

## THE WEEKLY PRINT

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## Interview with Sir David Adjaye, architect of Abu Dhabi's Abrahamic Family House

*"I always love the moment when something we've been working on, something that's been in the head, is suddenly taken over by people," Adjaye told JI*

By Tamara Zieve

Sitting quietly with his young son lying on his lap on one of the back rows of the oak wood benches in the Moses Ben Maimon Synagogue in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, Sir David Adjaye appeared keen to blend in with the crowd. As bright midday sunlight filtered into the sanctuary that Sunday noon, the architect of the Abrahamic Family House was soaking in the moment among the approximately 325 guests gathered to mark the Feb. 19 opening of the synagogue.

"Hello, rabbi! I've been caught," the award-winning Ghanaian-British architect laughed good-humoredly moments later, greeting Rabbi Yehuda Sarna, chief rabbi of the synagogue, as Sarna passed him. As *Jewish Insider* began an interview with Adjaye, several admirers of his work

quickly caught wind of who he was and began eagerly questioning him about the inspiration for the three iconic houses of worship he designed — a Catholic church, a mosque and a synagogue that stand side by side in a monumental interfaith complex on Saadiyat Island, Abu Dhabi's cultural hub.

"The deep history of all the religions," Adjaye said, was the inspiration for the synagogue, named after the 12th-century rabbinic philosopher Maimonides, the His Holiness Francis Church, named after St. Francis of Assisi, and the Imam Al-Tayeb Mosque, named for the grand imam of the Al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo.

"The concept is three temples, 30-by-30-by 30 [meters] — three. Three pylons. So if you notice each room, each volume from the exterior to the exterior and the height are all

equal," Adjaye, 56, told JI. "So they're three equal forms. But in each — three different atmospheres."

Each of the cube-shaped houses of worship in the 6,500-square-meter complex includes a courtyard with a water feature and ancillary spaces specific to their religious traditions and practices. The houses are linked by an elevated garden.

Adjaye's inspiration for the synagogue, which is oriented towards Jerusalem, was the Jewish holiday of Sukkot. The criss-cross beams that rise up to the roof, allowing light to filter in through the gaps, represent palm leaves or plants covering the sukkah, and allow congregants to look "up to the heavens," Adjaye said.

Adjaye, whose works include the National Museum of African American

History and Culture in Washington, D.C., and the National Cathedral of Ghana, had initially wanted to make the roof open, but noted that this wasn't possible for technical reasons.

A bronze mesh tent — symbolizing the original tabernacle, known to have included a bronze laver — cascades from a skylight in the ceiling, which allows in midday sun and creates the effect of dappled light, a theme that carries through the three houses of worship.

In the church, a striking feature of vertical wooden beams of different lengths hanging down from the ceiling allows for a similar play on natural light. The church is oriented east, the direction of the rising sun, as light is considered a symbol of divinity.

"The idea of the New Testament, for issue, is that the spirit of the Lord is with you. So it is about the energy of the Lord, encompassing the entire chamber, not just the altar. So you come in and you're under this timber shower," Adjaye explains. "What does that timber shower do? It splits the light. So it's also another idea of dappled light bathing the congregation."

And in the mosque, which is oriented towards the holy city of Mecca in Saudi

Arabia, Adjaye highlighted the four-column interior grid that creates nine ascending vaults, which orient visitors toward the *mihrab*, or wall niche that faces Mecca. The four columns, according to a fact sheet about the holy site, "reference the Islamic notion of stability, order, and fullness that is attributed to the number four."

Adjaye said the design for the mosque is about "the breath, the Word of God."

"And basically, what you have is the geometry of Islam, the idea of moving to geometry, creating a screen between the columns, and creating again, dappled light, filtered light," he explained.

"So what I'm trying to talk about also is the idea of light and God, that that is part of the whole atmosphere that we've come into, when we are talking about the sacred."

Adjaye, born a Christian, delved deeply into Judaism and Islam when conducting research for this project. "It's been an incredible education," he said.

The architect, who hails from Ghana's capital city of Accra, spent a lot of time in the UAE while working on the buildings. "I think that what Abu Dhabi is doing by opening up is very powerful," he remarked.

Adjaye describes as "critical statements"

the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together, signed by Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed Al-Tayeb, grand imam of Al-Azhar Mosque on Feb. 4, 2019.

"And to do it here, I think, on this continent was so symbolic and so powerful. And I hope that it has a ripple effect in the world," he added.

Sitting inside the Moses Ben Maimon Synagogue on its first day of prayer was a meaningful moment for Adjaye. "It's just such a magical moment to see it full of people," he said.

"I always love the moment when something we've been working on, something that's been in the head, is suddenly taken over by people," the architect continued. "And they know how to use it because of the rituals and the patterns of what these things mean. So it's beautiful. It's always humbling."

During the opening ceremony, Adjaye received an enthusiastic round of applause after Rabbi Sarna gave him a special mention in his sermon — ending the architect's apparent plans to merge unnoticed into the congregation gathered under the netted tent-like canopy he created. ♦

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## In a first, Hebrew University launches undergrad class in UAE studies

*'There was a lacuna in Israel in terms of understanding the UAE beyond the Abraham Accords,' lecturer Moran Zaga told JI*

By Ruth Marks Eglash

Since the Abraham Accords were signed two-and-a-half years ago, some half a million Israelis have visited the United Arab Emirates for diplomacy, business or to sample the Gulf state's high-end, luxurious tourism. Now, for the first time, an Israeli university has launched a certified

undergraduate course offering students the chance to gain a deeper understanding of what its new regional ally is all about.

Titled "The Geopolitics of the UAE," the course, which started Sunday and is offered within the department of Islamic and Middle Eastern studies at the Hebrew University

of Jerusalem, delves into the history of the economic powerhouse, explores its unique physical geography and influential role in a volatile region. The course also looks at the delicate make-up of the country's people — from the native Arabian tribes to the multinational foreign residents — as well as

the political policies and philosophies that turned it into a friend of Israel.

"The Abraham Accords is only a small part of the course," Moran Zaga, the founder of the program and one of the few researchers of the UAE in Israel, told *Jewish Insider*.

Rather, she continued, "The central question that we will explore is the stable foundations of the United Arab Emirates, and within that we will learn about the country's physical geographical, its social geography, its history, about the tribes that make up its population, the structure of its political authority and its political and economic principles."

Zaga, a political geographer and expert on the Arabian Gulf, said her interest in the UAE began as an undergraduate student at Tel Aviv University in 2005. As the holder of a foreign passport – in addition to her Israeli one – she was afforded the rare opportunity to visit the country despite the absence of diplomatic relations with Israel and has been researching it ever since.

"I got to know the country very well and really fell in love with it," she said.

While the announcement of the normalization agreement between Israel, the UAE and Bahrain in August 2020 caught much of the world by surprise, for Zaga, who had already been studying the Gulf federation for nearly 15 years, the warming of ties was a natural progression.

But, Zaga told JI, she immediately understood that there was a big gap in terms of Israelis' knowledge of their newfound ally.

"There was a lacuna in Israel in terms of understanding the UAE beyond the Abraham Accords," Zaga, who was suddenly called on by business leaders and government officials to share her unique insights about the country, explained.

"I tried to share as much as I could," she said. "Israelis really had no idea about this

country – most thought that Dubai was the country, and I worked very hard to close that gap in knowledge."

As well as educating those in diplomacy, politics and business, Zaga wanted to share her knowledge with other Israelis and began approaching the country's universities to see if they would be interested in offering a course solely about the UAE.

"Israeli universities have a very conservative approach to studying the countries in the Gulf," Zaga explained. "Most of the courses offered focus on Saudi Arabia, and the UAE is just a by-product of that."

Her offer to create and teach a course dedicated to the UAE was turned down by multiple educational institutions, until she reached renowned Israeli professor of Islamic and Middle Eastern studies Elie Podeh at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Podeh, a senior research fellow at the Harry S. Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace, and a board member of Mitvim – the Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, convinced Julia Rabinovitch, head of the Islamic and Middle Eastern studies department, to fulfill Zaga's dream and include the course this semester.

On Sunday, Zaga excitedly tweeted a photo from the class saying that it was "full to capacity." She told JI that 35 students were enrolled and there was already a long waiting list.

"I was so happy to see the amount of interest and love for this subject from the students yesterday," she said. "Not only did it fulfill my own dream, it also made me see that I am not alone in wanting to know more about this country."

Zaga said that the class, which will now meet once a week, will include site visits to Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and meetings with Emiratis and others who work in the field.

"We will follow the country's history chronologically and also thematically, we will look at its society, its economy and its politics," Zaga described. "In addition, we will study the UAE's geopolitical relations with other countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as its relations with the United States and China."

Asher Fredman, director for Israel at the Abraham Accords Peace Institute, told JI that a long-lasting partnership between the UAE and Israel needed to be based not only on trade and technology, but "on a deep understanding of each other's history and heritage."

"The offering of a course on the UAE at Hebrew University is a very positive step, which will enable Israeli students to gain a greater appreciation both for Emirati culture, and for the UAE's extremely impressive development in modern times," he added.

Launching the course this week, Zaga said she asked the students – a broad mix of secular Israelis, Arabs and even some soldiers – why they had signed up.

"They all said, 'we understand this is an important country, but we don't know anything about it,'" Zaga recalled. "They said that they were interested in learning about how a country as small as the UAE managed to have such an influence in the region, how it became an economic success and also about its population."

There were also many questions about the Gulf nation's patriotism and as part of the first lesson, Zaga played the UAE's national anthem, '*Ishy Bilady*' (Long Live My Nation), to her students.

"It was very moving to hear the UAE national anthem playing in Jerusalem, in a classroom at Hebrew University," she concluded. ♦

# Captain Ayoub is now Israel's ambassador to the UAE – on TV

*'Fauda' actor Itzhik Cohen, who plays Ambassador Yitzhak Maymon in new show, 'The Embassy,' told JI that his character is 'a very Israeli guy with a lot of chutzpah'*

By Ruth Marks Eglash

Judging a camel beauty contest, clandestinely befriend the Tunisian ambassador and babysitting a government minister intent on a massive shopping spree: These are some of the uncomfortable situations Israel's top envoy to the United Arab Emirates finds himself in – at least in the new fictional TV comedy series, "The Embassy."

Based in part on real stories from Israeli diplomatic missions around the world, the satirical show, which is currently airing in Hebrew on Reshet, Israel's Channel 13, is the brainchild of screenwriter and actor Yuval Haklai.

Haklai plays Tzvika, a straight-laced Israeli diplomat who is endlessly saving a lovable but slightly crooked Israeli politician-turned-ambassador from embarrassing himself or causing a diplomatic incident.

"The idea came from wanting to create an 'Office'-type sitcom set in the workplace and which combines my love for politics and international relations," Haklai, one of the show's three creators, told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview.

"Setting the show in an Israeli embassy where you have all the diplomacy and the Mossad inside the workplace, and then placing it in an Arab country, creates an even more dramatic area to explore," he continued. "I also wanted to do something new, so I thought, 'Let's say Israel signs a peace agreement with a hostile country in the Gulf; like the United Arab Emirates or Qatar.'"

But when Haklai first came up with the idea, he was slightly ahead of his time. It was six months before the signing of the Abraham Accords normalization agreements between Israel, the UAE and

Bahrain in September 2020, and everyone said the storyline was too far-fetched.

"They told me to create an imaginary country," he laughed. "Then perhaps it might be more feasible."

"When I told it to my agent, she was like, 'Yeah, yeah right.' She was not excited about it all," recalled Haklai. "And then, six months later, we woke up to the news [of the Abraham Accords]."

"Israel kept the agreements super-secret, but suddenly we were in a new era of peace in the Middle East, with the UAE, with Bahrain and they also even talked about Saudi Arabia joining," he added. "Then my agent called me and said, 'What about the show you were telling me about six months ago?'"

Luckily for Haklai, he had not taken too much notice of the naysayers and was able to reply that the show was already in the works.

"I told her that I had already developed the characters, the plotlines and had half of the script written, and from there it all came to life really, really fast, in terms of TV," he said. "From the first day I had the idea to when it went up on air was only three years; some TV shows take more than a decade to get on air."

Launched at the end of January — the first episode features the camel beauty contest — "The Embassy" stars Itzhik Cohen, whom "Fauda" fans will recognize as Capt. Ayoub, as the slightly arrogant yet insecure Ambassador Yitzhak Maymon. Maymon heads a diplomatic mission of colorful characters, most of them Israeli, who race around Abu Dhabi in an attempt to build relations with their new friends, the Emiratis.

Hilarious scenarios ensue when cultural differences, such as the Israeli drive for fast-paced, immediate results, contrast with the more relaxed, laid-back Gulf approach. And a roster of Israeli visitors — mostly politicians and businessmen looking to make money out of the new diplomatic arrangement — ends in all sorts of predicaments.

In one episode Maymon hears that the mayor of Tel Aviv is trying to twin his city with Abu Dhabi. The ambassador, who realizes the financial upsides to such a partnership, invites a cousin, who is now deputy mayor in his former stronghold of Rishon Lezion, and together they hatch a plot to outsmart the other mayor. In another plot twist, Tzvika, who serves as the embassy's administrative officer, political advisor and culture attaché — and is the only staffer with any real diplomatic experience — is left to manage a frivolous Israeli culture minister, who shows up on an official visit but only wants to shop.

Niv Gat, the show's director and co-creator, told JI that he and the show's other creators carried out a great deal of research while gathering materials for the show.

"We started out with the low-hanging fruit, researching the industry or just talking to people that we knew personally who were ambassadors or who had worked at embassies," he said. "We listened to their stories and heard some pretty mind-blowing experiences. The more research we did, the more we realized, wow, there's a show here that can last seasons, so much happens."

Gat, who was raised in California and worked in the film industry there before moving to Israel, traveled with Haklai and a third creator, Arnon Weiss, to the UAE for research. The show itself was filmed in

Petah Tikva, near Tel Aviv, and only includes Israel-based actors.

Cohen's casting as Ambassador Maymon, Gat said, was a natural choice.

"It's funny, we talk about it sometimes, like, when did the idea of Itzhik Cohen coming on board first start, and none of us can actually remember the moment when we thought he should play the ambassador," said Gat. "There was just no other actor, he was just so perfect for the role, and we were like, 'It has to be him.' There was never any question about anybody else."

For Cohen, playing an Israeli ambassador in an Arab country is full of ironies after his portrayal in "Fauda" of the head of an undercover unit that infiltrates and tracks down Arab terrorists.

"I got an offer from Niv and Yuval, they asked for me and I didn't even audition, but I swear to God, I didn't read more than four sentences of the script before I said yes," Cohen told JI.

"I thought it would be very, very funny

to play this part, which is very different from the other characters I've portrayed," he continued. "Since 'Fauda,' everyone sees me in a more dramatic way, so I thought it would be fun to do something lighter and funny."

"It's very funny because most of the Arab characters in 'The Embassy' are actors that were with me in 'Fauda,' but in 'Fauda' I was interrogating them and here I am trying to collaborate with them," he joked.

Asked about the quirky story lines that appear to be real life for some Israeli diplomats, Cohen said none of it really surprised him.

"I am an Israeli and Israelis play everything by heart and nothing according to the rules and regulations; everything is improvised and on the spot," he laughed. "So, the show isn't so different from living in Israel, because you know, in Israel, when there's a queue, there are always 10 people trying to go in from the side."

"This ambassador, Yitzhak Maymon,"

Cohen continued, "will do anything to get his way. It doesn't matter if it really works by the rules and regulations of the United Arab Emirates. He is a very Israeli guy with a lot of chutzpah and a lot of nerve, and he thinks he can go to Abu Dhabi and all the sheikhs will give him money to do whatever he wants."

Eight of the 20-episode series have aired on Reshet so far, and while Haklai and Niv say they have enough material for at least one more season and are hopeful about keeping the show on air in the future, both agree that signing on long-term with an Israeli TV company is almost as complicated as running an Israeli embassy in an Arab country.

"It all depends on our ratings," said Haklai of the show, which started with high ratings that have now dipped slightly. "Reshet also has some problems at the moment, so it really depends. We just don't know." ♦

MARCH 14, 2023

## Joshua Malina's Broadway return in 'Leopoldstadt' packs a personal punch

*The opportunity to appear in "Leopoldstadt," was in some ways an extension of Malina's mission to speak out against antisemitism*

By Matthew Kassel

When Joshua Malina learned that Tom Stoppard's widely celebrated play about Jewish life in pre-Holocaust Vienna, "Leopoldstadt," would be making its Broadway debut last fall, the veteran TV actor was determined to nab an audition.

"I tried to get in," he recalled in a recent interview with *Jewish Insider*, adding that, for whatever reason, his initial effort proved unsuccessful. "You never know what

happens, but I just remember hearing that, 'no, there's nothing really in it for you.'"

The rejection, however, was far from decisive, he would find. Later, thanks to a tip from his agent, Malina expressed renewed interest in signing on amid rumors that a leading actor in "Leopoldstadt," David Krumholtz, was planning to bow out before the play's conclusion this summer. "To my delight and amazement," he marveled, "they offered me the role."

Malina, who began rehearsals last month, will take the stage on Tuesday at Manhattan's Longacre Theater, joining a limited run that is scheduled to end on July 2. He is stepping into a major role as the assimilated Jewish patriarch Hermann Merz, a wealthy textile manufacturer who learns, as the Nazis rise to power, that even his conversion to Catholicism offers no protection from the horrors of antisemitism.

For Malina, 57, the coveted gig marks



something of a triumphant return to his roots in theater. More than three decades ago, he began his acting career in the Broadway production of Aaron Sorkin's breakout play, "A Few Good Men," before landing a series of distinctive roles in such cult-status TV shows as "Sports Night," "Scandal" and "The West Wing," the NBC political drama for which he is best known.

Still, Malina privately harbored ambitions to pursue theater again if the right opportunity should arise. "I haven't been on Broadway in 34 years, and I've wanted to for a long time," he said. Last September, he inched closer to that goal, accepting a role acting in a monthlong stage adaptation of Nathan Englander's "What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank," at The Old Globe in San Diego.

"It sounds like a cliché, but it sort of re-inspired me and reawakened me to why I wanted to be an actor in the first place," he said of the production. "I love working on TV and films, but there's something special about a live performance that there's no substitute for."

Not long after that performance, "Leopoldstadt," which had premiered midway through the Englander production, "just sort of magically presented itself," Malina said with characteristic humility. "It's one of those 'pinch-me' moments in my career."

From a personal standpoint, the play, which first opened in London in 2020, is a natural fit for Malina, a Jewish actor who is among the most outspoken critics of antisemitism in Hollywood.

Two years ago, for instance, in a withering viral essay for *The Atlantic*, he reopened an uncomfortable conversation around the film industry's continued acceptance of Mel Gibson, whom Malina dismissed as "a well-known Jew-hater." Meanwhile, on Twitter, where he identifies simply as "(((Jew)))", Malina, a former yeshiva student who grew up in New Rochelle, N.Y., and now lives in Los Angeles, has dedicated much of his pungently worded social media feed to exposing antisemitism wherever such hatred emerges.

The opportunity to appear in "Leopoldstadt," he suggested, is in some ways an extension of that mission, which he views with particular urgency as antisemitic incidents have risen sharply in recent years.

"I just thought it was a very relevant piece of theater for today," Malina told JI.

"There's a feeling of security sometimes, and then you can find that your feeling of security and your safety is built on sand," he elaborated. "We're at a time, in 2023, when antisemitism and all kinds of racism and senseless hate are on the rise, and so it makes me question sometimes how secure I feel in my life."

The play, which includes an immense cast of 38 actors, centers on a family of Viennese Jews in the decades before the Holocaust and in its immediate aftermath. By varying degrees, they are all ultimately forced to confront what viewers know is inevitably in store, even as some characters — namely Hermann, who is comfortably ensconced in Austrian high society — remain optimistic that the vicious legacy of European antisemitism is largely under control.

Because of that tragic blind spot, among other things, Malina said he had been particularly "moved by Hermann" when he first read the script and in subsequent viewings after he had claimed the role.

"It would be easy to sort of watch the play and maybe decide that he's somehow foolish for not seeing what's coming," Malina told JI, adding: "Rather than thinking him foolish, I feel compassion for the character, because I think it's understandable to think that the progress you've made as a people, and as a specific person, is going to continue rather than the wheels of history suddenly pivoting and regressing."

In one of the play's most harrowing scenes, Hermann is, at least momentarily, disabused of such illusions as he challenges an Austrian officer, whom he believes has insulted his wife, a gentile, to a duel. The young cadet, however, refuses, for the simple reason that because "a Jew is devoid of honor from the day of his birth," he insists, it is "impossible" to have insulted Hermann, who "cannot therefore demand satisfaction for any suffered insult."

"In a split second, it's made clear to Hermann that, despite his being baptized Catholic and his having converted, he is, as he stands before this man, just a Jew," Malina observed. "I think it's going to be a challenging but rewarding moment. There's a lot going on there emotionally."

Well before formal rehearsals began a few weeks ago, Malina had been mentally preparing to assume the role. He has read the play multiple times, he said, while "thinking deeply" about its themes. On the suggestion of Patrick Marber, the director who hired him, he has also consulted a book of history, *Last Waltz in Vienna: The Destruction of a Family 1842–1942*, whose story is similar to that of "Leopoldstadt," which takes its name from Vienna's Jewish quarter.

Stoppard, 85, wrote the play as a sort of belated reckoning with his own Jewish heritage, which he had long failed to acknowledge. The British playwright, who was born in Czechoslovakia before World War II, only discovered that he was Jewish later in life, after a cousin informed him that his grandparents had all died in the Holocaust.

For his part, Malina, who described himself as a "full-on Ashkenazi Polish Jew," said he is aware of "extended family" who perished during the Nazi genocide. "But it was the good fortune of my family, I guess, to have escaped areas of Poland where they lived, which were bad enough early enough that most of my close ancestors came to the United States before things got far, far worse."

While they had never met before he was brought into the production, Malina said he has long admired Stoppard's work, which includes such plays as "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead" and "The Coast of Utopia," among countless others. The first Stoppard production Malina himself saw was "The Real Thing," which he attended on opening night in 1984, five years before his own Broadway debut.

"I remember as an 18-year-old, would-be actor at the time being blown away by this man's writing," he said, adding that Stoppard had sent him a "lovely" message when he was chosen to play Hermann. "It was nice to send him an email and thank him and say, 'You know, if my 18-year-old self knew that my 57-year-old self would be acting on Broadway in a Stoppard play, he probably wouldn't have believed that.'"

In conversation with JI a month before his first Broadway performance in more than 30 years, Malina explained that he was feeling both excited and daunted by the prospect of joining a large cast of "first-rate

actors” in a production that he characterized as “a very well-oiled machine.”

“I will say that I feel pressure,” he acknowledged. “It’s like when you play tennis with people who are better than you at tennis, sometimes you play a little bit better than you normally play, and so I’m hopeful that these great actors that I’m lucky enough to join will raise my game.”

But such circumstances, he added, are hardly new to him. “It’s a little bit like when I joined the cast of ‘The West Wing,’” he recalled of his experience playing Will Bailey, a precocious presidential speechwriter and White House advisor who would become one of the show’s most beloved characters. “I’m like, ‘OK, well, this thing is already up and running and it’s great, and everybody is excellent at what they do. I have to show up now and not bring down the entire endeavor.’”

He isn’t the only new face appearing onstage on Tuesday. Among others, Dave Register is taking over the role of Fritz, the

Austrian officer with whom Hermann has a memorable scene.

Beyond acting, Malina, who previously co-hosted a popular podcast about “The West Wing” that concluded in 2020, has more recently turned his attention to Jewish issues on a separate podcast called “Chutzpod,” which he began hosting a year ago with Shira Stutman, a rabbi in Aspen, Colo. Malina said he had briefly stepped away from the weekly show to focus on rehearsals, but intends to return to hosting once performances begin.

In an effort that predates the podcast, Malina has also been pitching a new TV series based on what he has called a “comic spy thriller” he optioned. The project is slow going, he told JI. “I wish there were something more significant than the glacial progress I think we’re making,” he said of the show, more details of which he declined to share. “We are continuing to work on it, and I hope it will happen.”

For the moment, however, Malina

is especially energized as he mounts a Broadway comeback, not least because he is acting in a production whose message so movingly underscores his own personal concerns about rising antisemitism.

Still, he said that theatergoers would be well-served if they viewed “Leopoldstadt” through a more expansive lens than its subject material might immediately suggest. “It would be very reductive to consider it just a Holocaust play and to feel like if you’ve seen other works of art that deal directly or tangentially with the Holocaust, enough is enough,” he told JI. “It is a powerful play, but it’s also funny, and it’s joyous, and you see the family functioning in rich and rewarding times and also difficult and challenging times.

“You don’t have to be Jewish, you don’t have to be particularly concerned with the Holocaust, to derive a lot from the experience of seeing this play.” ♦

MARCH 13, 2023

## A Jewish journey to the front office of Major League Baseball

*Zack Raab’s stint selling Team Israel merchandise led to an eventual position with Major League Baseball*

By Tani Levitt

There were moments in Zack Raab’s extended *funemployment* from 2019 to 2021 when people asked him if he would consider a job outside baseball. He had spent thousands of dollars following the Israeli national baseball team to Korea, Japan, Germany and South Florida; hundreds more to attend the Major League Baseball (MLB) Winter Meetings in San Diego; and countless more in lost income by

quitting his lucrative job at a jewelry startup in Israel to move back to the United States and pursue a career in baseball. Still, no job.

Raab, 30, knew he was being stubborn, but he said to himself, “I’m gonna stick to baseball. I know something’s gonna fall into place if I keep working hard, building the right relationships and treating people the right way.”

Raab, now the only kippah-wearing

Orthodox Jew in the Office of the Commissioner of Major League Baseball, spent most of two years pursuing his dream to find a job, any job, in baseball. “I lived out my dream for almost nine years living in Israel,” he told *Jewish Insider*. And to pursue “another dream” — his dream to fulfill his “drive and a passion to work in baseball” — he would have to come back to the U.S. And in the end, he found his breakthrough on the

back of work he did with Israel Baseball.

A lifelong baseball fan, Raab built his love for the game in South Florida, following the hapless Miami Marlins. Before moving to Israel, he attended Weinbaum Yeshiva High School (now named Katz Yeshiva High School), and attended as many Marlins games as he could. Once in Israel, baseball was less accessible, but the challenge made it that much more satisfying when he got to watch a game.

After years of following baseball from afar, the Israeli National Baseball team offered a chance to root from up close. His fandom took him across the world, but not to a job in baseball. Articles about Israel's Baseball superfan popped up left and right as he followed his beloved team, and in 2019, as Team Israel prepared for a run at the Tokyo Olympics, Raab chose to formalize his relationship with the team.

"My professional background in Israel was ecommerce and marketing," Raab said, and he noticed a demand for Israel Baseball merchandise that wasn't being met. "I made the connection between Peter Kurz — the president of the Israel Association of Baseball at the time and now the general manager of the national team — and Jon Kawebloom from Klipped Kippahs."

As with all of Raab's involvement with baseball, he had no ulterior motives. "I just wanted to help grow Israel Baseball around the world and just grow awareness for Israel baseball with merchandise and get Jewish fans wearing Israel baseball merchandise around the country, around the world."

The Olympics were delayed due to COVID, but the demand for Israel Baseball products stayed steady. Israel Baseball reached out to see if Raab would run its

merchandise website and build out the product offerings and marketing.

Raab approached the consultation like his job, creating unique products, including a customized bobblehead of pitcher Shlomo Lipetz, the "the forefather of Israel baseball." For seven months, Raab's life was Israel Baseball merchandise.

His efforts culminated with a call from MLB on the same day Israel played at the Olympics, offering him a full-time job as an MiLB Services Coordinator within the Office of the Commissioner in midtown Manhattan. Team Israel bowed out of the Olympics on Aug. 3, 2021. Raab was in his new job before the month was out.

Life is different now that Raab is on the inside. He knows more about the inner workings of the game. "I read an article and it's funny digesting the article and realizing pieces of it aren't being talked about." He also stepped down as commissioner and left a fantasy baseball league that he had been in for a decade. "I need some detachment from baseball, like in the evenings," he admitted.

During the day, Raab is doing exactly what he's always wanted to: helping baseball be the best it can be. He speaks daily with any of the 120 minor league teams about new promotions, merchandising and whatever else they've got going on. He also played a linchpin role in a yearslong collaboration between Minor League Baseball and Marvel, to make Marvel-themed logos for more than 90 participating ball clubs.

Yet much is still the same for Raab. Team Israel is set to return to the World Baseball Classic stage in March, and Raab will not be missing a single game. "I told my manager, 'the World Baseball Classic is coming. I don't know the schedule yet [or] where Israel is

going to be playing. But I'm gonna really need to be at those games.'"

Team Israel (ranked 20th in the world) has the unfortunate pleasure of playing in the "group of death" with Puerto Rico (13th), the Dominican Republic (9th), Venezuela (6th) and Nicaragua (17th), and they are significant underdogs to advance past the first round of the tournament, but Raab is unfazed. He purchased a one-way ticket to Miami for the games.

"The World Baseball Classic is a collaborative effort between the players and the league to just grow the game of baseball around the world," Raab says. So as a fan committed to the health of baseball, and as an employee of MLB, he plans to support in the way he knows best: wearing Israel Baseball's original cap, and cheering on the Israel Baseball team proudly from the stands.

"I will be toned down a little bit now as an employee of Major League Baseball, but yeah, I'm very much going to be rooting for Israel." ♦



# Silicon Valley Bank's abrupt collapse sends shockwaves through Middle East

*Abu Dhabi bankers see upside to bailing out startups while Israeli tech executives demand their cash back and Netanyahu tweets concern*

By Jonathan H. Ferziger, Robert Lakin

*The article first appeared in The Circuit.*

The sudden collapse of Silicon Valley Bank in Santa Clara, Calif., reverberated more than 7,000 miles away in the Middle East, where cash-strapped startups struggled to meet their payrolls and local lenders seized the opportunity to help bridge the gap.

In Israel, where SVB was the lifeblood for many young technology businesses just beginning to generate revenue, company CEOs found locked doors at the California bank's Tel Aviv branch when its executives failed to respond to their desperate messages. The crisis led Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to tweet from a diplomatic visit to Rome that he was closely tracking the situation.

Tel Aviv-based Bank Hapoalim and Israel Discount Bank, meanwhile, circulated word that they could help startups pay immediate bills. Signature Bank, a New York-based lender active in real estate and popular with start-ups, also collapsed on Sunday. The U.S. Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. announced an emergency bailout program hours later and said it would pay depositors 100% of the money they had in both banks.

SVB's demise, the second-largest bank collapse in U.S. history, was less of a disaster in the United Arab Emirates, which promotes itself as a center for germinating technology companies but has fewer startups than Israel. Lenders including Wio Bank, Zand Bank and MBank are ready to pick up the slack for SVB's ailing customers, said Ryan Lemand, co-founder and CEO of Abu Dhabi-based Neovision Wealth Management.

"There's an upside," Lemand told *The Circuit*. "The problem will be solved relatively quickly. Then these banks will

onboard them [as customers], said Lemand, who previously worked as a financial regulator and adviser on risk management for the UAE's federal government.

Having enthusiastically adopted the brand name, "Start-Up Nation" from a book published in 2009 by Dan Senor and Saul Singer, Israel experienced the sudden collapse of SVB as more of a direct strike at the heart of its economy. Most of the money fueling some 9,500 tech companies operating in Israel comes from the U.S., and Israel's venture capital firms are closely connected with some of the most prominent investors in Silicon Valley.

Israeli companies displayed in an animated crawl on SVB Israel office's website include: Papaya Global, Mesh, Innovid, Verbit, GlassesUSA, WalkMe, Pyramid, 8Fig, Tremor International, Minute Media, SimilarWEB and Clarot. The bank has had a presence in Israel since early 2008, with a Tel Aviv office led by General Manager David Cohen. The entity, SVB Israel Advisors Ltd., employs more than a dozen staff working from its downtown office on Ha'Arba'a Street.

"I understand why firms here wanted to be able to say they were at Silicon Valley Bank when everything was in order," Aviad Kimche, chief investment officer at KIMFO, a Ra'anana, Israel-based family office and money management firm, told *The Circuit*. "Still, an event like this supports my longtime conviction that Israeli startups should have their money in Israeli banks."

Kimche's sentiment was echoed by Yonaton Mandelbaum, a principal at TLV Partners, who told *The Circuit* that "bank redundancy is beneficial in this situation" but acknowledged that it "doesn't apply to everyone and isn't a panacea."

After a two-day silence following the 60% plummet in SVB's shares that wiped out \$80 billion of its value when depositors rushed to withdraw their money, SVB's Cohen posted a note on social media that sought to explain his predicament. The Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. took over the bank on Friday and set up a new entity that will pay clients up to \$250,000 of their money, far short of many corporate depositors' balances.

With the U.S. bank's direct presence in Tel Aviv, "we managed to convince the Israeli innovation ecosystem to trust us and the SVB platform as its true long-term partner," Cohen wrote. "The 40 hours that created the disaster of wiping SVB from earth are shocking and sad to me personally, to my team that I love and respect so much, to my colleagues across the globe and... to the entire industry."

The impact of the bank's collapse on the Israel tech landscape remains to be seen. Concerns that companies with working capital accounts at the bank will see their access to that money constrained were eased by the FDIC's action, announced Sunday. Otherwise, companies would have been forced to hold back on paying employees and vendors without finding other sources of cash. Still, the prospect of hundreds of startups laying off staff or shutting their doors was a double whammy for Netanyahu, who has spent the last three months struggling to rebut criticism that his plan to overhaul the country's court system is a threat to democracy that will inflict severe damage on the economy.

The proposed legislation has triggered protests that have brought crowds of more than 100,000 into the streets of Tel Aviv every Saturday night for the past 10 weeks.

Along with hundreds of Israeli economists who attacked the plan for politicizing the appointment of judges and neutralizing the Supreme Court's ability to override legislation deemed illegal, the plan has been condemned by international figures ranging from Larry Summers, the former U.S. Treasury secretary, to billionaire businessman Michael Bloomberg, the ex-mayor of New York City.

"I am closely monitoring the collapse of the American investment bank, Silicon Valley Bank, which has led to a major crisis in the high-tech world," Netanyahu said Saturday night on Twitter. "If necessary, out of responsibility to Israeli high-tech

companies and employees, we will take steps to assist the Israeli companies, whose center of activity is in Israel, to weather the cash-flow crisis that has been created for them due to the turmoil."

Adding an ironic twist to the twin crises was Eynat Guez, the CEO of Papaya Global, which runs a workplace management and payroll platform that has brought the company to a valuation of more than \$1 billion. Two months ago, Guez addressed the Saturday night protests outside Tel Aviv's iconic 46-story Azrieli towers and said she was withdrawing the company's cash from Israeli banks because of the threat Netanyahu's plan posed for the economy.

In light of the disaster at SVB — Papaya's U.S. banker — Guez expressed her appreciation to Israeli lenders who stepped into the breach.

"Israel Discount Bank and Bank Hapoalim taking wonderful steps to support Israeli companies — immediate loans to companies alongside bridge loans to employees whose salaries may be delayed from the companies because of the SVB crisis," she tweeted. "This is what true leadership looks like."

*Jonathan H. Ferziger reported from Dubai, UAE; Robert Lakin reported from Ra'anana, Israel. ♦*

MARCH 14, 2023

## The UAE teams up with the ADL to launch the Manara Center in Abu Dhabi

*The coexistence project seeks to foster people-to-people connections and education about tolerance*

By Melissa Weiss

A new initiative launched this morning in Abu Dhabi seeks to promote region-wide coexistence and opportunities for cross-cultural collaboration and education. The Manara Center, created by the United Arab Emirates in partnership with the Anti-Defamation League, will serve as a mechanism "to interrupt intolerance before it might take root," ADL CEO Jonathan Greenblatt told *Jewish Insider* from Abu Dhabi ahead of the center's opening on Tuesday morning.

The idea was conceived, Greenblatt said, in conversations with UAE Ambassador to the U.S. Yousef Al Otaiba several years ago, as the Gulf nation prepared for its Year of Tolerance, a year-long national project that in 2019 brought global religious leaders to the country, modernized aspects of the

government and saw the announcement of the construction of the Abrahamic Family House, a complex that includes a mosque, church and synagogue.

"What I found in Ambassador Al Otaiba is a shared commitment to fighting extremism and hate," Greenblatt explained. "And what he recognized that really struck me was how, if you try to peel back the layers, why we have extremism, it often comes from a place of ignorance. So if we could promote people-to-people engagement, and encourage understanding, we thought that could be a pathway forward."

The center will focus its efforts in part on outreach to university students across the Arab world. "We do know from our own research," Greenblatt said, "that anti-bias education, Holocaust education, these

kinds of interventions can literally reduce instances of prejudice. So we're going to start with student-to-student activity."

When its programming begins this summer, the center plans to engage students from across the Middle East and Southeast Asia for a variety of conferences and exchanges. The effort, Al Otaiba said, reflects the shared values of the UAE and U.S. in committing "to advancing peace and coexistence, and creating opportunities for the region's youth."

Rev. Johnnie Moore, who previously sat on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and who serves on the ADL's task force for minorities in the Middle East, told *JI* that the Manara Center's opening was "yet another example of history being made."

“Ignorance is the enemy of peace,” Moore added in an interview from Abu Dhabi. “And it’s not enough to just do grand gestures. We have to prepare the next generation to live in the world that we’re creating. And I think that’s the power of this Manara Center.”

The center’s name is derived from the Arabic word meaning “source of light.”

Greenblatt will sit on the board of the Manara Center, whose chairman is Dr. Ali Al Nuaimi, a leading member of the UAE’s Federal National Council and a global expert on extremism who heads Hedayah, Abu Dhabi’s top institution fighting extremism. The initiative, Al Nuaimi explained, “will be based in our region and for the benefit of our

region.”

The region-wide focus, Greenblatt said, was intentional. “It’s not for the UAE or even just for the Gulf. It’s how do we think on a broader scale?... It’s how can we help equip and support an indigenous effort from the region to combat extremism and hate? I think if we get it right, we all win.” ♦

MARCH 15, 2023

## Maimonides Fund launches in-house institute to turn Sapir Journal ideas into action plans

*Former White House liaison to the American Jewish community Chanan Weissman tapped to lead the new center; Zack Wainer also brought on board as director of special initiatives*

By Judah Ari Gross

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

**T**he Maimonides Fund is opening an in-house institute to turn ideas generated by its quarterly *Sapir Journal* into viable plans of action, tapping Chanan Weissman, a former two-time White House liaison to the American Jewish community, as its director, the organization announced on Wednesday.

According to Maimonides Fund President Mark Charendoff, the impetus for SAPIR Institute was feedback from readers of the journal, who wanted to see programs and initiatives inspired by the articles.

“We found that every time we put an issue out, people contacted us and said ‘On this article you raise really good questions, so who’s doing something about this?’ And our response was, ‘We’re a journal, we’re not doing something about this, we just put the idea out there,’” Charendoff told *eJewishPhilanthropy* on Tuesday. “After a year, we thought maybe there is a vacuum in the market.”

The new institute is scheduled to launch on April 1. For now, Weissman will be the sole member of the team, though it will likely expand with time. “He’ll work closely with Bret Stephens, who’s the editor-in-chief of *Sapir* and a lot of the vision behind it, and Ariella Saperstein from the Maimonides Fund side,” Charendoff said.

Weissman, who is coming to Maimonides Fund from the State Department, served two stints as the White House liaison to the American Jewish community, first in the final year of the Obama Administration and then in the first year of the Biden Administration. (Due to his current employment at the State Department, Weissman was not available for interview.)

In another recent though unrelated hire, Maimonides Fund also brought on board Zack Wainer, an academic-turned-consultant, for the newly created role of director of special initiatives.

Wainer, who received a Ph.D. from Brown University in the ancient Near East and history of science and taught in the Department of Classical Studies at William

& Mary College, will also work to identify issues of interest to the Maimonides Fund that are not receiving sufficient attention.

“Both myself and the fund are hoping to address some of the issues that either [Maimonides Fund] grantees or other people out in the field are either addressing tangentially or not addressing at all, areas that are important but haven’t gotten attention,” Wainer told eJP.

Wainer, who entered his position on March 1, said he was looking at a number of potential projects to focus on, including improving the “pipeline of Jewish professionals and Jewish education writ large.”

As an example of the type of idea that Sapir Institute will work to develop into an implementable program, Charendoff offered the “moonshot” proposed by Jewish Funders Network President Andrés Spokoiny in *Sapir*’s Winter 2022 edition of a “universal basic Jewish literacy,” ensuring that every American Jew has the fundamental knowledge needed to hold “informed Jewish conversations.”

“That’s a great idea. That’s doable, and we should figure it out,” Charendoff told eJP. “We can convene people to think this through, to come up with an action plan, and then go to an organization with that program.”

In some cases, Maimonides Fund would provide funding to existing institutions to implement those programs or help a group of people start a new organization, according to Charendoff. “The goal would be to take things from just the idea stage and move it along a path toward implementation,” he said.

Though Weissman will be the only

employee of Sapir Institute for the time being, he will not be alone in this work. The plan is for Weissman to identify the topics for the institute to develop and then invite representatives from other organizations, stakeholders and thinkers to discuss the topic and come up with an actionable plan.

“Chanan is the conductor, and we’ll put together an accomplished orchestra,” Charendoff said. “Chanan has already got a range of meetings set up with key individuals so that he can learn what people’s priorities are and what the best ways are to have these discussions.”

This could be in the form of small

roundtable meetings or larger retreats, but likely not open conferences, according to Charendoff. “It is not our vision to do things open to the public per se. Each gathering would be highly targeted in terms of who we bring around the table,” he said.

Charendoff said he hopes that Sapir Institute will fill a void he sees in the Jewish communal space. “We don’t have enough opportunity to work through ideas together in creative, compelling ways with A-list talents and thinkers. It’s been frustrating,” he said. “I don’t think this is a solution to that problem but I hope it will be a contribution to the discussion.” ♦