

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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JANUARY 30, 2023

Tracing his family history in Poland, Emhoff explains his approach to antisemitism

The second gentleman wants a big-tent message that unites the Jewish community. Can it actually lead to change?

By Gabby Deutch

On a cold Sunday morning, Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff sat in this medieval city's historic Jewish quarter at a trendy coffee shop called Cheder, the Hebrew word for a traditional Jewish primary school. Bookshelves crammed with Jewish volumes in Polish, English and Hebrew covered the walls from floor to ceiling.

But the room was not filled with Jewish boys studying together: That Emhoff is a Jew likely made him unique among the patrons of the café. Church bells rang across the city as he sipped coffee inside.

Poland was for centuries the beating heart of Jewish life in Europe, and half of the 6 million Jews killed in the Holocaust were Polish. After the war, what few Jews

remained in Poland mostly fled, first to displaced persons camps in Europe and then to Israel, the Soviet Union or the U.S. In recent years, Krakow has experienced a moderate rebirth of Jewish life. Still, fewer than 10,000 Jews live in this country that once was home to one of the most vibrant and diverse Jewish communities in history.

So there was no better place for Emhoff, the first Jewish spouse of a president or vice president, to visit in order to viscerally understand what happens when antisemitism is taken to its most extreme, brutal manifestation. He was in the middle of a five-day swing through Poland and Germany to mark International Holocaust Remembrance Day, which fell on Friday.

"This happened. This is real. If you don't

believe me, go — go see what I saw," Emhoff told *Jewish Insider* on Sunday, two days after an emotional visit to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp on the 78th anniversary of its liberation. Emhoff, who learned recently that his great-grandmother was from Poland, spoke powerfully throughout the trip about his family's connection to the country and their luck in getting out decades before the war.

Over the past several months, Emhoff has emerged as a visible advocate for the Jewish community and a figurehead in the national fight against antisemitism. Attacks on Jews and Jewish institutions in the U.S., as well as online hate directed at members of the Jewish community, have recently increased to levels not seen in decades.

While his position is largely ceremonial, Emhoff has something that policymakers in Congress and state capitals do not: a direct line to President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris, his wife.

But while in Poland, Emhoff was careful to only characterize his role as that of a listener, maybe even a catalyst or a cheerleader, but certainly not that of a policymaker.

Instead, he offered a window into his approach to the issue, articulating a big-tent vision for combating antisemitism that requires building a broad base of support across party lines while avoiding some of the more contentious questions around antisemitism, like the place of anti-Zionism or Islamist extremism.

"This whole thing is to listen and bring back good ideas that we can use as we're building out our national plan," he said. The White House announced in December the creation of an interagency task force focused on combating antisemitism and other forms of hate, with a mandate to create a national strategy on antisemitism. The news came days after Emhoff had hosted Jewish leaders at the White House with senior officials including Susan Rice, the director of the U.S. Domestic Policy Council, who is known to have Biden's ear on policy matters.

Emhoff was joined in Europe by Deborah Lipstadt, the U.S. special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism and a longtime Emory University professor. Lipstadt has spoken for years about the diverse forms that antisemitism takes: on the political right and the political left and, particularly in Europe over the past decade, from Islamist extremism. Emhoff, though, prefers to avoid getting into those details.

"We're not that granular yet," he said, when asked whether he intends to focus on more specific forms of antisemitism like jihadism or anti-Zionism. "There are certain aspects that we've discussed in terms of security, funding and how to address particular issues, but I'm really right now just focused on listening, gathering information, bringing it back, and then trying to figure out the best way to deal with it."

Emhoff has been reluctant to speak about where Israel fits into the White House's approach to antisemitism, even as many Jewish leaders have argued

more forcefully in recent years that anti-Zionism often veers into antisemitism. Early in Biden's term, Secretary of State Tony Blinken wrote to pro-Israel leaders articulating the administration's support for the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism, which includes examples of when criticism of Israel crosses the line into antisemitism.

"I'm just focused on antisemitism," Emhoff told JI.

He recently met with Hillel students at Arizona State University for a conversation about antisemitism and said his takeaway was "the students really want to feel a part of a broader coalition in dealing with hate and dealing with other issues," Emhoff explained, "where they want to be there for other groups that might be facing issues, whereas they want those groups to help them."

A 2021 study from the Anti-Defamation League and Hillel found that antisemitic incidents on college campuses increased significantly in the wake of the May 2021 conflict between Israel and Hamas, with many Jewish students feeling ostracized from broader campus social circles because of their views on Israel. Nearly a quarter (24%) of respondents said others had "assumed [they] hold particular views on Israel or Israeli policy because [they] are Jewish," and 10% reported they "felt unwelcome in a campus organization because of actual or perceived support for Israel as a Jew."

"We didn't really get into it that much, if at all," Emhoff said, when asked whether he and the students discussed how debates around Israel play into their feeling unwelcome in coalitions. "My message to them was the same to everyone. Like, I just really want to hit the issue of antisemitism and talk about that. And, just, that's the thing that unites, in my opinion, Jews."

Still, Israel was impossible to avoid, even while in Poland. Hours after Emhoff wrapped up his visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau, a Palestinian terrorist killed seven Israelis as they were leaving a Friday night prayer service in Jerusalem. The next morning, after a Saturday morning tour at the Oskar Schindler Enamel Factory in Krakow, Emhoff addressed the incident. He said he

had spoken about it with his wife on the phone.

"This is a terrorist attack. This is murder. This is something that's horrible. These were people who were just praying in a temple, living their everyday lives, and were murdered in cold blood," he told reporters. "It's something that we need to just stop. And that's why we're doing this work. And that's why I'm gonna continue to do this work. But it's also — we stand with the people of Israel on this. We're committed to the security of Israel."

On the next leg of his trip, Emhoff attended a convening on Monday of antisemitism envoys in Berlin, alongside Lipstadt. There, he heard from representatives from European nations, including Germany, Romania, Austria, Croatia and the United Kingdom, that have been dealing with surging antisemitism for many years.

Earlier in the trip, he also met in Krakow with Jewish and interfaith leaders about tolerance and antisemitism.

"It was a real good lesson," he told JI of the Krakow roundtable, that "no matter where you land politically, on a religious spectrum, it's committed towards [fighting] the scourge of antisemitism." He pointed to specific ideas that they discussed, like engaging young people, dealing with legal issues, involving the private sector and NGOs, and mobilizing educators and historians.

It's no small feat that in his two years as second gentleman, Emhoff has managed to, by and large, win over the American Jewish community, especially given that he did not come into this job expecting to be famous for being Jewish. "I never would have thought that this would be my path as second gentleman, working on the safety and security for Jewish Americans and Jews around the world, that that would really become my cause and my mission," he said at the Monday event.

He expected to emphasize his unique status as the first male spouse of a president or vice president. Instead, he's won over legions of Jewish admirers with his stories about Jewish summer camp and his grandmother's brisket. He often visits Jewish communities when traveling in the U.S., such as when he stopped at a kosher

deli in Des Moines, Iowa, in November.

But his trip to Poland, which was mostly a cultural visit, also took on the trappings of an emotion-laden roots journey, something uniquely personal for the spouse of a president or vice president. His last stop before departing to Berlin was Gorlice, the town where his great-grandmother was believed to have lived before she fled to the U.S. roughly 120 years ago.

After a two-hour drive through winding roads in the Polish countryside, blanketed by snow, Emhoff's motorcade pulled up to the town hall. A mural was painted on the wall, dated 2005, marking Gorlice's 650th anniversary. Before World War II, the town's

population was more than half Jewish. Now, none remain. (Many were killed in an August 1942 massacre memorialized in a forest outside town, where a mass grave marks the site of the tragedy.)

"Welcome home," Gorlice Mayor Rafal Kukla said to Emhoff when he stepped out of his car. Later, after a tour of Gorlice, Emhoff placed a stone — a Jewish mourning custom, in lieu of leaving flowers — at a small Holocaust memorial in the town square.

"Everyone wants to know where they come from. I think that's important to know, and to see this beautiful place, to see how it was, but to see the violence that happened here, and all over Europe to disrupt what

were ordinary lives," Emhoff told reporters. "These were ordinary people just living their lives but because of propaganda, misinformation, disinformation, antisemitism and hate, it led to mass murder. And that's why we have to do this work. And that's why I'm doing everything I can on behalf of our administration, with our partners and friends in Europe, to make sure that we push back so this does not happen again."

Emhoff had not yet told his parents he was coming to Gorlice, but said there would "probably [be] a lot of tears" when he next spoke to them. Then he paused, choked up. He smiled. "I'm looking forward to that." ♦

JANUARY 30, 2023

Why Jordan is not embracing the Abraham Accords

Israel and Jordan have maintained a shaky peace for more than 30 years, now with the Abraham Accords normalization process taking hold in the region, the two countries' differences have come into sharper focus

By Ruth Marks Eglash

Last week, Israel's recently reinstalled Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made a surprise visit to Amman, Jordan, where he met with King Abdullah II.

Readouts from the meeting sent out by each leader's office struck a similar tone. Both emphasized maintaining stability in a volatile region. Yet, while Israel's statement highlighted the "strategic, security and economic cooperation between Israel and Jordan," Jordan's was focused on respecting the status quo at Jerusalem's holy Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount, and support for Palestinian sovereignty.

The meeting, and contrasting messaging, come at a time of heightened tension between the two countries, which have maintained a cool and shaky peace for more than 30 years. While the two neighbors cooperate closely in the fields of

security, water and energy, disagreements between Israel and Jordan — and between Netanyahu and Abdullah in particular — have dominated the diplomatic and political arenas for years.

As the process of normalization with Israel — sparked by 2020 signing of the Abraham Accords between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, followed by separate agreements with Morocco and Sudan — continues to be deepened with meet-ups such as last March's Negev Forum, tensions between Israel and Jordan has been brought into even sharper focus.

Part of the tension centers around the holy site, which like all of Jerusalem's Old City was under Jordanian control until 1967, when it was captured by Israel during the Six-Day War. Today, the status quo refers to Jordan still being custodians at the Haram

al-Sharif, which includes the third holiest site in Islam, while Israel maintains overall security for the area. Jews are permitted to visit the Temple Mount, which they believe is the site where two holy Jewish temples once stood, but are forbidden from praying there, a point of contention for an increasing number of Israelis, including a portion of Netanyahu's newly appointed cabinet.

In Jordan, Abdullah is watching closely as Netanyahu's new government takes up office and far-right ministers in the Israeli coalition insist on a change in status at the holy site. At the same time, the king is contending with ongoing social and economic unrest in his own country, one of the region's poorest. Protests and poverty are a constant threat to his status.

In Israel, Netanyahu is struggling to strike a balance between his ideologically

driven far-right cohorts, and a desire to expand the circle of Abraham Accords countries – regional Arab states – who are willing to normalize ties with Israel.

“Netanyahu’s visit to Amman is very important,” Michael Milshtein, head of the Palestinian Studies Forum at the Dayan Center in Tel Aviv University, told *Jewish Insider*. “Netanyahu understands that in order to maintain calm in Jerusalem and the West Bank, especially during the upcoming Ramadan period, he has to improve his own image in the eyes of the Arab world.”

“He also understands that he cannot really promote any moves toward the Arab world, as long as the issue of Jerusalem is still in a very high tension,” Milshtein continued. “In many ways, the path to Riyadh is via Amman.”

Daoud Kuttab, a Jordanian columnist with *Al-Monitor* and *Arab News*, told *J*, however, that the Abraham Accords does not hold great significance for Jordan because “there is already a peace treaty with Israel and that is more advanced than normalization.”

What bothers the Jordanians, he said, is that they constantly feel belittled by Israel and see many of the Jewish states’ promises to its neighbor being broken.

“Jordanians feel that Israel looks down on them, that it does not take Jordan seriously,” Kuttab continued, listing multiple promises and guarantees made during previous meetings and summits between Abdullah and Netanyahu that were not fulfilled or kept.

He noted a set of understandings reached between the leaders in 2014 with mediation from then-U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in which Israel committed to preventing radical and extremist Jews from repeatedly visiting the Temple Mount.

“Radical people have ulterior motives, they are not coming as tourists, they are coming to change the status,” Kuttab noted. “The Jordanians are right in worrying that the repeat visitors and extremist visitors are not coming to visit like any normal tourist would come but they have these ulterior motives, and that worries the Jordanians.”

In a brief published last month by the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, Jonathan Schanzer, the think tank’s senior vice president for research, noted that Jordan’s ongoing frustration towards its

neighbor to the west is working counter to the spirit of the Accords, not only unsettling the region but also hindering U.S. national security interests.

“Ties between Jordan and Israel are currently at a low point,” he wrote, outlining Jordan’s social and economic woes, as well as the dominance of the Palestinian issue on the political country’s agenda. “A return to the fundamentals, with a concurrent embrace of the new regional order, are key to a prosperous and secure future for both American allies.”

Schanzer urged the U.S. to work to improve ties between Amman and Jerusalem, an issue that he suggested was raised when U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met last week with Netanyahu, and which is most certainly also being pushed with Abdullah in Jordan.

“King Abdullah is under pressure from Washington and from the UAE to join the Abraham Accords because they can really benefit from it,” Oded Eran, a senior researcher at the Institute for National Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University, told *J*.

A former Israeli ambassador to Jordan, Eran said he sees some signs that Amman is softening its stance towards the possibility of joining the process but that it came with a caveat.

“They are saying yes to the Negev Forum provided that the Palestinians participate in the activities,” he said. “They’re telling Israel and Washington they need to create the conditions to allow the Palestinians to participate, and if that happens then they will also participate.”

“I think we need to understand the internal arena in Jordan,” explained Milshtein. “The king himself is really afraid of being portrayed as a collaborator with Israel or with the U.S. Whenever there is an event in Jerusalem relating to the Temple Mount, there are demonstrations in Jordan, and in a minute those demonstrations can switch focus and turn against him.”

Milshtein noted that the situation in Jordan, where more than 70 percent of the population is of Palestinian heritage, is “much more complex and sensitive” than other countries in the region, including Egypt, the first Arab country to make peace with Israel. Egypt did participate in the

Negev Forum and spin-off meetings, a sign of warming relations with Israel following the signing of the Abraham Accords.

Mansour Abu Rashid, a former major general in the Jordanian armed services who describes himself as a peace activist, said that while Jordan is willing to work to strengthen peace between Israelis and Arabs, it would not be pressured by any other country.

“We signed a peace agreement with Israel 32 years ago and we are serious about strengthening peace, but where [are] the Palestinians in this story? Why don’t the Americans use their position to pressure the Israelis to invite the Palestinian Authority to take part in this process?” he asked.

“The Jordanians and the Palestinian Authority have very good relations and they want to finish this conflict,” Rashid continued. “Jordan can play a role in releasing tensions between the Palestinians and Israel... If you look at the press release from the meeting with Netanyahu, King Abdullah stressed that any future cooperation with Jordan must include the Palestinians.”

“Until we find a solution to the Palestinian problem, and the conflict, I think the relationship between Jordan and Israel will not improve,” he observed. “As Jordanians, we want to see some hope for the Palestinians and an independent sovereign state for them to live side by side with the Israelis.” ♦

Robert Shwartzman is inching his way closer to a Formula One spot

The Russian-Israeli race car driver became Ferrari's newest reserve driver for the 2023 season

By **Tori Bergel**

The Fiorano Circuit was wet, so much so that Robert Shwartzman, Scuderia Ferrari's newly promoted reserve driver, had to start the morning late in order to give the ground some extra time to dry. It didn't help much, but Shwartzman was just happy to get behind the wheel of his Formula One race car. Decked out in Ferrari's signature red, he sped around the course in a blur of scarlet, the only color contrasts coming from a handful of sponsorship logos, his golden-hued helmet and the small Israeli flag stitched on his waist.

Despite the less-than-ideal conditions, the Russian-Israeli racer ended the afternoon last Tuesday having completed 87 laps equalling a total of nearly 161 miles. Shwartzman's ride marked the first of three season-opening test days for Ferrari, which took place last week at the team's private development track in Fiorano Modenese, Italy, in preparation for the first official race of 2023 in early March.

"It was a bit more challenging because of the wet conditions of the track...but still just a good experience, because I've never experienced driving an F1 car in the rain," Shwartzman, 23, told *Jewish Insider* of his first drive since his promotion. "Overall, I think it was a very positive test for me to learn new stuff, new things."

Since the instant he jumped into the driver's seat at age 4, Robert Shwartzman loved to race, a passion he'd inherited from his father, Mikhail, who died in April 2020 after contracting COVID-19. Only a few months later, Shwartzman would debut in Formula Two, where he would go on to end the season in second place.

"Basically, from the moment I [was] born I got that passion too, and [then] it was just me and him," Shwartzman recalled. "We

were fully dedicated and fully obsessed [with racing], me and my dad, no one else from the family."

Three years later, Shwartzman has kept pushing in his pursuit of their shared dream — to become a competitive Formula One driver. He took one step closer to that goal on Jan. 19, when Scuderia Ferrari, the luxury brand's F1 team, announced that Shwartzman had been promoted to reserve driver, a role he shares with Italian driver Antonio Giovinazzi.

"I'm very happy and honored that this year I became a reserve driver for Ferrari," Shwartzman said of his promotion. "I'm very thankful for Ferrari, and also for the part of [the Ferrari Driver Academy] for pushing and giving their experience and everything they could to me to develop and to grow...It's a very important role I have for this year, so my target is just to do my best and to deliver the best job as possible."

Shwartzman's history with Ferrari goes back to 2017, when he joined the FDA ahead of his rookie Formula Three season driving for Prema Racing — he was released from the academy last month after attaining reserve driver status. Most recently, Shwartzman was a test driver for the team throughout the 2022 season, during which he made his official F1 debut in two rookie free practice sessions in Austin, Texas, and Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

Shwartzman's advancement to F1 was a welcome move for the young hopeful; however, as a test driver and not a starter, it also means his days of competition are over for the time being. Shwartzman spent most of 2022 at Ferrari's headquarters in Maranello, Italy, working mainly in the simulator, or testing new cars and features to help perfect them for the team's competing

drivers.

"In the regulations, the [competing] drivers on the teams can't test the real car," Shwartzman said. "There is a very short, limited amount of testing that they [are able to do within the rules], so therefore, all the teams [have] simulators where they're doing, sort of, homework to prepare the car in the best shape as possible."

On any given day, Shwartzman could log up to six hours of simulation work at a time. While not an exact replica of true racing conditions, he maintained that as a tool to gauge improvements, the simulator is a pretty accurate comparison.

Despite the similarities, no machine compares to real tires on asphalt or the feel of accelerating to over 200 mph while battling G-forces of up to 6 Gs, and the mental toll Shwartzman faced after nearly a year away from the racetrack, was significant.

"It's very challenging," Shwartzman told *JI* at the end of last season. "You really miss this atmosphere: being in the paddock, working with the team, traveling, driving the car, enjoying this feeling of driving, pushing it to the limit, racing itself, you know, having this adrenaline that you're receiving from racing. It's basically a big part of any racing driver, so whenever you're giving that up... at the beginning you don't really feel it...but then after some time, you start to miss it quite a lot."

Now, with Shwartzman's new position as a reserve driver, comes the promise of more track time. In addition to racing in two more rookie free practices in 2023, as a reserve driver, Shwartzman will need to be on site at most Grand Prix races in case one of Ferrari's current starters, Charles Leclerc and Carlos Sainz, can't compete. He will also join team Ferrari for this year's GT World

Challenge Europe Endurance Cup, his first competition since 2021 and his sportscar-racing debut — unlike formula racing, GT racing utilizes two-seater cars with enclosed wheels.

In order to meet new regulations set last year by the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile — the governing body of F1 racing — Shwartzman, who holds Russian and Israeli citizenships, began operating under an Israeli racing license ahead of the 2022 season. He had previously been driving under a Russian license, but in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the FIA began requiring all competitors to “run

under a neutral flag.”

The change felt natural to Shwartzman, who was born in Tel Aviv and spent the first three years of his life in Israel, before moving to Russia for six years. He moved to Italy when he was 9, where he has spent most of the last decade.

“I knew, always, that I was born in Israel and that I have Jewish blood inside me... I never said I'm only this or only that,” Shwartzman said. “[Switching to an Israeli license] just gave me a good feeling... It felt comfortable, like it was always there.”

For now, Shwartzman has no intention of switching back to a Russian license, even

if FIA changes the mandate in the future.

As for his own future, Shwartzman tries not to look too far ahead — both Leclerc's and Sainz's contracts are up for renewal in 2024. He's staying focused on improving his technique and doing what it takes to turn his childhood dream into reality.

“The goal is still the same: to arrive to Formula One [as a starter]. Obviously, I have a bit more job to do and a bit more learning, which is always good,” Shwartzman said. “I just try to learn as quickly as possible, and improve everything I have to improve as quickly and as better as possible to be fully prepared for hopefully future next steps.” ♦

FEBRUARY 2, 2023

At former SS headquarters in Berlin, European leaders teach the U.S. a lesson on antisemitism

The White House announced last month its plan to create a national antisemitism strategy, a process the European Union completed in 2021

By Gabby Deutch

For decades, American Jews generally regarded Europe with a feeling of superiority on matters of antisemitism. When Jeffrey Goldberg asked, “Is it time for the Jews to leave Europe?” in a prescient 2015 *Atlantic* cover story, written in the wake of the deadly attack on a kosher supermarket in Paris, many Jews in America read the article with fascination, but not yet understanding — a vast gulf separated the two communities in their experiences of antisemitism.

That has changed in recent years as antisemitism in the U.S. has risen to levels not seen in decades. The result is that 80 years after the Holocaust, the U.S. finds itself in the slightly ironic position of turning to Europe for guidance in how to combat antisemitism.

Antisemitism envoys from across Europe

gathered in Berlin on Monday for a meeting with Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff and Deborah Lipstadt, the U.S. special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism. The convening took place in the Topography of Terror museum located at the former SS headquarters, on the 90th anniversary of Hitler's appointment as chancellor.

“I know each of you is laying such crucial groundwork for those who will come after you to do this important work,” Emhoff said in remarks at the start of the meeting. “We can learn from each other.”

The meeting follows a White House announcement in December that the Biden administration plans to create a national strategy on antisemitism. After a busy and emotional five-day visit to Poland and Germany, Emhoff arrived back in Washington on Tuesday night to move

forward with plans to create the national strategy. Next week, he and Lipstadt will speak at a United Nations event focused on antisemitism.

“My voice amplified the fight and amplifies the fight, but [Emhoff's] voice does — it's on a whole different level,” Lipstadt told *Jewish Insider* on Tuesday.

Katharina von Schnurbein, the European Commission coordinator for combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life, told *JI* after the roundtable that she believes Emhoff's involvement with the issue “will have a real impact” as the U.S. begins to put together its action plan. “What I think is important — and this has been our focus — is to create structures in a way that the system reacts,” she said.

In 2021, the European Union released its own antisemitism strategy after

years of careful research, planning and brainstorming. The process was a diplomatic and logistical feat, involving representatives from each of the 27 EU governments and each country's Jewish community. An efficiency-minded German with an eye for both organization and the big picture, von Schnurbein was the mastermind behind the strategy.

"It seems to me she sees it a) as an affront to what happened here in European history that there still should be antisemitism, and b) just as I do, and I think anybody else from a democratic country, [she] recognizes the threat to democracy," Lipstadt said.

Von Schnurbein, who is not Jewish, has overseen Europe's approach to countering antisemitism since 2015. She grew up in the German state of Bavaria in the shadow of the Holocaust. The closest Jewish community was located an hour away.

"In my family home, I mean, these were dinner discussions, [about] our responsibility towards Jewish people and what we as Germans, as individuals, have to do, what responsibility we have," explained von Schnurbein.

The antisemitism landscape in Europe and the U.S. is not the same, nor are the mechanisms to respond to it comparable. Europe's population is larger, although the EU has less power over its member states than the U.S. federal government does over the 50 states. And the U.S. has a Jewish population several times larger than that of Europe.

"It really needs to be ensured that there is education, not only about the Holocaust, of course, about the *Shoah*, but all the richness of Jewish life beforehand, so Jewish life just simply becomes more normal," von Schnurbein said. "In your everyday life, you don't necessarily have someone sitting next to you in school that says, 'Tomorrow I am not here because of Yom Kippur.'" A 2014 Pew study found that roughly 40% of Americans said they did not know any Jews.

The tight-knit group of global antisemitism envoys, from Europe and beyond, will meet in Washington at the end of this month to provide insight and feedback to the White House interagency task force on antisemitism and other forms of hate. Von Schnurbein believes the EU's antisemitism strategy could

offer useful guidance to Washington. The EU's approach is country-specific, and its recommendations for each member state — such as its insistence that each EU country appoint its own antisemitism envoy and craft its own antisemitism strategy — could also correspond to actions in each American state, rather than just at the federal level.

"Why not see this also with regards to the U.S.? You have a federal level and then 50 states," von Schnurbein explained. "There needs to be ownership from the member state side, from the civil society, from businesses, from schools and universities and political parties and so on, and translate this into the respective contexts. And that's important, too, for it to, let's say, trickle down."

Similarly, the EU plan calls for each member state to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance working definition of antisemitism. "I think that the question of the adoption of the IHRA definition was not a given. I think that we have made tremendous progress in ensuring that all forms of antisemitism are seen as equally pernicious," von Schnurbein said. "We want a society free from antisemitism, so we have to look at all these examples, including Israel-related antisemitism." More than half of all U.S. states have adopted the IHRA definition, although it has also faced pushback for its assertion that anti-Zionism can sometimes cross the line into antisemitism.

Emhoff has refrained from discussing Israel in the context of antisemitism, insisting that his role right now is to listen to others who are the experts on the issue of antisemitism.

"He's trying to be careful. He's trying to do a good thing," said Lipstadt. "He's trying to be smart politically and not take away from the issue itself. It's the kind of thing that needs nuance, and nuance demands knowledge, experience. He's just gaining that."

Von Schnurbein started working for the European Commission (the EU's executive body) in 2002, holding a number of different roles including spokesperson, before she took on the antisemitism portfolio.

"It was a real learning curve," she said. "I came to this with a very open mind. What is regarded by the community as antisemitic

— that should be our starting point."

Lipstadt has a global remit, so she closely follows what happens in Europe. As an ambassador, her work is focused on the rest of the world, not the U.S. Still, Emhoff has called her a mentor, and the Holocaust historian has helped him make sense of the weighty topic. She told JI she did not anticipate working so closely with him after President Joe Biden nominated her in 2021. "I didn't even think about it," she admitted.

The idea for the trip to Poland and Germany, which included a visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau and to the Polish town where Emhoff believes his great-grandmother once lived, came from a serendipitous conversation at a State Department Sukkot event.

"We're in the kitchen and he said, 'So where are you traveling, Deborah?'" she recalled, and responded by saying she would be traveling to Poland in January for International Holocaust Remembrance Day. "He said, 'I'm in.'"

The EU antisemitism plan has a long horizon. Its recommendations were crafted with a long-term commitment, looking ahead to 2030. In Washington, where political priorities shift in each presidential administration, the White House may have less than two years to formulate and implement its plan.

"This goes far beyond the current mandate of this [European] Commission because we want to make sure that this is there to stay, and the structures we're building up," said von Schnurbein.

Speaking to reporters on Tuesday after meeting with Holocaust survivors, Emhoff said the White House has not yet set a deadline for completing its antisemitism strategy.

"I want it to be right, and I want it to be good," he said. "Sometimes, if you do things too quickly, you're gonna miss things."

The biggest test, both in Europe and in the U.S., is whether an antisemitism policy actually leads to a reduction in hate crimes and violence against Jews. France reported a 36% increase in reported assaults on Jews in 2021, while antisemitic hate crimes in Germany were up 29% that year.

"What we need is that, then, it has a direct effect also on the livelihood of Jews in that they feel more secure. They feel they

can go out as they like. They don't have to think twice [about] which metro to come up," said von Schnurbein.

As a proud and supportive political spouse, Emhoff has spent years watching his wife, Vice President and former Senator

Kamala Harris, write policies and put them to the test. On antisemitism, it's his turn. ♦

FEBRUARY 1, 2023

Will Scharf steps up to run for Missouri AG

Scharf is challenging newly appointed A.G. Andrew Bailey, who is seeking his first full term, in the Republican primary

By Matthew Kassel

Will Scharf, a recent federal prosecutor and conservative activist, announced on Tuesday that he will run against Missouri's newly appointed attorney general, Andrew Bailey, setting the stage for what could be a heated two-way Republican primary.

"Year after year, election after election, we have entrusted our government to the same narrow set of political insiders, lobbyists and special interests and we expect to get different results," Scharf said in his announcement. "Instead, the results are the same, year after year, election after election. Our cities are overrun with crime. Jobs and businesses are fleeing. Schools are failing. Our fellow citizens are suffering. Missouri deserves better."

Scharf, who filed to run for statewide office shortly after the midterms, had been widely expected to launch his campaign for the attorney general seat, which has traditionally served as a springboard to higher office in state and federal government.

Before Bailey took office in early January, the position had been occupied by Eric Schmitt, a Republican recently elected to the U.S. Senate. Bailey was subsequently appointed to fill out the remainder of Schmitt's term by Gov. Mike Parson.

Bailey, the 41-year-old prosecutor who had served as Parson's general counsel, said last week that he would run for a full term in 2024, casting himself as "a constitutional

conservative" who "has defended Missouri communities by putting violent criminals behind bars."

In an interview prior to his own campaign launch, Scharf, 36, said he was undeterred by his position in the race, even as he moves to unseat Parson's choice for the job. "The governor made his pick," he told *Jewish Insider* last month, "and in August of 2024, the people of Missouri are going to get to make their choice."

Bailey, he insisted, "very much represents the establishment insider clique in Jefferson City," the state capital. "I think we can present a very strong contrast there."

The Democratic primary field is currently vacant with nearly two years until the election. The seat has remained under Republican control since 2017, when Josh Hawley, now a U.S. senator, claimed victory in an open-seat race to succeed Chris Koster.

It's the first campaign for office for Scharf, a lawyer and prosecutor who previously served as a top advisor to Eric Greitens, the former Republican governor of Missouri who resigned from office in 2018 amid accusations of sexual misconduct.

Following his tenure in state government, Scharf was actively involved in the Supreme Court confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh as a consultant to the Judicial Crisis Network, a conservative advocacy group now called the Concord Fund. He then served as a special nominations counsel in the Justice

Department's Office of Legal Policy, where he helped to confirm Amy Coney Barrett.

Until last November, Scharf had been working for more than two years as an assistant U.S. attorney in St. Louis, where he specialized in the prosecution of violent crimes, a focal point of his campaign. "If we don't tackle the crime problem in this state," Scharf told *Ji*, "this state doesn't have a future."

Speaking more broadly, Scharf said he is now running for office to address what he characterized as "a culture of corruption in Jefferson City."

"It's one of the worst state capitals in America," he told *Ji*. "You have a very narrow set of lobbyists and consultants and insiders and trial lawyers and captured industries and people who do very well for themselves off of state government. The people who are left out and left behind are the people of Missouri, and I think until we break that mold, until we bring new leadership into Jefferson City, the macro problems the state faces just aren't going to change."

He said the attorney general can ideally serve as a "watchdog across a wide range of issues," including education, "which you wouldn't necessarily think of as an attorney general issue." The office should be "willing to investigate school districts that may be violating state law or misusing state funds," he argued, while pointing a finger at nonprofit groups that, in his assessment,

“frustrate state policy in areas like school choice and education reform.”

“There are a lot of stones that the Jefferson City establishment would rather remain unturned,” Scharf claimed. “I would see my job as attorney general as diligently flipping those stones.”

Scharf, who is Jewish, added that he is personally concerned about recent instances on college campuses in which anti-Israel activism has given rise to what many students have described as antisemitic discrimination. “With the rise of the BDS movement and the dominance of intersectionality as a motivating principle on the left, I think a lot of Jewish students really feel under fire,” he said, referring to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against Israel. “We haven’t had big incidents like that here yet.”

But Scharf said he is “interested in getting involved” with such issues as attorney general if specific cases of anti-Jewish discrimination at state-funded universities in Missouri are brought to his attention. “College campuses are often not friendly places for Jewish students now,” Scharf told JI. “To the extent that’s the case in the state of Missouri, I’d love to play a role in improving the situation.”

For his part, Scharf, who believes he would be Missouri’s first Jewish attorney general, said he has never experienced antisemitism during the years he has lived in the state. “It’s a state with a long history of electing Jews to Congress, to statewide office, or electing people with Jewish family,” he said. “In terms of my race, I don’t see antisemitism being an issue and I hope it doesn’t become an issue.”

Scharf, who grew up in New York City

and North Florida, was raised in a Modern Orthodox home but attended non-Jewish schools, a dynamic he described as having “a foot in two worlds.”

“I believe I was the first observant Jew to graduate from Andover, which was very difficult,” he said, referring to the Phillips Academy preparatory school in Andover, Mass., where he graduated in 2004. “I had a special dispensation to not go to Saturday classes. The local Chabad rabbi was obviously very helpful.”

The Harvard Law graduate, who first moved to St. Louis in 2011 to clerk for a federal appeals court judge, said he keeps kosher, wraps tefillin every morning, davens regularly and walks to the local Chabad on Shabbat.

“Judaism is still a big part of my life, and it comes up in weird places,” Scharf told JI, recalling one particularly memorable episode during his time with the Greitens administration. “I was at work late one night during Hanukkah and I lit a little travel menorah in my office in the governor’s office, and I thought to myself, like, this is probably the first time that a menorah has been lit in the governor’s office here, and it’s just sort of cool to think about things that way.”

It wasn’t the only time he remembers his Jewish identity intersecting, even to an occasionally comical degree, with his professional life. During a routine bill signing at the governor’s office, for instance, one of the attendees, a Baptist faith leader, asked if Scharf would lead the group in prayer, which he said came as a surprise.

“I was sort of caught off guard, so I said the ‘Shehecheyanu’ in Hebrew and then translated into English,” Scharf said of the Jewish blessing of gratitude. “It was just

kind of what came to mind.”

In his telling, the prayer was well-received. “We all said amen,” he told JI. “I think I passed the prayer test.”

“Coming from a strong faith tradition,” Scharf said more broadly, has often provided him with “a point of common origin” in what he characterized as a “pretty religious state.”

While Bailey officially launched his campaign for a full term last week, Scharf enters the race with a fundraising advantage. The political newcomer pulled in nearly \$300,000 in just the month of December, including from such big-name Republicans as Leonard Leo, who co-chairs the Federalist Society; Patrick Morrissey, West Virginia’s attorney general; and Peter Bisbee, the executive director of the Republican Attorneys General Association. In January, Scharf also gave \$500,000 to his own campaign.

“It’ll be an interesting race, given that neither Bailey nor Scharf are experienced in electoral politics,” Jeremy Walling, a professor of political science at Southeast Missouri State University, said in an email to JI on Tuesday. “Both men can point to accomplishments, but those have occurred offstage, out of the spotlight of electoral politics.”

Speaking with JI, Scharf explained that he had long been “content supporting other people” behind the scenes as an advisor and consultant.

“But I think we’re at a period of time now where if good people don’t step up, we’re just not going to get done what we need to get done,” he said. “That’s how I feel about my race.” ♦

Three Israeli NGOs in Africa weren't collaborating. Now they're working together

The collaborations between IsraAID, Save a Child's Heart and Innovation: Africa were spurred by the Kirsh Foundation, which supports all three groups

By Linda Gradstein

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

The lives of a group of children from South Sudan hung in the balance, the promise of heart surgery resting more than 1,700 miles away in Tel Aviv. The Israeli nonprofit Save a Child's Heart, which offers life-saving procedures in Israel to children from all over the world, had recently identified several in the impoverished African country who were excellent candidates for the surgery. "We saw them and we knew we could help them, but we didn't have the logistical support on the ground," said Simon Fisher, SACH's executive director.

Now, such support in Africa is fast becoming a reality. Three Israeli humanitarian nonprofits working on the continent — IsraAID, Innovation: Africa and Save a Child's Heart — have begun collaborating on projects, with a push from the Kirsh Foundation, which donates tens of millions of dollars to the three groups.

"This collaboration is very unique and does not happen very often between nonprofit organizations in general and the humanitarian space in particular," IsraAID CEO Yotam Polizer told *eJewishPhilanthropy* in a phone interview from Dominica, a small country in the Caribbean that was recently devastated by a hurricane. IsraAID is working there to build a long-term recovery and resistance project there as well as a project to deal with climate change.

IsraAID, founded in 2001, has worked in more than 60 countries after emergencies, such as hurricanes, as well as long-term projects. Polizer says the group is often able to respond to emergencies within 72 hours, bringing models from Israel for

public health, education and psychological support. The organization works on three levels: emergency response, recovery and preparedness, and refugees and forced migration. It also works with survivors of rape and gender-based violence. The organization is currently working in Kenya, Uganda, South Sudan, Mozambique and Ethiopia, having recently finished a project in Eswatini (formerly known as Swaziland) dealing with survivors of Ebola as well as a large-scale vaccination campaign.

Polizer, who last month was announced as the recipient of the Charles Bronfman Prize, said that each of the three organizations involved has a different expertise and that collaboration can benefit all of them, such as the case of the Sudanese children who required heart surgery.

"We saw them and we knew we could help them, but we didn't have the logistical support on the ground," said Simon Fisher, the executive director of Save a Child's Heart. "It's life and death for these children. We hope we can use the collaboration to reach out to children who we otherwise would not even identify and be able to bring them to Israel."

Fisher said that since Save a Child's Heart was founded in 1995, the nonprofit has treated more than 6,500 children from 66 countries around the world. In the next few weeks, SACH hopes to receive children from Guinea-Bissau, Gabon and Eswatini, raising the total number of countries from which they've received children to 69.

The third large-scale organization working in Africa is Innovation: Africa, which has used Israeli solar and water technology to deliver clean water and energy to more than 4 million people across 10 African countries.

Sivan Yaari, the CEO of Innovation: Africa, said that the collaboration with IsraAID is beneficial to both organizations; while there is some overlap, each operates in different countries in Africa and can therefore share knowledge. The organization employs 130 people, mostly engineers, throughout the continent.

She said that she has hired employees from IsraAID, and IsraAID has hired her employees and that the two organizations maintain good relations. This week, the two groups are conducting a joint training with geophysicists in Uganda to learn about issues surrounding drilling wells.

Save a Child's Heart has been working in Tanzania for years, and when Innovation: Africa wanted to open a project in Tanzania, SACH staffers were able to share knowledge of hospitals where clean water was not available and where providing it would address the most urgent needs.

The foundation encouraging this collaboration was founded by South Africans Nathan and Frances Kirsh. The Kirsh Foundation focuses on southern Africa development through microfinance loans that have helped nearly 27,000 businesses. The foundation also funded a project for internet connectivity in Eswatini. In Israel, it operates a similar microfinance program called Keren Natan.

"They are incredibly committed philanthropically to Israel and were looking for a way to bring their two passions together," Carly Maisel, the foundation's global CEO, told *eJP*. "These three organizations embody the best of what Israel can do in the humanitarian space across the African continent."

She said that the CEOs of all three nonprofits knew each other but didn't

necessarily have a close working relationship. The Kirsh Foundation encourages collaboration among all of its grantees but especially in Africa, given the continent's many challenges. Recently, the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Ukraine has captured the world's attention, and IsraAID has been active there as well. But the crisis in Africa is worsening because of a severe drought and climate change.

"The Kirsh Foundation understands what it takes to build a sustainable and

efficient organization," Innovation: Africa's Yaari said. "They understand that to be efficient you have to hire the right team and empower the local teams on the ground. In every country we work in, we hire local people and then transfer the knowledge and technology from Israel."

She said that the foundation's support has enabled her nonprofit to scale its efforts up significantly. In 2022, the organization brought water and electricity to 241 villages, delivering the utilities to a new village, on

average, every day or two. Before that, it took 10 days or two weeks for each village to get those services.

"They understand that access to clean water makes such a difference to the community," Yaari said.

Polizer of IsraAID agrees.

"These three organizations put a spotlight on Africa and the need there," he said. "The partnership we received has really been a game changer." ♦

FEBRUARY 2, 2023

Gottheimer, Moskowitz call for select committee on antisemitism

The letter followed the House's party-line vote to remove Rep. Ilhan Omar from the Foreign Affairs Committee for antisemitic comments

By Marc Rod

Shortly after the House voted along party lines to remove Rep. Ilhan Omar (R-MN) from the House Foreign Affairs Committee, two Jewish Democrats, Reps. Jared Moskowitz (D-FL) and Josh Gottheimer (D-NJ), urged House Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) to establish a Select Committee on Combating Antisemitism.

In a letter addressed to the speaker, Moskowitz and Gottheimer highlighted an increase in incidents involving antisemitism, pointing in particular to the emergence of Ye, formerly known as Kanye West, in recent months as a virulent propagator of antisemitism and Holocaust denial, and tying the performer's comments to recent antisemitic incidents across the country.

"In recent years, we have seen a troubling rise in antisemitic rhetoric and violence both at home and abroad. Left unchecked, this hate poses a direct threat not only to the Jewish community but the entirety of

our society as it creates division and sows discord," the letter reads. "We are deeply concerned, as you must be, by the rise in antisemitism and stand ready to help you take action to create a more tolerant society."

"A Select Committee on Combating Antisemitism would provide a dedicated forum for Members to bring legislative efforts to combat antisemitism to the forefront of the national conversation," the letter argues.

Amid a series of antisemitic outbursts on social media and podcasts, Ye and far-right provocateur Nick Fuentes met with former President Donald Trump.

Shortly after the dinner, held at Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate, McCarthy said that "the president can have meetings with who he wants," but "I don't think anybody, though, should have a meeting with Nick Fuentes and his views are nowhere within the Republican Party or within this country

itself."

Gottheimer and Moskowitz both voted to keep Omar on the Foreign Affairs Committee. In a statement, Gottheimer cited the Minnesota Democrat's support for a resolution "recognizing Israel as America's legitimate and democratic ally and condemning antisemitism." Moskowitz condemned Omar and said she did not deserve to serve on the committee, but said he opposed the precedent of removing minority party lawmakers from committees.

Such a House committee would follow in the wake of an administration task force dedicated to combating antisemitism and Islamophobia, established following the urging of Jewish groups and lawmakers. ♦

Alvin Bragg defends plea deal in brazen antisemitic attack

A defendant who said he'd 'do it again' if given the chance was offered a plea deal by the Manhattan district attorney

By Matthew Kassel

As he enters his second year in office, Alvin Bragg, the district attorney of Manhattan, finds himself at the center of a heated and increasingly personal debate over a case involving the brutal assault of a Jewish man in Times Square.

The veteran prosecutor, whose closely watched handling of the high-profile tax fraud investigation into former President Donald Trump's real estate company successfully capped off an otherwise turbulent introduction to city politics, is now facing scrutiny for offering what many are denouncing as an overly lenient plea deal to one of four defendants charged with targeting a Jewish resident of Nassau County, Joseph Borgen, in an antisemitic attack nearly two years ago.

Borgen, now 30, has said he was wearing a yarmulke when, in an incident captured on video, he was violently beaten while walking to a pro-Israel demonstration in Midtown Manhattan during the May 2021 conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, which coincided with an uptick in antisemitic incidents across the U.S. He has recalled being punched, kicked and pepper-sprayed during the assault, for which he was hospitalized.

The six-month plea bargain recommended for Waseem Awawdeh, a 24-year-old Brooklyn man accused of striking Borgen four times with a crutch in an attempted gang assault, provoked an outcry from Jewish leaders in New York City and its surrounding suburbs, some of whom have seized on the chance to cast Bragg as misguided in his approach to crime.

Renewing charges that Bragg, a Democrat who took office last January, has been insufficiently aggressive in pursuing

criminal convictions, Bruce Blakeman, the Republican executive of Nassau County, dismissed the deal as "a slap on the wrist" and characterized Awawdeh as a "ringleader" in the attack during a press conference held earlier this month. Meanwhile, in a significant escalation of rhetoric, Dov Hikind, a former state assemblyman from Brooklyn, called on protestors "to go to the DA's house" as he delivered remarks at a rally in Lower Manhattan late last week.

Left-wing advocacy groups, including Jews for Racial and Economic Justice and New York Jewish Agenda, objected to such comments on Thursday, after protestors had gathered outside a Manhattan courthouse where Awawdeh had made an appearance. In a statement defending Bragg, NYJA accused "Hikind and his allies" of "weaponizing antisemitism to call for violence against an elected official."

The case is shaping up to be another potential test of the district attorney's relatively brief tenure, which began on rocky footing after he released a controversial policy memo pledging to seek prison sentences only for the most severe offenses. Bragg, who faced calls for his ouster from Republican leaders during the midterms, has since tempered his approach to such crimes.

In his first public comments to address the Borgen case, Bragg, 49, said in an interview with *Jewish Insider* on Friday that he was "aware of the broader discussion" around the investigation but refrained from responding directly to accusations from some of his most vociferous critics. Instead, he insisted that his office is simply following the facts at hand. "Our focus is where it must be," he said in a phone conversation,

"which is the evidence that will be put forth and that does come forward during our investigation."

"We take these cases extraordinarily seriously," Bragg averred. "That sort of hate has no place in Manhattan."

Despite the uproar over the sentencing recommendation, Borgen, whose public statements addressing the case have largely remained diplomatic, told *The New York Post* last week that he believes the prosecutors involved in the investigation "are doing the best job they can do at this point."

Awawdeh, who reportedly called Borgen a "dirty Jew" during the attack and later said he would "do it again," did not initiate the assault and left before it was over, according to a spokesperson for Bragg's office. He has no prior criminal convictions.

"We do this in all of our cases, a kind of individualized justice depending upon a person's role in the charge conducts" and "a person's criminal history or lack thereof," Bragg, a former federal prosecutor who has long advocated for a holistic approach to criminal justice, said broadly of the deal offered to Awawdeh. "We're looking specifically at the person, the crime and the person's role in the crime."

While Bragg said that "all of the offense conduct plays a role" in the investigation, he explained that his office is, unlike the general public, for now privy to what he characterized as "the full context of conduct."

Rebecca Roiphe, a professor at New York Law School, said she was unable to weigh in on the merits of the plea deal "without knowing more about the details of the case," even as she acknowledged that it "has

provoked a great deal of outrage and the nature of the crime was horrific.”

“But the DA has to consider multiple factors in determining what plea deal to offer,” she wrote in an email to JI, adding: “It is impossible to scrutinize a plea deal without fully understanding what role this defendant played and a host of other facts that bear on the proper plea deal and sentence.”

Bragg said his office is “requiring felony hate crime pleas and incarceration, at the minimum,” for three of the four defendants in the case, including Mohammed Othman and Mahmoud Musa, who must plead to the top charge of assault in the second degree as a hate crime, a Class C felony with a minimum sentence of three-and-a-half years in state prison and a maximum sentence of 15 years.

“That is, in our view, serious, the three-and-a-half to 15,” Bragg said, “and is commensurate, in our view, with the charged conduct.”

A fourth defendant, Faisal Elezzi, has been offered a plea to attempted assault in the third degree as a hate crime, a Class A misdemeanor with a “sentencing condition” of “intensive programming,” a spokesperson for Bragg’s office told JI.

Bragg declined to comment on the specifics of the case, which he inherited from his predecessor, Cyrus Vance Jr., because it remains ongoing. The defendants are due back in court on March 9, when more details of the case are likely to be made public.

“We do the work,” Bragg said. “We are in the arena. We are in the court. We’ve got an obligation to focus on the facts and the facts and the evidence, and that’s where, certainly, my focus is and the office’s focus in every case, including this case.”

Even as the six-month plea deal has been met with disapproval from a cohort of outspoken detractors, Bragg, who is Manhattan’s first Black district attorney, has emphasized that countering a rise in hate crimes remains a “top priority,” as he claimed in an interview with JI last summer. Such offenses “tear at the fabric of society,” he said on Friday, adding: “They’re different when someone’s being attacked because of their religion or their race or their national origin.”

Last year, Bragg successfully lobbied for

\$1.7 million in additional funding to expand his office’s hate crimes unit, which he had characterized as under-resourced amid an uptick in attacks against Asian Americans, Jews and other minority groups across the city.

Since the funding was released this past July, Bragg’s office has staffed up while building a sizable docket of cases. The unit, led by Hannah Yu, is now operating with 20 specially trained hate crimes prosecutors, in contrast with just three during the same time a year ago, according to Bragg. It has also hired two new senior investigative analysts while increasing outreach to underserved communities with the help of victim services counselors fluent in such languages as Cantonese and Mandarin, among other efforts.

“As a result of this work, our hate crimes prosecutions are up 20% on the year,” said Bragg, whose office initiated 92 new hate crimes cases in 2022. “Our docket is, sadly and tragically, at an all-time high, and probably even sadder than that, we still note that this is an underreported crime.”

He suggested that the growing docket of cases was the result of both rising hate crimes and the recent influx of resources allowing the unit to take on additional investigations. “I think that our outreach certainly has directly led to some reporting,” he said. “I also do think, sadly, that hate crimes are up.”

More broadly, robberies, burglaries and other major crimes have also increased overall during Bragg’s time in office, even amid a contemporaneous decline in murders and shootings across New York City.

In a demographic breakdown of his office’s open hate crimes investigations shared with JI, the highest number of cases, 44 in total, were said to be motivated by anti-Asian bias, followed by 32 cases involving members of the LGBTQ community. The hate crimes unit is currently working on 16 antisemitic cases, which represent the third largest share of hate crimes prosecutions now under the office’s purview.

“That’s a very high number,” Yu, the hate crimes unit chief, said in an interview with JI last week. “They range from incidents involving the placement of a swastika on a building to some very serious cases.”

The office is now bringing charges in

another high-profile antisemitic incident involving two defendants, Christopher Brown and Matthew Mahrer, who were arrested this past November in an alleged online terror plot to attack the Jewish community in Manhattan. The suspects are scheduled to appear in court on Tuesday following a grand jury indictment last month.

Brown is facing a top indicted count of criminal possession of a weapon in the second degree as a crime of terrorism, while Mahrer is charged with a top count of criminal possession of a weapon in the second degree. The district attorney’s office has enlisted its director of intelligence for counterterrorism to help prosecute the two defendants, Yu said, while noting that a senior trial counsel is the lead assistant district attorney on the case. “These are very serious crimes,” Yu told JI.

Yu, who took over the hate crimes unit in 2021, said her team is “seeing a persistent number of assaults and harassment cases against the Jewish community,” amid what she described as a “troubling” uptick in antisemitic incidents.

Last year saw more than 250 antisemitic hate crimes reported to law enforcement across New York City, according to a recent analysis of police data conducted by *The Times of Israel*.

“Whether we can connect that to recent rhetoric that we’ve seen from celebrities and the like about the Jewish community, I can’t say for sure,” Yu told JI. “But there is, it seems, an increase in harassment of Jewish people, threats communicated either over the phone or by email — and those require extensive investigation, which we’re doing right now.”

The office’s docket of cases listed as antisemitic, while unusually large, still falls short of providing “the full picture of” related ongoing work, Yu added. “There’s a lot of pre-arrest investigations and post-arrest investigations that are happening,” she said, referring in particular to cyber-related crimes. “There’s very little that we don’t look at when we are trying to see if there’s any sort of bias-related motive evidence,” Yu explained. “If there’s a pattern, we’re looking at each incident to see if there was a statement made at every incident.”

The 20 prosecutors who work in the unit

have also received additional training, Yu said, to enhance their skills at identifying antisemitic tropes and interviewing victims and witnesses from immigrant communities, among other things. “We’re really expanding our knowledge base,” she told JI.

As the office has worked to bolster its hate crimes unit over the last six months or so, it has increased engagement with pro bono legal advocates and nonprofit organizations, including the Asian American Bar Association of New York, the Anti-Defamation League and the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York.

“There’s just a constant stream of communication with our community-based organizations,” Yu told JI. “We can’t do the job without them, because they may have information that we’re not privy to.”

In keeping with what Yu described as Bragg’s “vision for fairness and justice,” her unit, she said, has referred many of its cases to the office’s Pathways for Public Safety division, which was launched last year in an effort to promote alternatives to incarceration “without jeopardizing community safety,” according to a statement announcing the initiative.

The goal, Yu elaborated, is “to see if there are other programmatic” legal avenues — such as substance abuse programs and mental health court — that could possibly “make sense” in lieu of what Bragg has criticized as an excessively punitive criminal justice framework often more focused on securing convictions than addressing root causes of crime.

“We want to achieve many goals through these hate crime resolutions, whether it’s

letting the victim know that we care and achieving closure and justice for the victim,” Yu said, “but also preventing these crimes from happening again, which may involve rigorous treatment and programmatic efforts to really allow the defendant to be in a place where they will not commit a crime like this again.”

While even the plea deal given to Awadeh was too cushy for some of Bragg’s most strident critics, the district attorney said his office will continue to prioritize hate crimes investigations using an “individualized” approach to justice, as the recently expanded unit works through a record number of cases.

“There’s a lot more work to do,” Bragg told JI in the interview on Friday. “But we are, I think, well-positioned from a kind of human and institutional resources perspective.” ♦