. “I wholeheartedly believe that [these groups are] something that needs to happen,” he told eJP. “I know that I often feel kind of alone sometimes. And I’m sure there are others who feel that way too.”

Even though she was skeptical of its chances of success, Deren gave the dads’ group initiative a thumbs-up, telling eJP that historically, society has viewed dads as “props,” she said, not essential caretakers.

But “over the years,” she added, “fathers are more involved than they used to be [in their kids’ lives], no question.” She came up with the name Fathers First for the dads’ group because “we wanted to give the message that who you are as a father comes first in your life. That should be the most important thing.”

For eight years, the fathers’ group that seemed unlikely to last became a small-scale success story for the school, drawing a consistent crowd of dads to a program focused on their experiences that, organizers and others say, is a rarity in Orthodox spaces. But by 2016, Fathers First was gone, and an attempt to recreate it elsewhere fizzled —

even though educational professionals told eJP there should be more groups like it.

There is “a dearth of parenting [support] in general, and for fathers in particular,” Tricia Stern, a psychotherapist and the vice president of Child and Adolescent Mental Health for the Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies, told eJP. “Even before COVID — parenting is hard. Raising children is hard. And I just wish [support] was more normalized.”

The Fathers First group fit with the goals of the school, which were to provide quality education to entire families, not just children, said Deren. The school had recently received a grant from The Jewish Early Childhood Education Initiative, a program that aimed to draw families into Jewish early childhood education programs by employing best educational practices and engaging the entire family in Jewish living — including by providing consultants on site. The program — which gave the school roughly \$20,000 to \$30,000 over two years from a consortium including the Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life, the Harold Grinspoon Foundation, and the Samuel Bronfman Foundation — also empowered family members to take on leadership positions in the schools.

By the time Hordiner began working at Gan Yeladim in 2007, he discovered that mothers and children often had supports including classes and support groups that fostered community, but fathers didn’t. He also felt that targeting dads was unique. There was no blueprint. “I didn’t find a lot of people doing these kinds of things at all,” he told eJP.

Fathers First launched in September 2008, with eight to 15 dads initially gathering together four times during the school year at different members’ houses in the evening to discuss parenting and Torah. The initiative cost Gan Yeladim very little; Hordiner was a salaried employee, so all the school needed to pay for was snacks and beverages.

“It was *heimish*,” Hordiner said, using a Yiddish term connoting hominess, informality and warmth. “People would come into the house and there would be socializing, food, drink, a little bit of hanging out.” His goals for the program were to create “a place where fathers can get together, get to know each other, be part of a community,

build friendships.” The makeup of the group crossed denominations; some participants were Orthodox, others were not.

“It was a very unusual thing to have a man in a prominent role in children’s education,” Deren said. Since Hordiner had grown up non-observant and was also trying to be thoughtful about his parenting, she felt his personal example demonstrated “lifelong learning as a way of life and growing.”

Topics discussed at gatherings ranged from “Effective Discipline: Parenting with Love and Values” to “Fathering in Tough Economic Times” or “Breakfast, Dinner, and Shabbat: The Role of Mealtime When Raising a Family.” The sessions also covered marriage and childcare, and therapists were frequent guest speakers. Members sat in a circle and “either share[d] something that worked for them,” Hordiner said, “or they would share a struggle or a challenge and then the group would respond to each other... It was a safe space for many. Fathers really did make themselves vulnerable.”

Marc Nerenberg, a group member who joined in 2015 when his kids were ages 1 and 3, at first found it “weird to talk about being a dad,” he told eJP, but soon he was opening up to the group: seeking advice, discussing bedtime concerns and how to get out of his own head so he could focus on his kids’ needs. On TV, he said, he was used to seeing fathers portrayed as useless dolts, chugging beer all day in recliners while mothers coddled them and the babies. He felt Fathers First represented men pushing against the trope of inept fathers.

The connections participants made during the group’s meetings spread through the community. Soon, they were meeting weekly with Hordiner for a Torah study group. Deren remembers a Simchat Torah celebration where the group was pressed up against the *bimah*, dancing and singing together, as their kids slept in the pews.

“Many synagogues have a challenge around preschool, early childhood programs, where the parents of these programs don’t necessarily come to synagogue events,” said Rabbi Levi Mendelow, the director of Adult Education at Chabad of New Canaan, Conn., who worked closely with Hordiner. “Sometimes these communities can become quite compartmentalized. This Fathers First group had this effect of creating

synchronicity between the various different elements of a larger organization.”

Deren said that she was “blown away by the response that he got... There are not that many opportunities, especially for a guy who doesn’t like football, for men to come together in a meaningful way as men as fathers.”

But in 2016, Hordiner left the community for a new position at the Tzohar Seminary, a gap-year program for young women to study art and Torah in Pittsburgh, and the group shuttered. He hoped to start the group in his new home, so in mid-May 2016, he sent a proposal for a similar group to the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh.

Instead of going through the official funding portal, he contacted an employee he knew directly, proposing three Fathers First groups serving different local communities with an overall budget of \$14,720, covering his work, travel, marketing and a website. Many follow-ups later, in mid-August, he received a reply:

“As truly excited as I am about the possibility of launching a fathers initiative,” the federation employee wrote, “I have not quite had the type of response I was hoping for from the [Early Childhood] Directors. There is a possibility that one or two EC centers are interested in co-collaborating together on this new initiative but, nothing definitive has been decided as yet. Clearly, this ambiguity offers you no help in planning for your year and for this I do apologize.”

With that, Hordiner’s hopes to launch a new Fathers First initiative fizzled away. “I just moved on [with] my life,” he said, always thinking, “maybe someday, maybe someday.”

Laura Cherner, the director of the Community Relations Council at the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh, told eJP that she believes that if he decided to pitch the program through the official portal, a fathers’ group led by Hordiner, who has partnered with the federation for other programs, would be seriously considered. “I can’t think off the top of my head of fathers’ groups that are equivalent to the several mothers’ groups that I know of,” she said. “So I could definitely see a need for that. Anytime we can empower fathers and children, I think that’s like a wonderful initiative.”

Even though the original Fathers First failed to last, the community it helped birth thrived. “I still hang out with a lot of the guys that went to Fathers First because we’ve just become better friends over time,” Nerenberg said. The mothers and kids became friends, too. Social circles formed. The fathers and children matured and grew. “If you ask our wives [how this community was formed], it’s not that a whole bunch of moms got together, it’s that a whole bunch of dads became friends,” he said.

His teachings stick with the fathers he

worked with, said Lael Shapiro, a dad who attended the group for six years, first joining when his daughter was about to turn 2, six weeks before his son was born. He now considers himself a mindful parent who tries to lead by example.

“He made me want to be better,” Shapiro said. “There’s one lesson in particular that really stuck with me that I still think about all the time. And that was a discussion about how for every negative thing that we say to our kids, it takes eight positives to undo that one. So we need to be really careful in what

we say to our kids and how we say it.”

Hordiner left his mark on the school. “This particular group was the brainchild and the baby of Dovid Hordiner, so when he left it wasn’t picked up,” said Mendelow, but “the goal of engaging with families and with fathers and with learning still remains as part of Chabad of Stamford to this day. And part of that is because [Hordiner’s] success in this area made an indelible imprint that will always be felt in the community.” ♦