

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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The U.S. diplomat seeking justice for Holocaust survivors

Ellen Germain, the U.S. special envoy for Holocaust issues, says the work is more important than ever as Holocaust survivors age

By Gabby Deutch

Like many American Jews, Ellen Germain grew up hearing about family members who perished in the Holocaust. When her great-grandfather immigrated to the U.S. from Poland in 1904, he left behind his two brothers and their families. Everyone who remained in Europe was killed by the Nazis.

Germain took an interest in her family history, eventually digging into genealogy research to learn more about the relatives who were slaughtered simply for being Jewish in their home country. Later, as a U.S. diplomat, Germain would spend three years in Krakow, Poland, where she learned the language of her uncles and cousins — and some of their killers.

“Those brothers, Shlomke and Joske

Gutferd, lived in Radzilow and Szczuczyn, in northeast Poland, and I want to say their names because I feel like no one else remembers them anymore,” said Germain.

Germain's mother was a child during World War II. She once told Germain her memory of coming home from school one day to find her own mother and aunts and uncles huddled around the kitchen table, crying. One of her relatives in Poland, a promising yeshiva student, had been gunned down in the street by Nazis.

“They'd gotten a letter from relatives in Poland telling them he was shot,” Germain recalled. “So when I talk about the importance of accurate Holocaust commemoration and education, it's something I really care about.”

After more than 25 years as a career member of the Senior Foreign Service, Germain's latest posting in some ways feels like the job she was always meant to do. Since 2021, she has served as the U.S. special envoy for Holocaust issues. She leads a State Department team that aims to return Holocaust-era assets to survivors and help them receive compensation for evils perpetrated against them by Nazis and Nazi sympathizers. She also promotes Holocaust education and remembrance around the world.

“Doing this job as special envoy for Holocaust issues feels very personal to me because it feels like I'm doing something to remember them,” she said of Shlomke and Joske, “and all the other victims whose

names no one knows.”

Nearly eight decades after the Holocaust, the number of survivors of Nazi atrocities dwindles each year — and many die before receiving restitution that they’ve sought for decades. Of the 275,000 Holocaust survivors alive today, more than one-third live in poverty, advocates say.

“We like to say our mission is seeking a measure of justice for Holocaust survivors and their heirs,” Germain, who is 60, told *Jewish Insider* in a Zoom interview last week ahead of International Holocaust Remembrance Day, which falls on Friday.

Germain often hears from people who are surprised to learn that her position even exists, thinking that the issues she works on might instead fit under the purview of Deborah Lipstadt, the higher-profile special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism. But Lipstadt is a political appointee.

Her first real international experience was as a teenager, when she spent a summer in Israel with Camp Ramah. And while Germain always had an interest in traveling the world, the Foreign Service “is a third or fourth career for me,” she noted. She dropped out of two Ph.D. programs, one in medieval English literature and the other in computer science, and worked as a computer programmer and a science journalist. She signed up for the Foreign Service exam on something of a lark after a friend told her he planned to take it.

Germain’s first posting was in Tel Aviv, and over the years she spent a significant portion of her time on Middle East issues, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian portfolio. But she also focused at times on post-Soviet Eastern Europe, Iraq and the United Nations. The job “is really good for someone like me with a short attention span, because every one to three years you’re moving around and doing something different,” she noted.

Her favorite posting was in Moscow, where she focused on science and technology, including space; a perk was attending rocket launches. But diplomacy is more of an art than a science — for Germain, it’s knowing when and how to pressure an ally, or how to get the issues she handles on the desks of her more senior colleagues in the vast bureaucracy of the State Department.

“I’m not sitting in the office. I don’t know who she calls to get something done

internally. But I do know that things happen,” said Mark Weitzman, chief operating officer at the World Jewish Restitution Organization, an NGO that represents Jews outside of Germany and Austria pursuing claims for the recovery of Jewish property. “It would not be a significant part of U.S. policy if there was not advocacy from within the department.”

Germain’s work might seem morally clear-cut, but diplomatically, the issue is fraught. Diplomatic skills are crucial; the U.S. must have uncomfortable conversations with European allies to urge them to follow through on what Washington sees as the deeply important task of supporting elderly and ailing Holocaust survivors and their families.

“What I deal with is working with governments, generally European governments, to encourage them to set up processes or pass laws so that individuals can file claims for restitution or compensation,” Germain explained.

Washington has for decades been involved in negotiating restitution agreements with nations across Europe. The office of the special envoy for Holocaust issues was created in 1999 at the request of Stuart Eizenstat, the former U.S. ambassador to the European Union and an expert in restitution issues, having negotiated restitution agreements with several European nations. Eizenstat now serves as a special advisor on Holocaust issues to Secretary of State Tony Blinken.

“I don’t think there would be any success in resolving any of these issues without U.S. government support and their initiatives on it. This has been a bipartisan effort,” Weitzman said.

The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, better known as the Claims Conference, was set up in 1951 to secure German reparations, and laid the groundwork for restitution programs that would later be adopted across Europe.

But countries in Central and Eastern Europe generally did not do so until the 1990s or later, after the fall of the Soviet Union, when they began to confront their Nazi-era pasts for the first time. Still, some of those nations even today shy away from reckoning with the role their former leaders or military heroes may have played in the

Holocaust. The result is that those countries — Poland being the most significant example — also are slow to recognize the importance of restitution.

“It’s been 30 years since the fall of the Iron Curtain, so those are countries that are often still constructing their historical narratives,” Germain explained.

“You’ve got, often, historical figures who are considered heroes because they fought the Soviets after World War II. But they also collaborated with the Nazis and were complicit in the crimes of the Holocaust,” she added. “When you have glorification of those kinds of figures, whether it’s in statues, plaques, streets named after them, sports stadiums named after them, that’s not the full story, and generally we encourage countries to, you know, not glorify Nazi war criminals.”

A 2020 report from the State Department issued a troubling assessment of the state of Holocaust restitution. “Bureaucratic inertia has delayed the resolution of too many restitution claims,” the report found. Claims are often not considered in a timely manner, if they even make it to the correct agency. In some countries, the regulations are so stringent that they make it nearly impossible for survivors who no longer live in the country of their birth to receive any restitution. (The vast majority of Holocaust survivors now live in Israel or the U.S.)

In November, Germain and diplomats from 46 other nations gathered in the Czech Republic to take stock of the state of restitution. In 2009, those countries signed on to the Terezin Declaration, which was a groundbreaking statement of support for helping Holocaust survivors receive restitution and compensation.

“Among the immeasurable horrors the Nazis perpetrated against the Jews was their systematic dispossession,” Blinken said in a video address to the November gathering. “The dispossession was part of the stripping away of a person’s humanity – of turning an individual into a number. But it was also part of a mass theft, one just as rigorously orchestrated as the mass extermination.”

Blinken shared the story of his stepfather, Samuel Pisas, a Holocaust survivor who at first viewed West Germany’s offers of compensation as an affront. It was, he felt, too little and too late when so many had

been killed. “And yet, he ultimately decided to file a claim, which was awarded. He never touched the small payment, but later said, ‘It is all I ever got in exchange for my father, my mother and my sister. As such, it is sacred to me,’” Blinken recalled. “For communities, it can affirm that the unspeakable horrors they endured were real, and that those who were complicit or silent were wrong.”

Poland, which had the largest Jewish community before the Holocaust, still has no formal restitution policy. Israel recalled its ambassador to Warsaw in 2021 after Poland passed a law effectively shutting down any avenue to restitution for heirs to the property that belonged to people killed by Nazis in Poland. In 2018, Poland faced a global outcry after considering legislation that would make it illegal to blame Poland for complicity in the Holocaust.

“Germany is responsible for the Holocaust. But in Poland, as in pretty much every other country, there were collaborators, and there were individual Poles, and sometimes many people in the community who either helped the Nazis,” Germain explained, or there were instances “where it does seem that it was the Polish neighbors who killed their Jewish neighbors. Poland has gone back and forth on being able to face up to that.”

The result has been many difficult conversations with Polish officials. But as a diplomat, Germain knows that Washington’s relationship with Warsaw encompasses much more than just the restitution issue — especially in light of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine that began nearly a year ago. Poland has emerged as a critical NATO ally and a welcoming home to many Ukrainian refugees fleeing Russia’s invasion.

“As always, in diplomatic conversations, none of it is done in a vacuum. We’re always cognizant of the current global situation or the current regional situation. But on these issues, we’ve been very consistent in raising them. Because they’re fundamental,” added Germain.

It helps that Germain was head of the U.S. Consulate General in Krakow for three years, during which she learned Polish and often spoke about these same Holocaust issues. Most recently, she served as deputy chief of mission at the U.S. Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

“When you start talking about atrocity prevention and what we can learn from the Holocaust, that has a global reach. And I saw that very clearly when I was in Bosnia and visited Srebrenica,” Germain said, referring to the site of a 1995 massacre of more than 8,000 Muslims by the Serbs. The Serbs’ campaign has widely been described as a genocide. When looking at photos of the massacre, Germain was struck by their similarity to the infamous and horrific images from the Holocaust.

“All of those things bring home to me how important it is to maintain the accurate memory of the Holocaust, both because it was such a horrific and unique tragedy in and of itself, but also so that we can, I really do believe — it sounds a bit Pollyannaish — but so that we can try to learn from it, and maybe try to do better in the future, do better at preventing such things,” said Germain. “It’s both learning from it, but also it’s important to remember and teach about the Holocaust in and of itself, because it’s sadly a defining moment in history, where an entire culture and almost an entire people in Europe were wiped out.”

Germain is the U.S. representative to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, whose working definition of antisemitism has been embraced by governments around the world as a tool for teaching about and identifying antisemitism. The IHRA definition has also faced some pushback from the left due to its assertion that criticism of Israel can veer into antisemitism.

“It’s a very good way of saying, ‘Here are guidelines. Here is how you can recognize antisemitism when you see it, and here are some examples,’” Germain said. The IHRA definition was finalized in 2016 and embraced by former President Donald Trump. Early in his term, President Joe Biden affirmed his administration’s support for it.

Germain acknowledged that sometimes it can be hard for people to differentiate between legitimate criticism of Israel, “like the criticism that one would make of any country,” and “criticism that veers into the antisemitic.”

“The Holocaust, Israel, antisemitism — somehow they are linked up in a variety of ways, and sometimes are linked up in ways

that are clearly, horrifyingly, antisemitic. And the IHRA definition is meant to help the world understand what antisemitism is,” she said. One of IHRA’s examples of antisemitism is “drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.”

Antisemitism is on the rise in the U.S. and Europe, and with that comes an increase in Holocaust denial and distortion. But it isn’t all bad news, Germain insists. This month, the United Arab Emirates pledged to teach about the Holocaust in its schools for the first time.

“It’s really a great announcement and a really encouraging move,” said Germain, who also noted that two Arab nations — Egypt and the UAE — held official Holocaust remembrance events last year for the first time, and plan to do so again this year. “Those are examples of how the Abraham Accords are maybe making it easier to address these issues in the Middle East.”

In Europe, too, there has been progress recently on Holocaust-related issues. Last year, Latvia and Lithuania both passed long-awaited restitution measures.

But at the same time, Russian President Vladimir Putin and other Russian officials continue to use Holocaust analogies to justify his invasion of Ukraine. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov last week compared Western nations’ approach to the war as akin to Germany’s “final solution” in the Holocaust. “Such comments insult the six million Jews murdered and all those who fought and died to end Hitler’s murderous regime. We have to #ProtectTheFacts,” Germain tweeted.

What matters most to Germain is allowing Holocaust survivors to live the rest of their lives with dignity.

“For survivors these days, a certain amount of restitution or compensation is also the acknowledgment that, yes, this house belonged to my great-grandfather, or this was my great-aunt’s seamstress shop,” she said. “I view it as the last chance to really shine a big international spotlight on these issues while there’s still a significant number of survivors who can benefit from some form of restitution or compensation.” ♦

Dani Dayan's efforts to unite Jewish communities

Speaking ahead of International Holocaust Remembrance Day, Yad Vashem Chairman Dani Dayan tells Jewish Insider that Holocaust education can be a unifying force for the Jewish people

By Ruth Marks Eglash

As an immigrant to Israel, a secular former leader of the country's mostly religious settler movement and a former envoy for the Jewish state, Dani Dayan has spent his life bridging divides between Jewish communities.

Appointed chairman of the World Holocaust Remembrance Center, Yad Vashem, a year and a half ago, Dayan, who spent the prior four years as Israel's consul general in New York told *Jewish Insider* that while ensuring the horrors of the Holocaust are never forgotten is not an optimal way of uniting a people, it is a powerful force in overcoming the increasing ideological and religious divisions polarizing world Jewry today.

"One of my mottos is something that I read from a speech given by Menachem Begin in August 1948," Dayan, 67, told *JL*. "He said that the Mediterranean shore is not the limit of our people, it's not the boundary of our people, and I am a great believer in that."

"I'm very passionate about the Israel-Diaspora relationship," he continued, "and I intend to bring that passion for Jewish unity to Yad Vashem."

At a time when division both among and between Jews in Israel and in the U.S. appears more rife than ever, Dayan, who also spoke extensively about witnessing the rise in antisemitism in the U.S. during his four years in New York, said that "Holocaust remembrance, Holocaust education, Holocaust awareness, has the potential to be a unifying force."

Born in Buenos Aires in 1955, Dayan immigrated to Israel as a teenager and today lives in Ma'ale Shomron, a West Bank settlement. He became a well-known public figure between 2007-2015, when he served as chairman of the Yesha Council, an umbrella organization for Israel's West Bank

settlements. Despite being a key leader in the largely religious settlement movement, Dayan has remained secular.

In 2016, Dayan moved to New York and was suddenly struck by weird feelings of déjà vu living once again as a Jew outside of Israel. "I didn't understand how impactful the fact that I was born outside of Israel has been in my life until I arrived in New York," he said. "I believe that it helped me a lot when I was in New York, and I think it will also help me here in Yad Vashem."

While most of his family had already escaped Europe for either Argentina or Israel long before World War II and the horrors of the Holocaust, Dayan still describes himself as "a Jew with deep historical conscience," a factor that is now guiding him at the helm of Holocaust research, education, preservation and remembrance.

Recalling his first day on the job in August 2021, the former envoy said he noticed a quote on the wall in the Museum of Art that quickly became his *modus operandi*. The quote, which Dayan later had etched onto a wall in his office, comes from the last will and testament of a Jewish painter who perished in the Warsaw Ghetto.

"As I stand on the border between life and death, certain that I will not remain alive, I wish to take leave from my friends and my works.... My works I bequeath to the Jewish museum to be built after the war..." reads Gela Seksztajn's words, written in August 1942. She is believed to have died the following year, but no official records of her death exist.

"When I saw that, I understood she was speaking to me and she was speaking about Yad Vashem – even though she did not know there would be a Yad Vashem – and in that moment I realized the responsibility that lies on our shoulders," said Dayan.

During his first few months on the job, Dayan commissioned a team of experts to create a single marketing message that would define Yad Vashem's work and the lessons of the Holocaust, but quickly realized that "it's impossible to have only one message."

"I think that the Shoah is an event so wide, so vast, so multifaceted and the time that has passed since it happened, just 80 years, is basically a blink of an eye in historical terms, that it's impossible to dilute the Holocaust into one message," he admitted. "Our mission is to tell the story in as many innovative and engaging ways as possible, to different audiences, with different techniques."

Dayan's broad approach is reflected in two exhibitions that Yad Vashem is launching this week for International Remembrance Day, which falls on Friday. The first, to be put on display in the Bundestag, the German parliament in Berlin, is a collection of 16 original artifacts from the center's vast archives, each from a different district making up the Federal Republic.

Although he refrained for many years from visiting the country that carried out the Holocaust, Dayan will make his first visit to Germany to inaugurate the exhibition on Tuesday.

"I didn't refrain from visiting Germany out of hate, I refrained from visiting Germany because it helped me remember the terrible things that happened there," he explained. "Now, going there as chairman of Yad Vashem has a huge impact on remembrance, so the same reason – the desire to promote and strengthen remembrance – that prevented me from going to Germany is the reason that brings me to Germany now."

The second exhibition, set to open in the United Nations headquarters in New York on Thursday in the presence of U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, will feature a gigantic Book of Names containing the names of some 4.8 million victims of the Holocaust — the names of all known victims. Created by Yad Vashem for the permanent exhibition located in the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Memorial, placing an additional copy of the book in the halls of the international body, Dayan said, is Yad Vashem's "contribution to reminding the U.N. why it was founded."

In Jerusalem, Dayan shared with JI his future plans for Yad Vashem, from creating an educational center dedicated to remembering Jewish communal life wiped out during the Holocaust to boosting overall education among the country's minority communities — the Haredi and Arab populations.

"Unfortunately, we are approaching the post-survivor era, the post-witness era, obviously, I still hope it will take many more years but inevitably it will come and when that happens the task of Yad Vashem, as the flagship of Holocaust remembrance, will

become much more difficult but also much more important and much more vital," he emphasized.

But, Dayan added, he remains optimistic, highlighting new initiatives, including the establishment of International Holocaust Remembrance Day, and the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), as well as global conferences exploring the Holocaust that have taken place in recent years.

"Today, it's hard to believe that in the previous century, [U.S. special antisemitism envoy] Deborah Lipstadt was taken to court by Holocaust denialist David Irving, who was considered, quote unquote, a respectable person," he said. "Today no serious intellectual, no serious politician, no serious journalist, with the exception of Iran or a few places in the Islamic world, would dare deny the Holocaust."

The biggest dangers today, said Dayan, are Holocaust distortion and trivialization, especially from countries in Europe that continue to downplay their roles in the mass genocide of the Jewish people during the war. He also said that while Holocaust education is not the ultimate cure for rising

antisemitism worldwide, it is an essential part of tackling the phenomenon.

"When I greet dignitaries at Yad Vashem, I tell them that there are many lessons to learn from the Shoah, but I choose to share two with them," Dayan said. "One is the vital necessity of a Jewish state, even at a time when the notion of a nation-state in some quarters is going out of fashion, the Shoah teaches us that we need an independent Jewish sovereign state; the second is about antisemitism."

"I'm not claiming we are in Europe of the 1930s, we are far from it," he continued. "But there is one difference between now and the past, Jewish and not-Jewish, and that difference is that we have experience."

"In the past, they probably thought 'OK, they burn books [and] that's bad, they burn synagogues [and] that's even worse, but they will never burn human beings...' Today we know that they can," said Dayan. "Therefore, the lesson world leaders need to know from the Shoah is that when you see antisemitism don't wait, confront it vigorously, decisively and immediately before it develops into monstrous dimensions that you can't stop." ♦

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'I've never been more optimistic' about the Middle East, Gillibrand says after Abraham Accords trip

The New York legislator traveled to Israel, the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco with a bipartisan group of senators

By Marc Rod

Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) said she's "never been more optimistic than today" about the future of peace and cooperation in the Middle East after returning from a congressional delegation last week to Israel, the United Arab Emirates,

Bahrain and Morocco.

"This was an extremely positive trip and it's one where I felt there was far more hope for a long-term peace solution and a long-term regional alliance than ever before," Gillibrand told *Jewish Insider* on Monday. "It

was probably the most optimistic trip I've taken to Israel in the last 10 years."

The New York senator, who joined Sens. Jacky Rosen (D-NV), James Lankford (R-OK), Michael Bennet (D-CO), Dan Sullivan (R-AK), Mark Kelly (D-AZ) and Ted Budd (R-

NC) in the region, said that both Arab and Israeli leaders were “extremely optimistic” about the future of the Abraham Accords and their potential for the region.

“There is a Middle East peace plan in these opportunities and [President Joe Biden] could create the greatest Middle East peace plan of generations,” Gillibrand said.

She said that each country’s leaders expressed a desire for expanded economic and security cooperation with Israel and the U.S., highlighting in particular the threat of Iran and its proxies.

“[Iran] is a unifying issue,” she said. “And when we met with Prime Minister [Benjamin] Netanyahu, we really reiterated the statements from these [Arab] governments and how their talking points aligned almost exactly with the prime minister’s.”

Israel and Sunni Arab states have generally taken a more hawkish position on Iran than the Biden administration, particularly in opposing nuclear negotiations with Iran. Gillibrand argued that a regional security agreement “could address” the urgent questions related to Iran’s nuclear ambitions and said she’d like to meet with the administration and Biden to discuss the subject.

She said that working to “deepen and strengthen” the Accords “has to be a very significant high priority” for herself and the Senate as well.

Gillibrand added that “you would be blown away” by the existing defense cooperation among the new allies. She cautioned, however, that “we have a lot of work to do” to create a deeper national security alliance between the UAE and the U.S. in particular, given the UAE’s continuing relationship with China, which she said would have to be curtailed.

The New York senator said she has already discussed pathways for expanding collaboration with National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and U.S. Ambassador to Israel Tom Nides. She also proposed formally bringing Jordan and Egypt into the Abraham Accords and floated the idea of adding Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to the pact — although she said the delegation’s focus was on deepening existing relationships rather than adding new countries to the Accords.

She said that Netanyahu was “extremely optimistic” about the prospect of adding Saudi Arabia to the agreements — “he [said], ‘This is weeks and months away, not years.’”

“From my perspective, I could only imagine some normalization if it was part of a much larger Middle East peace plan that was entirely about regional security, regional economic alliances and a plan to support the Palestinian people as something the Arab countries would put [o]nto the table,” she continued.

Gillibrand described the possibility of expanded Arab support for the Palestinians through the Accords as a potential “game-changer.”

“I think that the real takeaway for me is that what these Arab countries can do for America is to really help stabilize the region, No. 1, and No. 2, support Palestinian well-being,” she said.

Israeli policy with regard to the Palestinians — particularly relating to the status of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem — has already created friction with Jordan and the United Arab Emirates in the first weeks of Netanyahu’s new government.

Gillibrand told JI that Netanyahu “made assurances that his government follows his lead” on Palestinian issues, adding, “I think he was trying to very directly say to us that, despite perspectives of some members of his coalition government, it is his judgment that is relevant.”

The junior New York senator downplayed a report from early in the trip by Axios that Rosen had requested that the delegation not meet with two controversial far-right members of Netanyahu’s coalition government, ministers Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich. The group met with Opposition Leader and former Prime Minister Yair Lapid, President Isaac Herzog and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant in addition to Netanyahu.

Gillibrand said that the group “never planned to meet with other parties within the government,” that “wasn’t part of what our goals were” and such meetings “would not have been on our agenda regardless.”

Rosen largely sidestepped the issue during a CNN interview last night, emphasizing that they spoke with “all the high-level officials” in Israel and “were quite firm... about not doing anything that

would change the status quo and that would impede the process of a negotiated two-state solution.”

Lankford, asked on CNN if he had concerns about Ben Gvir and others in the coalition, responded that the members were elected by the Israeli people. “The United States continues to be able to stand with Israel regardless” of who is in the government, he said, also alluding to “frank conversations... privately” with officials from each of the Abraham Accords countries about points of concern in each country.

“Everything that we were focused in on is how do we continue to advance the Abraham Accords,” he added. ♦

Rosen highlights potential for air- and missile-defense, water projects through Abraham Accords

The Nevada senator told Jewish Insider she's planning to focus on those two areas as part of her efforts to strengthen and deepen the Abraham Accords this year

By Marc Rod

Sen. Jacky Rosen (D-NV), who returned last weekend from leading a group of fellow senators on a delegation to Abraham Accords member countries, told *Jewish Insider* yesterday that she sees opportunities for the Senate to work this year on efforts to expand Middle East cooperation on air-defense and water-resiliency projects through the Arab-Israeli agreements.

It's "particularly important that we continue to work and build on" the DEFEND Act — passed last year to promote regional air- and missile-defense cooperation, Rosen told *Jewish Insider* yesterday, following a press conference with other members of the delegation.

Rosen noted that several members of the delegation — herself and Sens. Mark Kelly (D-AZ), Dan Sullivan (R-AK) and Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) — are members of the Armed Services Committee, making them well-placed to work on the project, and said they'll be meeting with with Armed Services Committee Chair Jack Reed (D-RI) later this week to discuss the issue further. "I'm sure a lot of others are interested as well as we begin this year's National Defense Authorization [Act] process," she added.

She also mentioned possibilities for expanding collaboration to protect waterways in the Gulf. The group met with leaders from Morocco, Bahrain, the UAE, Israel and the Palestinian Authority, as well as U.S. military personnel in Bahrain and the UAE, and visited the Abrahamic Family House, a multifaith complex in Abu Dhabi.

Sullivan said during the press conference that he sees an "enormous opportunity to do more" and that the air-defense would "directly address... the biggest threat in the region," referring to Iran. The delegation

members highlighted that Iran was a top concern for all of the leaders the group spoke with, including Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh, according to Sullivan.

Sullivan said that the officials in the United Arab Emirates told the group they were "upset" that they felt the Biden administration had failed to respond to an attack a year ago by Iran-backed Houthi militants that killed three people in Abu Dhabi. Sen. Ted Budd (R-NC) echoed that message, saying that the group heard "again and again and again... the fear among our Middle East allies that America is not going to have [their] back."

But Sullivan also cautioned that any Chinese involvement — including that of telecommunications company Huawei — in the participant countries' security and military communication systems would be a deal-breaker for U.S. participation in any joint air-defense projects

Rosen further highlighted to JI possibilities for cooperative water resiliency projects in the Middle East, which she noted could also help the drought-stricken states of several of the delegation members. Several senators noted Israel's specialty in innovative irrigation and agricultural projects.

"In the Middle East, water, water, water — they don't have it," she said. "And so what they've done to improve their conservation, what they've done in desalinization, how they modified and improved their farming... wastewater treatment, really important. I think there's a lot of lessons that we can learn."

Rosen told JI she thinks projects like this are the best path to facilitating further expansion of the agreements — focusing

on the current relationships to deliver "tangible results... to show the benefit" of the agreements to other prospective members.

During the press conference, Rosen and Sen. James Lankford (R-OK), who co-led the delegation, again downplayed a report that Rosen had specifically requested not to meet with controversial far-right members of the Israeli government.

Rosen told JI that she and Lankford have been planning the trip for a year — well before the new government took office — and that they met with "high-level government officials" at each stop, painting the controversial ministers as "mid-level members" of the government.

Lankford added that he had never met with an Israeli finance minister — the job held now by Bezalel Smotrich — on any of the five trips he's made to Israel. "It's fascinating to me the media buzz on who we didn't meet with, rather than what we actually did," he said. "There's, what, 117 members of the Knesset we didn't meet with?... We're meeting with all the key people."

Rosen subsequently told JI that some Arab leaders had raised questions about Israeli policy toward the Palestinians, which has created flashpoints between Israel and its Arab allies in the first weeks of the new government.

"What every leader said is that they wanted to be sure that there was nothing that was going to be done that would impede both the Abraham Accords and the path to a negotiated two-state solution," Rosen said. "We spoke with Prime Minister [Benjamin] Netanyahu and our delegation was very clear about keeping the status quo [in Israeli-Palestinian affairs] and not doing anything that would sacrifice or get in

the way of a negotiated two-state solution. He heard us loud and clear, we're going to continue to... let him know how we feel."

The Nevada senator said during the press conference that the group had also urged Israel to "do more to combat Russian aggression in Ukraine" — an issue that has created some daylight between pro-Israel American lawmakers and the new Israeli government.

Generally, the members of the delegation sounded a positive note about prospects for the Middle East, echoing comments by Gillibrand to *Jl* the day prior.

"When it comes to the Abraham Accords, in the 14 years that I've been going to the Middle East, I don't think I've ever been as encouraged by the progress that I've

seen," Sen. Michael Bennet (D-CO) said, highlighting increased trade and travel among the new partners. He offered the caveat, though, that "we have a long, long way to go."

Kelly added the group's meeting with Palestinian Authority leadership "highlighted to me that there is a lot more work to do, not just with the Abraham Accords."

Lankford acknowledged a continued "difference of opinion" between the Arab nations' leaders — who support the Accords — and their citizens — who have been more reluctant to accept the agreements, but emphasized that "we're going to work through this, understanding that this is a generational shift that's there" and that the

process will take time.

Bennet highlighted that most of the group's meetings included discussions of rising antisemitism, demonstrating "real possibilities that might arise with the people-to-people engagements that are going to be made possible as a result of the Abraham Accords."

Lankford noted that the delegation's flight, on a military aircraft from the UAE to Israel over Saudi airspace, is the first time a U.S. military aircraft has ever made such a flight, itself a sign of regional progress.

Ed. note: This post was updated at 11:30 a.m. ET on 1/25/23 to reflect Rosen's description of the implementation of the DEFEND Act. ♦

JANUARY 20, 2023

Matt Dolan's second shot at the Senate

Dolan was first out of the gate in announcing that he would run for the seat held by Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-OH)

By Matthew Kassel

During the last election cycle, Matt Dolan, a Republican state senator in Ohio, took his time weighing a bid for the U.S. Senate, embarking on a statewide listening tour as a prelude to launching his campaign to succeed retired Sen. Rob Portman (R-OH), a like-minded moderate conservative. Dolan, who jumped into the race months after his opponents had declared their candidacies, ultimately finished third in the Republican primary.

The 58-year-old state legislator from suburban Cleveland is now moving at a swifter pace as he seeks to position himself for a more favorable outcome in 2024. Earlier this week, Dolan was first out of the gate in announcing that he would run for the seat held by Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-OH), a three-

term Democratic incumbent and former longtime congressman who is expected to face a competitive reelection campaign.

"I think I have a record that I can prosecute Sherrod Brown's case and also say, 'Here's what I've done,'" Dolan, who chairs the Ohio Senate's finance committee, said in an interview with *Jewish Insider* on Thursday. "Though I haven't spent 30 years in Washington, in my shorter period of time in Columbus I've been able to get things done."

He argued that Brown's record in Washington is "out of step and out of touch with Ohio," citing recent remarks in which the senator claimed that he does not "hear much about immigration from voters, except for people on the far right."

To Dolan, such comments were dismissive of what he regards as a pressing matter. "Our southern border is a security issue, it's a humanitarian crisis, and it's an economic issue," he told *Jl*. "How are we going to solve those problems if our senator doesn't even recognize those problems?"

A spokesperson for Brown's office did not respond to a request for comment from *Jl*.

As much as Dolan takes issue with Brown's leadership, however, he also believes the GOP has suffered from its own self-inflicted wounds that contributed to an especially dismal performance in the midterms, where Republican losses in crucial swing states such as Georgia and Pennsylvania cost the party a coveted

majority in the upper chamber.

Even as recent voting trends in Ohio have favored Republican candidates for statewide office, Dolan warned that the results of the last election should serve as a cautionary tale as Republican leaders begin enlisting recruits for the coming cycle.

“When, nationally, Republicans nominated candidates who were looking to the past, they lost,” he said. “As a result of losing, we didn’t gain the majority. In fact, we lost ground in the Senate and we barely have a majority in the House. That frustrates me that that’s what we’re doing because we can’t change some of these problems.”

In his last race, Dolan distinguished himself as the lone Republican candidate who claimed he was uninterested in courting an endorsement from former President Donald Trump. J.D. Vance, the Republican who nabbed Trump’s support, won the primary by a wide margin and went on to claim victory in the general election by an even slimmer one. He was sworn into the Senate earlier this month.

Dolan made no indication that he is eager to win Trump’s backing in his second campaign, even as he has looked positively upon some of the former president’s achievements, particularly in the Middle East.

In the interview with JI, he cast himself as a fiscal conservative who is in favor of “low taxes,” “limited government,” “less regulation” and “educational choice,” among other things. “These are all Republican truisms,” he said, “and I believe I have a conservative record.”

Still, Dolan suggested that the conservative label as he sees it has been diluted in a party where such issues have frequently taken a back seat to culture war debates, partisan flamethrowing and conspiracy theories espoused by hard-right lawmakers who have gained prominence in both chambers of Congress.

“What does that mean anymore?” he said. “What is a conservative? Is it loyalty to a person? Is it you have to just be louder than the next person to be more conservative? I don’t know. But I do know this, that if we don’t elect Republicans, like me, who want to go and engage and implement these conservative principles, we’re going to go backwards.”

With well over a year until the primary, Dolan so far has the lane to himself, but the field is likely to grow in the coming months as a number of potential GOP challengers are reportedly mulling bids of their own, including Bernie Moreno, a Cleveland businessman who briefly ran for Senate last year. (He did not respond to a text message from JI seeking comment.)

Dolan, whose family owns the Cleveland Guardians baseball team, has indicated that he will self-fund as he did last cycle, when he spent \$11 million on his campaign.

Dolan has served in the Ohio Senate since 2017 and before that spent five years as a state representative. After his defeat in the Republican primary last summer — where he benefited from a late polling surge in the final weeks of the race that caught some election forecasters by surprise — he launched a new super PAC, Ohio Matters, to boost traditional conservative candidates like himself.

He also took his first trip to Israel in August last year on a week-long state senate delegation focused on the country’s innovation economy as well as potential partnerships with Ohio. Dolan said he was impressed with “the economic opportunities that Israel is developing” and how business leaders he met in Tel Aviv are “taking a lead in technology.”

“Because of its size, for these investments to pay off, they have to be able to scale them worldwide,” he said. “So it’s really, really interesting that Israelis are truly into relationship-building, because that helps the entrepreneurs who are there.”

Dolan said he arrived in Israel a day before Palestinian militants had fired rockets into Israel from Gaza. “Then the day after I left Israel, there was a terrorist attack [near] the Western Wall,” he told JI. “You begin to understand the daily concern and diligence that Israelis have to live with.”

His own experience visiting the Western Wall in Jerusalem, he told JI, was more positive. “We had the opportunity to go up on a roof at the Western Wall, and we could see people praying at the Western Wall and we could see the Muslim prayers going on on the other side of the wall,” Dolan recalled. “You start to realize, we shouldn’t be all that far apart.”

Howie Beigelman, executive director of

the nonprofit Ohio Jewish Communities, which co-sponsored the delegation to Israel, said in an email to JI that Dolan “left the mission feeling like ‘the world was a much smaller place’ thanks to the connections made and lessons learned,” adding: “He told us the trip was a ‘wonderful lifetime experience’ to learn more about ‘Israel’s rich history along with its current opportunities and challenges.’”

From a business standpoint, Dolan “was particularly interested in Israel’s success in workforce development,” Beigelman said, “both by the outsized returns Israel sees on its government investment in economic development as well as efforts in Israel by universities, political leaders and private industry to help provide more opportunities at advancement to disadvantaged populations who sometimes seem to miss out on the middle class dream.”

“I think those are areas he’s deeply engaged in, and has true expertise in, from a policy point of view,” Beigelman added. “They’re areas where I see — and I think he also does — the most benefit to Ohio from deeper collaboration with Israeli innovators.”

While Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has drawn criticism for including controversial far-right figures in his new governing coalition, Dolan was, for his part, diplomatic in addressing the political dynamic in the Knesset. “I think this should go beyond party politics and recognize that Israel is our staunch ally, our friend, is a bastion of democracy and freedom, and simply wants to exist,” he argued. “Every nation has their own internal political struggles. Is someone going too far? Is someone not going far enough? That clearly exists here in the United States.”

“But in foreign relations, we need to rise above that and have the common goal of the common good, and that is, we need to protect Israel,” he concluded. “That is, we want a Middle East that’s growing economically. We want peace and economics to drive it, and anything else is not acceptable.”

He praised the Abraham Accords, which helped normalize diplomatic relations between Israel and several Arab countries, as emblematic of such goals.

“The Abraham Accords were not just peace accords, but they were economic

opportunities,” Dolan explained. “The best way to prevent somebody from becoming a jihadist is to give him a job, give him a reason to stay home and support their family and create economic opportunities. All of a sudden, you don’t see each other as the enemy, you see each other with opportunities. That’s what we created in the Middle East.”

Withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal in 2018 — as Trump did — was another development that Dolan characterized as an advancement for Middle East stability. “It’s about security at home and it’s about security abroad,” he said. “How in the world, if we’re going to call each other allies and friends, can the United States support a deal that would provide nuclear weapons in 10 years for a nation that openly wants to eliminate Israel? That’s just not how allies treat each other.”

He cast his opposition to the Iran nuclear agreement as a central point of distinction

between himself and Brown, who supported the deal when it was brokered by the Obama administration. More recently, Brown has expressed skepticism of the Biden administration’s halting effort to reenter the deal.

But Dolan also described some disagreements over foreign policy with members of his own party, including Vance, who have endorsed an isolationist approach to U.S. investment abroad, not least in Ukraine. “I am for supporting the Ukrainian effort with American resources,” Dolan said, “so that we make a strong statement to tyrants all over the world that any invasion of other countries is not going to be sat idly by.”

“I am a strong believer that America needs to be a presence in the world,” he insisted. “It’s not to decide not to engage in wars. It’s not to change regimes. It’s to maintain law and order.”

Dolan said he would apply the same

level of diligence to countering a rise in antisemitic hate crimes in the U.S., noting that as a state senator he has helped approve security funding for Jewish schools and synagogues in Ohio. “They face it every day here,” he told JI. “Antisemitism is real and it’s painful.”

In the coming months, Dolan insisted that he would abide by a simple formula as he seeks to convince Republicans that he is best equipped to compete in the general election.

“I will continue to do what I do, and that is be my own person, go out and get my message out to folks, raise the money necessary to spread the word at the appropriate time, and make sure that the Republicans understand that we don’t have the majority when we should have had it,” he told JI. “To get the majority, we need candidates like me who can stand up to Sherrod Brown.” ♦

JANUARY 27, 2023

Carnegie Hall concert showcases music composed by victims of the Holocaust

“We Are Here: Songs From the Holocaust,” brings together Grammy- and Tony-winning artists for a performance of pieces taken from 14 Shoah songbooks

By **Tori Bergel**

They are songs in the key of life — and death. Culled from 14 songbooks written by Jewish composers in concentration camps and ghettos, the songs — a requiem, Yiddish ballads, poems set to music, popular tunes — formed the backbone of last night’s sold-out concert at Carnegie Hall, “We Are Here: Songs From the Holocaust,” on the eve of International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

In an auditorium that has hosted the likes of The Beatles, Judy Garland and Ella Fitzgerald, Holocaust survivors received applause rivaling Broadway stars, and the voices of victims long gone were given a second chance to tell their stories.

The second piece performed, “Filing,” composed by Shmerke Kaczerginski, was a heartbreaking duet about Kaczerginski’s first spring without his wife, who was killed

in April 1943. Cantors Dan Mutlu and Rachel Brook performed the piece in eerie harmony, standing next to each other at center stage amid a six-piece ensemble.

“Springtime,” they sang, to the bated breath of the audience. “I’m drowning in my sorrow. There’s no tomorrow, since you’ve gone away.”

In contrast, “Zog Nit Keyn Mol,” which came directly after intermission, played

like a pop anthem. A “battelsong for peace” written by Hirsh Glik as a protest song after the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the performance showcased 12 singers displaying the very best of their talent, with trills and vocal runs at every turn.

The room’s mood lifted immediately, not only because of the jovial atmosphere, but because of the camaraderie clearly present on stage. Whenever one of the group gave a particularly impressive show of vocal acrobatics, which was often, those around them would send them a smile or a quick nudge on the shoulder.

Last night’s concert at Carnegie Hall was years in the making, with its origins in 2016, following the death of Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel in his Manhattan home. Nearly 800 miles away in Chicago, the news hit music producer and composer Ira Antelis, who was struck by the magnitude of Wiesel’s impact.

“He was really the voice for all of us growing up that kept the Holocaust alive and relevant, and the whole idea about never forgetting,” Antelis recounted to *Jewish Insider*. “I just started reading about him...he loved music, it said, and he wrote the foreword for this songbook [compiled by Eleanor Moltek and Malke Gottlieb] called ‘We Are Here’ — which is music from the ghettos and the camps.”

Surprised that he was unaware of the compositions despite a lifetime in music, Antelis dove into the book, determined to share the last words of its songwriters; they may have been doomed, but they wouldn’t be silenced.

“To me, being able to bring [the original composers’] music back at a place like Carnegie Hall and honor their memory, aside from my family, my kids, I think it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever been involved with,” Antelis said — a feat which could not have been achieved without show host Rabbi Charles Savenor.

“When the people wrote this music, whether or not they knew that they were going to die, what they wrote about...much of it is uplifting. It’s about family, it’s about relationships, it’s about love, it’s about hope. And again, I think that’s a message that the world needs today,” Savenor said.

Antelis and Savenor first met when Antelis was a member of Savenor’s congregation at the Anshe Emet Synagogue

in Chicago in the late 1990s. The two became friendly but didn’t stay in regular contact until a chance encounter back in 2017, a year after Wiesel’s death.

Antelis, who grew up in Brooklyn, was visiting family when he ran into Savenor on the streets of Manhattan, where Savenor had moved after leaving Anshe Emet in 2001.

“I said, ‘I’m doing this concert with music from the Holocaust and I want to do it in New York, so if I do it, I want you to do it with me,’” Antelis recalled. Savenor, who at the time was teaching a class on Holocaust memoirs at Park Avenue Synagogue, where he was director of congregational education, jumped at the opportunity.

“I had family that was murdered during the Holocaust, and only a couple of years ago did we discover testimony online... about what happened to our family in Lithuania,” Savenor said. “So in some small way, this is a memorial to my family as well, and to anybody else who lost anyone in the Holocaust. This concert gave the opportunity to say, not just what they were thinking as they marched to their deaths, but what were they singing? What was in their hearts?”

If Carnegie Hall was not enough of an undertaking, Antelis was determined to sell out the venue’s nearly 3,000-seat Stern Auditorium/Perelman Stage.

“I’m Ira’s friend, and I thought he was crazy,” Savenor laughed. “He’s like, ‘This music deserves to be played on the most prestigious stage in the world.’ It’s hard to argue with someone who was so convinced by what this music represented, even if it was just a commemoration. But now, it’s a statement of something that’s not about history, but it’s a statement about our moment that we’re living in, and the challenges that we face as a society here in America and around the world.”

Antelis’ determination to fill as many seats as possible was not about clout, but about wanting a space where as many people as possible could come together.

“During the Holocaust, when the United States was turning a blind eye to the Holocaust and what was happening, even Jews in this country were not wanting other Jews to come in,” Antelis said. “I thought, we need to take a stand about all the hate and things that are going on”

A large part of that step forward included choosing a diverse cast of performers and presenters, which included stars such as Harvey Fierstein, Chita Rivera, Andrew Lippa, Shoshana Bean and Brenda Russell, among others. New York Archbishop Cardinal Timothy Dolan and German Consul General David Gill both presented.

“The fact that performers from diverse backgrounds and presenters from different backgrounds said, ‘I want in, I want to participate,’” Savenor said, “is actually the exact statement that we want to make; that the Holocaust, yes, was a war against the Jews, but hatred is a war against everybody and we’re all on the frontlines today.”

The concert was initially to focus solely on Wiesel’s songbook, but after coming across an article by U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum musicologist Bret Werb detailing the 14 others, Antelis reformatted the program. He later partnered with the Illinois Holocaust Museum to help get the show off the ground.

Choosing to highlight one song from each book, alongside a few other wartime compositions, Antelis made sure each piece was by a different songwriter with a different presenter to tell their story. Though the songs have been performed outside of “We Are Here,” they’ve never been set to Antelis’ vision.

One such piece given Antelis’ unique touch was Martin Rosenberg’s “Ten Brothers” requiem. Rosenberg, a Jewish Polish conductor, secretly put on choirs with Jewish inmates during his time in Sachsenhausen. After learning he would be transferred to Auschwitz, Rosenberg wrote “Jüdischer Todessang” or “Jewish death song” inspired by “Tsen Brider,” a Yiddish folk song meaning “Ten Brothers.” Aleksander Kulisiewicz, a non-Jewish prisoner who had befriended Rosenberg, promised to keep the piece alive.

“Kulisiewicz would go and sing a lot of songs on the Holocaust...he literally performed music concerts doing all this, and that was one of the songs,” Antelis said. “In Rosenberg’s mind, he wanted it to be a requiem...so, because of what I do, I’m like, ‘Oh, great, we’re going to take his voice, the

actual Kulisiewicz recording, and I'm going to set a choir to it.' So in the concert, [you] actually hear Kulisiewicz's voice from 1972."

"The whole meaning is that Rosenberg wanted this piece never to be forgotten. And here we are, 80 years later, doing this piece at Carnegie Hall, arguably the most historic venue in the country," he added.

Acting as the show's finale, LaGuardia High School's 120-person choir performed "Jüdischer Todessang" alongside an a cappella recording of Kulisiewicz. Their voices melted together into a symphony of survival, highlighting and harmonizing before finishing to the audience's resounding applause.

Another distinct part to the concert was Antelis' take on "Ani Ma'amin," which Antelis noted as one of Wiesel's favorites.

His version incorporates Wiesel's "Never Shall I Forget" poem from "Night," which was recited by Steven Skybell as the song was sung.

"This music, this concert, represents today standing up, speaking out, singing, against hatred and embracing love, inclusion and acceptance," Savenor said.

This is not Antelis' first altruistic work. During the pandemic he created digital music platform "We Have Loved," as a way to honor the lives that were lost. Even more recently, when Russia invaded Ukraine, Antelis composed "We Sing For Ukraine" to raise relief funds.

"I try to do stuff that works for me in a

world that I know," Antelis said. "I knew I could really put the right pieces in place to do this Carnegie Hall thing."

In the future, Antelis and Savenor hope to bring "We Are Here" to Lithuania for the 80th anniversary of the Vilna ghetto's destruction — some of the songs featured in the show were created during the ghetto's operation. The Lithuanian general counsel will be at tonight's performance.

For now, the pair hopes audiences left the show "inspired to stand up against hate."

"We thought it was a concert, we thought it was an event, and it's becoming an experience that's larger than itself," Savenor said. "I feel privileged and humbled to be a part of it." ♦

JANUARY 23, 2023

Biographer Aidan Levy puts the spotlight on jazz great Sonny Rollins

Seven years in the making, the book is Levy's second published biography and the first to examine Rollins, the legendary tenor saxophonist and composer, with such granularity

By Matthew Kassel

When the author Aidan Levy bought his first jazz album at the age of 11 in the late 1990s, he had no inkling that Sonny Rollins' breakout 1957 masterpiece, *Saxophone Colossus*, would set him on a uniquely fortuitous path — the product of which is a major new biography, *Saxophone Colossus: The Life and Music of Sonny Rollins*, released last month to critical acclaim.

Seven years in the making, the meticulously researched and exhaustively

plotted book is Levy's second published biography and the first to examine Rollins, the legendary tenor saxophonist and composer, with such granularity, including detailed accounts of his many celebrated recordings, ecstatic live performances and fabled practice regimens.

The biography, at 772 pages, hinges on extensive archival research as well as hundreds of interviews with close associates and family members of Rollins, who is widely regarded as one of the greatest

improvisers in jazz.

Now 92, Rollins last performed in 2012 and stopped playing the saxophone altogether eight years ago as a result of pulmonary fibrosis. But Levy said he was helpful with the book's creation and personally approved the idea from the beginning, even as he has still not read it in full.

"He had a copy of the manuscript, but he was reluctant to read the whole thing," Levy, 36, said in a recent interview with *Jewish*

Insider. “It sounded like it might be too uncomfortable to read a book that details your life with all the minutiae — that it might be like, for Sonny, listening to playback from his recordings, which is something he never liked to do.”

The musician who recorded with Miles Davis, Clifford Brown, Coleman Hawkins, Max Roach and other jazz luminaries has long resisted looking back on his own music, according to Levy. “He was always looking to the next gig,” Levy said. “He’s still looking to the next gig, in a sense, and has had just a lifelong quest to improve.”

Levy, who published a biography of Lou Reed in 2015, lives in Lancaster, Pa., and is now teaching a class on jazz and fiction at Columbia University, where he recently completed his doctorate in English and comparative literature. His new book, published by Hachette, was longlisted on Friday for the PEN/Jacqueline Bograd Weld Award for Biography, which is given to a “biography of exceptional literary, narrative and artistic merit, based on scrupulous research,” according to the announcement.

Speaking with *JJ*, Levy discussed the painstaking process of writing a biography worthy of its subject and gave insight into some of the lesser-known aspects of Rollins’ artistry, including an apparent interest, detailed in his journals, in the connection between the saxophone and the shofar, or Jewish ram’s horn, as well as a one-off recording with Leonard Cohen captured on video in 1989, among other things.

The conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Jewish Insider: *Have you always been a fan of Sonny Rollins?*

Aidan Levy: As a young saxophone player, Sonny Rollins was an early inspiration. When I was about 11 years old, I went to a record store to buy my first jazz CD. I picked up *Saxophone Colossus*, and listening to Sonny play “You Don’t Know What Love Is” immediately set a standard for what I hoped to do on the saxophone, although having heard that, I already suspected that I may never get there.

JJ: *Well, that is certainly a high standard.*

Levy: Of course, Sonny himself, as it turned out, tried to reach his own impossible standards, so it’s always been nice to have him as a model for what one could do through improvised solo.

JJ: *How did the idea for this book come about, and how did you begin to put it together? It seems like it was a massive undertaking.*

Levy: Around 2012, I was writing editorial content for Blue Note Records, and I ended up doing this interview with Sonny Rollins that was pitched around the 55th anniversary of his album “Newk’s Time” — “Newk” is one of his nicknames. To connect with Sonny then for an hour or so was so inspiring that I started looking deeper into his life and music. I read every book that was out there on Sonny and saw some documentaries, and I got so much out of that experience but I still wanted to know more. I thought at one point maybe I would try to work on a biography myself, and after I finished my first book, *Dirty Blvd.: The Life and Music of Lou Reed*, I thought about working on a book on Sonny.

I applied for a fellowship at the Leon Levy Center for Biography at the CUNY Graduate Center, and at the time, the esteemed jazz critic and historian Gary Giddens was the director. I didn’t expect to get the fellowship, and when Gary called me in the spring of 2016, I almost had a heart attack. I was so ecstatic to hear this news, and at that moment, I realized I would write this book. Prior to applying for the fellowship, I contacted Sonny to see if he would allow me to work on the book, and to my surprise, he said “OK.” I didn’t want to move forward with it unless I knew that he would not object.

JJ: *It sounds like it was important for you to have Sonny’s approval out of respect for his wishes, but from a research perspective, it was probably extremely useful to have access to him for interviews as well.*

Levy: Right. And when I started the book, I wasn’t sure how many conversations we’d be able to have. But as it turned out, over time, he was able to answer many

questions, and then after I turned in the first draft of the manuscript, we actually talked through the entire book together. He had a copy of the manuscript, but he was reluctant to read the whole thing. It sounded like it might be too uncomfortable to read a book that details your life with all the minutiae — that it might be like, for Sonny, listening to playback from his recordings, which is something he never liked to do. So we talked through the whole book after I completed the manuscript, and I was able to make additions based on that.

JJ: *Did you meet him in person?*

Levy: No, a lot of the material I had for the book was put together during the pandemic, so it just precluded that.

JJ: *Have you ever met him in person?*

Levy: No.

JJ: *Do you think he would have been resistant to doing an interview in person? I know he’s done them before at his home.*

Levy: He doesn’t really do in-person interviews anymore.

JJ: *I interviewed Sonny just once, on the phone, in 2015, for a story about the 80th anniversary of the Village Vanguard, the storied New York City jazz club where he made some of his most memorable recordings. He gave me an amusing detail about a cook who used to work there named Elton, who “made the greatest hamburgers in the world.” I found Sonny to be very thoughtful and deliberate, even for the brief conversation we had. How would you describe your own interactions with him?*

Levy: I would say that Sonny’s a very caring and compassionate person. Very generous and thoughtful. It was great to be able to speak with him.

JJ: *As his fans are keenly aware, Sonny has not been able to play the saxophone for the past eight years as a result of pulmonary fibrosis. What is he up to now that he’s stopped playing?*

Levy: He's starting a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting the golden rule and living by the golden rule — and particularly, he's focusing on spreading that approach to life to other musicians. So he's been studying Vedanta and other spiritual traditions and has really settled on the golden rule as a way to kind of synthesize everything that he's found in a variety of religious traditions. That nonprofit, I believe, is something that he's very passionate about.

JJ: Can you describe the research process for this book? The endnotes are quite extensive, and you seem to have done a broad range of interviews and sifted through a lot of archival material.

Levy: The book was based on interviews with Sonny and more than 200 other people who worked with him, friends of his, family members and other folks who I connected with over a period of years. I was able to speak with people like Randy Weston, the great conguero Cándido Camero, Sheila Jordan, his nephew Clifton Anderson, a drummer of his who worked with him for a while, David Lee. I could go on and on and on.

But I also did archival research, first and foremost, in the Sonny Rollins collection at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, just a couple of blocks from where Sonny was born. The collection there is truly extensive, and it goes all the way back to the '50s. Sonny just saved so much material there, and this includes writings, correspondence, business records and practice notes. It turns out that Sonny was a prolific writer, and a prolific letter-writer, and most of this material was unpublished. He also kept track of what he was working on, musically, on music manuscript paper, and he would write out exercises for himself that he worked on, really, every day when he went out to practice. I also conducted archival research at the Max Roach collection at the Library of Congress, the National Library of Norway, in Oslo, Jazzinstitut Darmstadt in Darmstadt, Germany, and many other places.

Finally, I had access to the collection of an archivist named Carl Smith, who co-founded a high-end audio company in

Maine called Transparent Audio, and Carl has amassed an enormous collection of Sonny Rollins' live tapes going back to the first known recording of Sonny in 1950 in Chicago, and there are hundreds of tapes in that collection totaling probably thousands of hours. To be able to document Sonny's life in a book like this, I felt it was important to listen to as many live recordings of him as I could find, and Carl Smith's collection was just staggering in its scope.

The project became the challenge of synthesizing all this material and also drawing from the thousands of articles that had been written about Sonny and interviews he had done over the course of his career, and just to take all of that and present it as a cohesive narrative of the life of one of the greatest musicians in the 20th century.

JJ: Did you have any sort of model in mind for the book? Robin Kelley's biography of Thelonious Monk seems similarly exhaustive and ambitiously plotted.

Levy: Robin Kelley's biography of Thelonious Monk was definitely an inspiration, as well as Lewis Porter's biography of John Coltrane. I also love Ben Ratliff's biography of Coltrane. I got a lot out of many of the books that have been written about Billie Holiday by scholars such as Farah Jasmine Griffin and John Szwed. There are some others, as well as many of the memoirs. I should also mention Stanley Crouch's book on Charlie Parker.

JJ: Do you have any favorite jazz writers or critics? Who did you read when you were starting out in the field?

Levy: Let's see, Amiri Baraka and *Blues People*. I read Whitney Balliett. I drew a lot of inspiration from Robert O'Meally's anthology *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*. Dan Morgenstern is influential. Val Wilmer. There are so many people I could name.

JJ: It's always struck me that there is a preponderance of jazz critics who are Jewish as well as Jewish jazz producers and impresarios and musicians, among others. Do you have any insights into the connection

between Jewish identity, or Jewish culture, and jazz?

Levy: There is that connection there. I mean, one thing I can point out is that klezmer music provides space for improvisation, and I've always been drawn to John Zorn's exploration of what he terms "radical Jewish culture" and his various groups in the Masada universe. But what exactly it is that has drawn so many Jewish people to jazz is not something that I can give you a definitive answer for. There's definitely that legacy there, and in this book there are a number of Jewish characters who make appearances throughout — people like Bob Weinstock and Ira Gitler. Weinstock founded Prestige Records, and Gitler worked with him. Teddy Reig, Nat Hentoff, of course, who was very critical of Sonny Rollins when he first came onto the scene but was gradually won over and became an ardent supporter of Rollins.

JJ: The live, televised collaboration between Leonard Cohen and Sonny Rollins that you mention in the book seems like a unique and unexpected partnership — more so, even, than the time Sonny recorded with The Rolling Stones. Can you provide some of the backstory there?

Levy: That was in 1989. They met on a television program called "Night Music," which was hosted by David Sanborn and, I believe, Jools Holland. The music director for that program was Hal Willner, who for ages was the music director at "Saturday Night Live," and Willner put together these tribute compilations where he would have unexpected pairings. For example, he would have Lou Reed doing Kurt Weill. On this show, he did something similar, so one of his ideas was to pair Sonny Rollins with Leonard Cohen. He thought maybe they could do Cohen's song "Who By Fire," which is an interpretation of the "Unetanneh Tokef."

They were not familiar with each other, they'd never met, and, as I understand it, they never even spoke. They only spoke through the music. It turned out that, according to Willner, this was maybe the greatest collaboration he produced on the show. They both had a shared spirituality,

and I know from talking to Sonny that he felt the spiritual connection in that performance, because the solo that he plays is just beautiful, and I believe Leonard Cohen was elated by the results. You can kind of see it when you watch the recording. I make a ritual of watching that every year on Yom Kippur.

JL: *Sounds like a worthwhile tradition.*

Levy: It's really just one of these magic moments, and fortunately it's available to us. When you listen to Sonny's solo, you can even hear him playing a little bit of the harmonic minor scale that's so common in klezmer music and in the liturgy.

JL: *There's a detail in the book where you write about Sonny, in a journal entry, "noted the similarities between the saxophone neck and the shofar, 'or ram's horn, of ancient times.'" That's an interesting comparison for him to have drawn.*

Levy: I never asked him if he actually blew a shofar. But Sonny is interested in the history of instruments, and I found in his archive, actually, an illustration of a shofar. I think of him as in this grand tradition of prophets going back to Joshua at Jericho, in a sense, and I think that there was even some reflection on that accompanying this illustration. That's how I made that connection to the idea of taking the neck and mouthpiece piece off and playing that way. This is something that he does on, I believe, "Now's the Time." You can hear that. It's also something that he does in a kind of different context, briefly, on "East Broadway Rundown."

JL: *Your experience as a jazz saxophonist must have been particularly useful while you were writing this book. Can you tell me about how you got into jazz more broadly and ultimately transitioned to writing about it professionally?*

Levy: I grew up in a town that has a communal passion for jazz, and the town is West Hartford, Conn. There's a jazz program at Hall High School, which is a public high school, that has fostered generations of jazz talent. This guy named Bill Stanley started

this program at the high school I went to, and Hartford has always been a jazz-loving town. There was always the Hartford Jazz Festival every year that I would attend in Bushnell Park. When I went to school, we had people who had gone there years before I went, like Brad Mehldau and Joel Frahm and the saxophonists Kris Allen and Erica von Kleist, Drew Sayers. My year, there was another saxophone player in the jazz band with me named Noah Preminger.

I also started writing about music all the way back then in high school or so. I did it a little bit in college and, afterwards, began writing about music in addition to performing it. I moved to New York in 2008, and shortly thereafter I joined a big band in New York called the Stan Rubin Orchestra. Stan — who, incidentally, is a Jewish bandleader and clarinetist — started the band in about 1955 when he was a student at Princeton University. His band the Tigertown Five performed at Grace Kelly's wedding in Monaco. Stan would make these records with Milt Hinton and people like that, but he kept the band going through all those years, so I joined right after I moved to New York, and then I started writing articles about jazz for *The Village Voice* and *JazzTimes* and some other publications.

JL: *Do you have a favorite period or favorite album by Sonny, having listened, I assume, to his corpus many times over?*

Levy: I don't have a favorite period, but I do love "A Night at the Village Vanguard." Sonny was known for playing without a chordal instrument, although sometimes he used a piano or a guitar, and "A Night at the Village Vanguard" features the bassist Wilbur Ware and the drummer Elvin Jones in addition to a separate group with the drummer Pete La Roca and the bassist Donald Bailey, not to be confused with the drummer Donald Bailey. I think it exemplifies everything that jazz can be. There was no set list; it was entirely unplanned; Sonny was just calling tunes and expected that Wilbur Ware would know them all — and he did. I just love that entire album.

JL: *Do you have any thoughts on why Sonny is the way that he is? Why is he so*

self-conscious, for example, and as you mentioned, about not wanting to listen back to his music?

Levy: He's always been a perfectionist, so when he listens to a recording of himself he hears everything that he hopes to improve on for the next performance, and it becomes a painful experience. In one interview that he did, he said that listening to himself is "like Abu Ghraib." Obviously that's an exaggeration, but it was a painful experience for him. He was always looking to the next gig. He's still looking to the next gig, in a sense, and has had just a lifelong quest to improve. Even when people thought that nobody could ever do better, Sonny still was always looking to the next frontier. ♦

Lockheed showcases F-35 Israel sales in face-off with Boeing

Joshua Shani, a retired Israel Air Force general, forges partnerships with local defense contractors as head of Lockheed Martin's local operations

By Yaakov Lappin

The article first appeared in The Circuit.

As tensions with Iran simmered last November, Israeli Air Force officers turned up at Nevatim Air Base in the Negev desert to greet the delivery of three F-35 stealth fighter jets. The message was clear: Israel is equipped with the most advanced aerospace technology that can attack multiple sites in Iran if it escalates its nuclear program.

The aircraft delivery by Lockheed Martin, which increased the size of Israel's F-35 fleet to 36 planes, was also a message to Boeing and other competitors that it will battle across global markets for dominance in military aircraft sales. The Bethesda, Md.-based aerospace company is the biggest weapons manufacturer in the world, and is strengthening links with Israeli defense contractors as it fights to maintain its stature in the Middle East.

Heading that effort is Joshua Shani, a retired brigadier general in the Israeli Air Force, who has been CEO for Lockheed Martin's operations in Israel for 30 years. The company has engaged in over \$1 billion of offset deals through manufacturing agreements with Haifa-based Elbit Systems, state-owned Israel Aerospace Industries and other Israeli firms. Elbit produces helmet-mounted displays for the F-35s that project information onto a pilot's visor. IAI produces wing parts for both the F-35 and F-16 jets.

"Lockheed Martin has a large footprint in Israel," Shani, 77, said in an interview with *The Circuit*.

Besides the fighter aircraft, Lockheed Martin is working with state-owned Rafael Advanced Defense Systems on a variant

of Israel's Iron Beam laser air-defense system for the U.S. market. Iron Beam is a 100-kilowatt air-defense laser cannon, developed by Rafael in cooperation with Elbit, and the Israeli Defense Ministry. The defense system shoots down rockets, mortars and unmanned aerial vehicles at far cheaper costs than missile interceptors. The system was displayed for visiting U.S. President Joe Biden at Ben Gurion International Airport in July by former Prime Minister Yair Lapid and former Defense Minister Benny Gantz.

Just last week, it was reported that Israel and the U.S. are in initial talks for the purchase of 25 Boeing F-15 fighter jets.

Lockheed Martin is active throughout the Gulf region, where it sells Hercules C-130 transport aircraft to Saudi Arabia and maintains a Center for Innovation and Security Solutions in the United Arab Emirates. The company is expected to begin delivering new F-16 jets to Bahrain in 2024.

Meanwhile, U.S. Air Force pilots stationed in the region, who fly F-16s and F-35s out of Al-Udeid Base in Qatar, regularly cooperate with Israeli Air Force pilots and often train together. With Israel's entry into CENTCOM, the U.S. military command responsible for the Middle East, joint military drills with Gulf allies Bahrain and the UAE are becoming formalized. In October 2021, the Emirati air force chief, Maj. Gen. Ibrahim al Alawi, arrived in Israel for a groundbreaking visit to observe the IAF's Blue Flag combat drill.

"This is a government-to-government relationship, but the joint systems means that the Israeli and U.S. militaries can cooperate well, and as a result, brings genuine value," Shani said.

Bridging the gap between the aerospace giant and the State of Israel is only the latest of Shani's many exploits in a 58-year career. Born in 1945 to Holocaust survivors in Germany's Bergen-Belsen displaced persons center, which had previously been a concentration camp, Shani came to Israel as a child. He received his pilot's wings from Ezer Weizman, the commander of the IAF who went on to become Israel's president.

"For my family who attended the wings ceremony, it was the most joyful and moving moment of their lives," he recalled.

Shani's skills were recognized in his selection for the IAF's aerobatic flying team, but he was ultimately transferred to the transport flying division. Starting on the Boeing B377 Stratocruiser aircraft, which began flying in 1947, Shani rose through the ranks until he started flying the C-130 Hercules, which was the aircraft that in 1976 transported Israeli commandos to the Entebbe airport in Uganda to rescue more than 100 hostages taken captive by Palestinian and West German terrorists. Among those killed in Entebbe were three hostages and the ground unit commander, Yonatan Netanyahu, older brother of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

"Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin asked me directly to take this on," Shani said. "We had days of preparations leading up to it. It was extraordinarily difficult, especially in a relatively new IAF plane, which few knew how to fly. No one knew much about the Hercules." Upon his return from Entebbe, Shani recalls being greeted by the IAF commander who gave him a bottle of whiskey.

"I learned how to fly the Hercules in the United States, being one of the first

two Israeli pilots [trained] on it,” he said. “We then instructed hundreds of pilots – a whole generation – on how to fly it. Today, I have ‘grandchildren’ – the sons of pilots I instructed – in the transport fleet,” he said.

In 1978, Shani became commander of the IAF base in Lod, adjacent to Ben Gurion International Airport, the first base commander from the transport aircraft array.

“As commander, the buck stopped with me,” he said. “I had the last say. The responsibility caused my hair to turn white.”

In 1985, Shani became the IAF’s attaché in the U.S. with the rank of brigadier-general. He was awarded the Legion of Merit by the U.S. Armed Forces. Entering civilian life, he started by advising Israeli defense companies and in 1993 was hired by Lockheed Martin as its chief executive in Israel.

Shani takes pride in Lockheed’s role in building Israeli air capabilities, including the delivery of 102 F-16 Sufa fighter jets – the backbone of the IAF, and the acquisition of two squadrons of F-35 stealth aircraft. If the purchase of a third squadron is approved, Israel will have 75 F-35s.

“The F-35 faced stiff competition from Boeing’s F-15, and many questioned its true capabilities in air-to-air combat. But the F-35 has won,” Shani said. “There were challenges, it was initially expensive, but

when its price dropped to \$78 million – the price of an F-16 – the IAF began purchasing many of these planes.”

Shani maintains close relationships to Israel’s military decision-makers. The Lockheed Martin Israel chief “is a rare combination of an officer and a former senior IAF pilot who continues, in his present role, to contribute to the national security of Israel, in the field of the IAF’s force build up, which is a spearhead of Israel’s combined force,” former Maj. Gen. Amos Gilead, executive director of the Institute for Policy and Strategy at Reichman University, and former director of policy and political-military affairs at the Israeli Defense Ministry, told *The Circuit*. Shani’s also a “charming and intelligent person,” he said.

While Lockheed Martin has a retired general running its Israeli division, Boeing hired the IAF’s former commander, Maj. Gen. Ido Nehushtan, to run its operation in Israel.

Competition between the two global giants heated up over an IAF contract to upgrade its aging Hercules fleet. Boeing offered the IAF a plan to upgrade existing planes, while Lockheed Martin argued that they needed to be replaced. “As the oldest Hercules operator, I knew what we did to these planes and how we broke them by landing them on dirt runaways. I objected to the upgrade proposal,” said Shani.

The IAF ultimately bought Lockheed’s new Super Hercules, and Elbit fitted out two squadrons with new on-board electronics systems, he said. Lockheed Martin and Boeing also faced off in 2021 over which would supply the IAF with new transport helicopters, to replace its aging fleet of Yasur CH-53D aircraft. The question was settled in February of that year, when Israel announced that it opted for the Lockheed Martin Sikorsky CH-53K King Stallion, which has a range of advanced capabilities, including autonomous pilot assist modes. The competitor was Boeing’s CH-47 Chinook.

“We demonstrated that despite being more expensive, if you look at it over the years, the Chinook would have had to be upgraded twice, to receive new refueling capabilities, meaning that the long-term costs would have been the same,” Shani argued.

The IAF has ordered 12 Sikorskys, and reserved the possibility for another six.

“I believe that my work with Lockheed Martin has created extensive and crucial benefits for Israeli defense,” said Shani. “The F-35, the new Hercules, the C-130J Hercules and the CH-53K King Stallion have no competition. They are the best in the world.” ♦