

## THE WEEKLY PRINT

*Growing Saudi-China ties unlikely to prompt major Saudi policy shake-ups; Eileen Filler-Corn, exiting Va. Statehouse, eyes the governor's mansion; For Wiley Nickel, 'never again,' is a personal declaration; Jeanie Milbauer's Oneg looks to bring Shabbat to the masses; A Brooklyn 'bridge' of his own; The Mormon bureaucrat in Utah changing marriage in Israel; Bahrain's Al Waha backs Mideast startups behind the scenes; and Meet the Jewish restaurateur behind DC's East London-style eateries.*

MARCH 23, 2023

## Growing Saudi-China ties unlikely to prompt major Saudi policy shake-ups

*Both critics and supporters of the U.S.-Saudi relationship are digging in on their preexisting positions*

By Marc Rod

Despite rising concern in Washington about China's inroads into the Middle East, including its increasing ties to Saudi Arabia, the recent Chinese-brokered deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran does not appear to herald any significant changes in posture toward Riyadh — from either critics or supporters of the U.S.-Saudi relationship.

The latest developments appear so far to be leading both sides in the polarized U.S. foreign policy discourse on Saudi Arabia to double down on their previous positions — vocal critics of Riyadh are pushing ahead with efforts to limit U.S. ties with the kingdom, while those more supportive of the U.S.-Saudi relationship say that a closer relationship is the only way to prevent further Chinese encroachment.

Among critics of Saudi Arabia, the

surprise agreement does not seem to have prompted any rethinking of efforts to tighten the screws on Riyadh. Days after the agreement was announced, Sens. Chris Murphy (D-CT) and Mike Lee (R-UT) announced new legislation aiming to force the administration to engage publicly with Congress on Saudi human rights violations and ultimately could force a Senate floor vote on cutting off aid to Saudi Arabia.

While noting that the deal represented a “continued move of Saudi Arabia away from the United States,” Murphy also said that “it’s a bit simplistic to jump to the conclusion that China getting involved in Middle East security is, by definition, bad for the U.S.”

Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-OR), another prominent critic of the Saudi regime and past U.S. efforts at rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, told *Jewish Insider* that the

new ties with China compounded his reservations about Saudi Arabia.

“I already have a lot of concerns about Saudi Arabia. And certainly you see different authoritarian leaders sharing their models and their interests,” Merkley said. “We just have to realize that democracy and the rights that we have... are not things universally embraced, and that we’re going to see an ongoing competition in the world between the vision of democracy and the vision of authoritarian powers.”

Lawmakers like Murphy and Merkley’s have highlighted concerns about human rights and Saudi Arabia’s actions in Yemen as the centerpiece of their approach to Saudi Arabia.

“People like Chris Murphy... aren’t going to let this issue go,” Aaron David Miller, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment

for International Peace, told JI.

Supporters of the U.S.-Saudi relationship, argue, however, that the U.S. needs to reinforce its relationship with Saudi Arabia, to cut off further Chinese gains, which could challenge the U.S.' longstanding military partnership with Riyadh.

"I think what we need to do is make sure that our allies in the Middle East know that we're going to be strong allies. This is one of the things I heard when I was there last month, that whether we're talking about Saudi Arabia, UAE or Israel, they want to know America is going to be there," Sen. Pete Ricketts (R-NE) told JI. "When we send signals that we are weakening, for example, our disastrous pullout of Afghanistan, or how we didn't respond quickly enough to the UAE when they were attacked with Houthi missiles last year, it sends a message to our allies that maybe they should be looking to China."

Sen. Jim Risch (R-ID) expressed a similar view during a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing yesterday, arguing that the administration's Middle East policy writ large has undermined confidence in the U.S.

"In the Middle East, it's clear that the administration is failing to compete with China," Risch said. "The administration's policies across the board have created great, great concerns for our partners... The recent deal between Saudi Arabia, China and Iran proves the U.S. is sitting on the sidelines."

Risch said that the U.S. needs to "fix[] our approach" and cannot "turn our backs on the Middle East" even as focus shifts toward China.

Rich Goldberg, a senior advisor at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and co-host of *Jewish Insider's* podcast, said urgent U.S. engagement and strengthened relations with Riyadh are critical to prevent further Chinese penetration into the Saudi defense ecosystem, which could complicate U.S.-Saudi military and intelligence cooperation.

"We can't just sit back and say let's see how this develops over the next six months, that's malpractice," he said. "That would only be a self-fulfilling prophecy of driving the Saudis deeper into the Chinese arms. This needs to be a five-alarm fire, wake-up call at the highest levels of the White House to engage the highest levels of Saudi Arabia."

Goldberg said that the U.S. needs to not only outline a vision for the "next generation" of U.S.-Saudi partnership, but also lay down red lines for Saudi cooperation with China.

These differing conclusions on how the U.S. should respond to the recent trilateral agreement appear to stem from the two sides' differing priorities for the U.S.-Saudi relationship, as well as differing conclusions about the genesis of the pact.

"You're seeing the crown prince [Mohammed bin Salman] decide that it's time for Saudi Arabia to start hedging on its relationship with Washington," Goldberg said. "They're sticking it to Washington a bit by showing that they're willing to work with China. Whether it's a game of hard-to-get or it's a decision to truly hedge is yet to be known."

Miller characterized Democrats as generally "more interested in human rights and holding the Saudis [accountable] over Yemen," than conservatives, who have prioritized closer ties with Saudi Arabia.

Joel Rubin, a former deputy assistant secretary of state in the Obama administration, attributed the pact to the U.S.' pullout from the Iran nuclear agreement, which he said had made it impossible for Saudi Arabia to turn to the U.S. to help reduce tensions with Iran.

"This is about Saudi Arabia trying to figure out how to change the Iranian behavior, and not being able to talk to the U.S. about engaging Iran on it, because the U.S. has basically self-selected out," Rubin said. The Saudis, he argued, turned to China because China maintains leverage and diplomatic sway with the Iranians.

Rubin said that policymakers should recognize that "we can't dictate to any country specifically what they can do" and that the U.S. needs to re-engage with Iran, but characterized American policy toward Saudi Arabia as well-balanced.

"Can we unilaterally get what we want every time out of every country? No. Do we sanction them only to get everything we want? Do we only talk to them and have no penalties?" he said. "I think we have the right mixture."

Rubin also called it "ridiculous" to say that Saudi Arabia is making a break with the U.S., pointing to Riyadh's recent multibillion-dollar purchase of Boeing airliners.

"Liberal Democrats pressuring Saudi Arabia does not cause Saudi Arabia to somehow move away — they didn't move away," Rubin said. "What they're doing is they are looking at their interests in the region, and seeing hot spots with Iran, and trying to figure out how they don't get sucked into that anymore."

Miller agreed that Saudi Arabia is not looking to "refabricate or fundamentally transform the security architecture that the U.S. and Saudi Arabia has built up over the years," but said that concerns about U.S. reliability may have been a factor in Saudi Arabia's thinking.

"The U.S. has demonstrated, in [Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's] view, that it is a very problematic partner," he said, highlighting the new Murphy legislation as an example of these tensions. He also pointed to ongoing Saudi security concerns, China's long-term need for Saudi oil and a Saudi desire to "make it unmistakably clear to whoever wants to listen, that the Middle East is open for business" as contributing to the current state of affairs.

Despite the pressures from both sides, Miller predicted no major changes in U.S. policy, in either direction. The U.S. has "limited options" for altering its Saudi policy or countering China in the Middle East, and that focusing on the issue may not be a top priority as President Joe Biden looks to the 2024 election.

"It's hard for me to imagine, right now, given congressional constraints, given our priorities, that somehow, in response to this move, the administration would even want to be in a position to be chasing after the Chinese," he said.

Should the Saudis seek to assuage U.S. concerns about the agreement, however, Miller suggested they could undertake further steps toward normalization with Israel.

"What would help — I hate to use the word — 'kosher' this, would be a major move on the part of Israel and the Saudis to formalize their relationship," Miller said. "But if you believe Prince Turki [son of Saudi King Abdullah], who said the other day, there's got to be justice for the Palestinians before that happens." ♦

# Eileen Filler-Corn, exiting Va. Statehouse, eyes the governor's mansion

*The first woman and Jewish person to serve as House speaker, who was ousted from party leadership, makes the case for her political future*

By Gabby Deutch

When Virginia Del. Eileen Filler-Corn announced this month that she would not run for reelection to the House of Delegates after 14 years, political observers in Richmond and Washington quickly began to wonder about her next move.

After two years as Virginia's House speaker — the first woman and first Jewish person to hold that role — Filler-Corn was ousted last year as the House Democratic leader by her colleagues. But in an interview with *Jewish Insider*, Filler-Corn insisted she isn't letting the setback keep her out of politics. In fact, it's fuelling her to look even higher.

"You always want your next move to be at least lateral, if not, you know, bigger and better," she said on Monday. "I realize, obviously, that until we control the executive branch as well, back to having all three [bodies], we would not have the opportunity to move Virginia forward."

Filler-Corn, known for being a prolific Democratic fundraiser, has been talking to donors and supporters as she considers her political future. A run for governor in 2025 is a strong possibility.

"I have definitely been letting everyone know that I'm interested in exploring it," she said. Two major election cycles, including this year's legislative elections in Virginia, still have to take place before Virginia's next gubernatorial race. But that hasn't stopped Filler-Corn and other possible contenders, including Richmond's Democratic mayor, Levar Stoney, Rep. Abigail Spanberger (D-VA) and former Rep. Elaine Luria (D-VA), from starting to raise money and jockey for political connections.

Donald Trump's election in 2016 fueled a wave of Democratic victories in Virginia.

In 2019, Democrats took control of the Virginia Statehouse, giving the party full control of state government for the first time in more than two decades. Filler-Corn was voted House speaker due in large part to her role campaigning and fundraising for Democratic candidates who flipped the House and Senate.

"I remember telling everybody everywhere we went, every speech was like, 'This is what we're going to do when we win, when we are back in power,'" she recalled. "We then did achieve that goal, and Democrats were in control for the first time in a generation. And as you know, I was the first woman and the first Jewish person to serve as speaker and had an opportunity to say, 'OK, let's be bold, let's be swift.'"

But Virginia Democrats saw their fortunes reversed in 2021, when now-Gov. Glenn Youngkin, a Republican, defeated Terry McAuliffe, a Democrat who had served as governor from 2013 to 2017. Democrats also lost control of the House, and Filler-Corn transitioned from speaker to minority leader — until a group of delegates led a quiet campaign to oust her, and they narrowly voted in April 2022 to remove Filler-Corn as party leader. Del. Don Scott, a Democrat from the Hampton Roads area in the Tidewater region of the state and the engineer of the plan to remove Filler-Corn, was voted in to replace her.

"I think it was just opportunistic on the part of, you know, a few ambitious new members," said Filler-Corn, who called the ouster an "internal battle" and declined to say more about it.

But she believes that the fact that she was voted out of her leadership position won't affect her odds in a future election.

"Not at all," she said, when asked if it

might hold her back. "I think the focus has got to be, when you look at the record, What did we accomplish? What did we, as Democrats, accomplish with me at the helm as leader?" She pointed to her role in winning the majority, as well as passing legislation on gun reform, the environment, reproductive health and public education.

A frequent critic of Youngkin, Filler-Corn found herself unexpectedly aligned with him during this year's legislative session on a number of bills related to antisemitism. After a commission Youngkin established to examine antisemitism in the Old Dominion returned its official report late last year, he introduced several bills to fight antisemitism. The state Senate, which is controlled by Democrats, initially voted down a bill that would adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism.

"There were no bipartisan patrons for those bills. So I think that was a concern, and I think that led to some hesitancy on the part of some Democrats," Filler-Corn said. Still, she added, "I felt strongly that if there was a bill out there which would work towards combating antisemitism, then obviously that is a good thing."

The IHRA legislation was amended to clarify that its adoption of the definition is "non-legally binding" in response to critics who argue that the definition — which says that anti-Zionism can at times be antisemitic — can infringe on free speech. The bill was supported by a coalition of Jewish communal organizations in Virginia and ultimately passed the General Assembly, but it had some Democratic opposition, including from Scott, the state delegate who ousted Filler-Corn and replaced her as Democratic leader.

"I was surprised," Filler-Corn acknowledged, "knowing that the IHRA definition was widely respected and used throughout state governments, countries, organizations throughout, that there was still pushback by some in the Democratic caucus, and even some of Jewish faith."

Filler-Corn's grudging partnership with Youngkin on antisemitism doesn't mean she's come around on his other policies.

Last year, after the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, she joined with other Jewish leaders — including the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington — to present a Jewish case for supporting reproductive rights. Youngkin has proposed banning abortions after 15 weeks of pregnancy.

She also criticized the way the governor approached education issues in the 2021 campaign, when Youngkin lambasted

McAuliffe for saying parents shouldn't have a say in what schools teach and called for "critical race theory" to be left out of Virginia schools. It's a playbook other Republicans nationwide have sought to follow,

"I don't believe it was exclusively or even primarily Terry [McAuliffe]'s response to that question as far as us losing the election. But I do believe them honing in on the issue of parents — parents matter, yes, parents do matter, and we have said that continuously," said Filler-Corn. "But it's also the teachers and the schools."

"You can't just say 'parents,'" she added, "without offering a vision. I think that's what we saw."

According to Virginia law, the governor cannot run for reelection, not to mention that Youngkin is reportedly considering a presidential bid in 2024. So if Filler-Corn runs in two years, she'll face someone new.

She faces an uphill battle — making sure voters outside of heavily blue Northern Virginia even know her name, and distinguishing herself in a likely crowded Democratic field.

Her argument seems to be, at least in part: *I helped other Democrats. Now it's my turn.*

"I've been crisscrossing the Commonwealth for a long time, making sure I've provided the resources to candidates and also hands-on experience and mentoring and even help recruiting many of them as well, to get them to realize that we need their voice," Filler-Corn said. "In Virginia, there's always another election, but we can't lose track of, as soon as we win this election, that we do have to win the executive branch back as well so we can continue to move Virginia forward." ♦

MARCH 20, 2023

## For Wiley Nickel, 'never again,' is a personal declaration

*In an interview with JI, the freshman Democrat from North Carolina expressed "a deep appreciation for the challenges the Jewish community faces"*

By Matthew Kassel

In one of his first floor speeches as a House member early last month, Rep. Wiley Nickel, a freshman Democrat from North Carolina, took a moment to acknowledge the victims of a deadly shooting that had recently occurred outside a Jerusalem synagogue on International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

The incident in late January, in which seven Israelis were killed by a Palestinian gunman, "was no random act of violence," Nickel said from the lectern. "This was a heinous and cowardly attack rooted in hate,

bigotry and antisemitism."

"In the face of such evil, it is imperative that we come together not as Democrats or Republicans but as Americans committed to fighting against antisemitism and defending the sacred relationship between the United States and Israel," he added. "'Never again' is more than a mere hashtag for social media. It is a solemn oath."

For Nickel, 47, such declarations are personal, he explained in an interview with *Jewish Insider* not long after his speech. "The Jewish community, their story is my

story," he said. "My mother is Jewish. My great-grandfather fled Poland prior to the Holocaust and would not be here today if he had stayed in Poland. When we talk about antisemitism, we need to continue to speak up."

Despite a verifiable claim to Jewish heritage, Nickel made clear — in contrast with a certain Republican lawmaker from New York — that he is not a practicing Jew and, like his father, identifies as Episcopalian, even as he grew up in a mixed-faith household celebrating Passover



and observing the High Holidays with his mother's family.

Nickel's maternal great-grandfather, Harry Sott, fled Jewish persecution in Poland in 1907 and ultimately settled in Detroit, according to an immigration document provided by the congressman's office. (The record describes Sott as "Hebrew.") He met his wife, who had escaped the same Polish town, in the U.S., a spokesperson for Nickel told JI.

Harry, who worked on the assembly line for the Ford Motor Company, became a successful textile manufacturer and then retired to California, where he bought land. His son, Herbert, would also prosper, though his effort to become a practicing attorney was not without its challenges, Nickel said of the hardships his grandfather endured before opening a real estate law firm that is now one of the largest in Michigan.

"People wouldn't hire him because he was a Jew," Nickel told JI. "I certainly have a deep appreciation for the challenges the Jewish community faces."

As a new member of Congress, Nickel, a former state senator and Obama administration staffer, says he is keeping those challenges in mind amid an uptick in antisemitic incidents, including in North Carolina. "This is an incredibly important issue to me," he vowed.

The congressman said he has joined the House Bipartisan Task Force for Combating Antisemitism, which is now led by a fellow North Carolina Democrat, Rep. Kathy Manning. He has also signed onto legislation promoting Holocaust education as well as a resolution "recognizing Israel as America's legitimate and democratic ally and condemning antisemitism."

Moreover, Nickel said he is planning to take his first trip to Israel this August with a House delegation of freshman Democrats sponsored by the AIPAC-affiliated American Israel Education Foundation, whose annual trips to the Jewish state are a rite of passage for many new congressional lawmakers.

"We need to continue to strengthen our military, economic and cultural ties with Israel to make sure that we have peace in the Middle East," he told JI.

Nickel supports a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict negotiated directly between both parties, he said.

"The U.S. has a role to play to facilitate those discussions," he argued, "but both Israelis and Palestinians have legitimate aspirations."

In conversation with JI last month, he shied away from expressing direct criticism of Israel's new right-wing governing coalition, which is promoting a controversial judicial overhaul that raised concerns among Democratic lawmakers in the House and Senate as well as the Biden administration.

"Whoever's in charge, and whatever coalition is governing, we just need to make it clear that we stand with Israel," Nickel said. "That's a fundamental position I have. We stand with our friends, and Israel is a country where we have a sacred relationship."

The congressman said it was "absolutely crucial" to the region "that we have a strong and stable democracy in Israel."

Even before he was elected to Congress this past November, Nickel, who became a state senator in 2019, had participated in debates over Israel that have caused ongoing tension between varying members of North Carolina's Democratic Party.

Last June, for instance, the state party adopted a series of controversial resolutions accusing Israel of "apartheid" and calling for "targeted sanctions, including travel bans and asset freezes," on unnamed Israelis who committed alleged human rights violations against Palestinians, among other strictures.

"There's certainly a far-left group in Democratic politics that has the wrong approach on Israel, and we've had some resolutions that are ones I do not support and have spoken out against," Nickel said. "I'm hopeful that by educating members of that group on the issues we'll be able to avoid that kind of divisive rhetoric. But I think the vast majority of folks don't support those efforts."

Late last month, Nickel was among the featured guests who delivered remarks at the founding convention of the North Carolina Democratic Jewish Caucus, a new group formed to address internal divisions over Israel as well as rising rates of antisemitism that have raised alarms among Jewish community members in the Tar Heel State.

The caucus, which intends to become formally affiliated with the state party, was

also created to boost organizing efforts ahead of an election cycle in which a number of vulnerable House Democrats in North Carolina, including Nickel, are preparing to defend their seats.

The state's Supreme Court, which recently won a GOP majority, is now hearing arguments that could result in the implementation of a new congressional map, which would likely give Republican candidates an edge in 2024.

Michael Bitzer, a professor of politics and history at Catawba College in Salisbury, N.C., said he expects the court "will rule that the power of redistricting is an exclusive constitutional power to" the GOP-controlled state legislature, "and therefore all of the maps will likely be redrawn to benefit Republicans."

"Nobody has any idea what the actual districts would look like, but my best guess," he told JI, is that Nickel — along with Manning, Rep. Jeff Jackson (D-NC) and perhaps Rep. Don Davis (D-NC) — "would be targeted for cracking their districts, and thus shifting those four districts considerably to GOP-favored."

Last week, the National Republican Congressional Committee included Nickel, Jackson and Davis — whose districts are rated as "toss-ups" by a leading election forecaster — on a list of 37 House Democrats who "represent prime pick-up opportunities for Republicans," according to a statement.

A few days earlier, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee had added Nickel to a list of "frontline" incumbents whose seats are "key" to the party's "path to reclaiming the majority," the group said in its announcement.

"We're a toss-up race," Nickel acknowledged to JI. "We won with 51% of the vote. It's unlikely that they would give me a pass. That's what we signed up for. We knew it was going to be a tough election. The voters liked our message, it resonated with them, and that's why I'm here, so we'll continue to make our case with voters all over the district as much as we can."

Nickel, whose district includes the state capital of Raleigh, won a competitive race over Bo Hines, a former college football player whose far-right campaign drew comparisons to former Rep. Madison Cawthorn (R-NC). Hines, 27, filed to run

again shortly after the midterms but has yet to announce if he will seek a rematch.

"If there was a Squad on the Republican side, he would have been part of it," Nickel said of his former rival, referring to a group of far-left lawmakers who entered Congress in 2018. "The voters are tired of extremists, whether they're on the far left or the far right. They want people who are going to work across the aisle to get things done."

During his first bid for federal office, Nickel earned endorsements from the political arms of Democratic Majority for Israel and the Jewish Democratic Council of America — neither of which has announced

its plans for 2024. Last week, AIPAC's bipartisan political action committee rolled out its first round of more than 90 House and Senate endorsements for the 2024 election. The freshman incumbent was not among the initial batch of candidates.

Nickel, who serves on the House Committee on Financial Services, expressed a desire to work with Republicans to enact legislation as a member of the bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus as well as the centrist New Democrat Coalition. "I start my day, every day, at 6:30 in the House gym working out with Democrats and Republicans in a CrossFit group," he told JI.

"The focus for us is what can pass both chambers of Congress and get signed by the president," Nickel explained, citing "access to capital," "the high price of housing" and "immigration reform" as among the top domestic issues he hopes to address in his first term. "Those are the things that we're starting to get working on."

Meanwhile, Nickel pledged that he will continue to advocate for a robust relationship between the U.S. and Israel, as he suggested on the House floor in early February. "That's just a part of the world that's personally important to me," he said. ♦

MARCH 21, 2023

## Jeanie Milbauer's Oneg looks to bring Shabbat to the masses

*Oneg offers up modernized Judaica and supplemental guiding materials to help make the weekly ritual more accessible*

By **Tori Bergel**

When Jeanie Milbauer's eldest daughter was 5 years old, she brought home a Torah portion worksheet from school regarding the biblical matriarch Sarah for the family to read over the weekend.

"The school sent home simple readings and questions, but without context," Milbauer recalled in an email to *Jewish Insider*. "I asked the kids why Eliezer picked Rebecca [to be Isaac's wife], and the little one, almost 2 years old, picked up her head and said the word 'water!'"

Milbauer, despite always feeling connected to her Judaism — she'd grown up going to summer camp and Hebrew school, traveled to Israel and attended High Holiday services — had never really practiced her faith.

"I don't know that I had even lit a Shabbat candle prior to raising my own children," Milbauer said. That moment, however, when her 18-month-old casually answered correctly a question about the *parsha*, is when Milbauer said her family's "Shabbat journey began in earnest."

These days, Shabbat is an integral part of Milbauer's life as the founder and CEO of the recently launched Oneg, a company that curates modern Judaica and guiding materials to make Shabbat more accessible to those who want to observe.

"Not only [do we] make it [easy], but take down all those barriers to entry," Milbauer said.

Oneg offers a variety of handcrafted ritual items, but its Shabbat Box is a one-stop shop for everything one would need to

host their own celebration.

"My feeling is, is once you get to know somebody really well you can't not connect on some level. And [connection is] one of the things, really the most important, or what we found is the most impactful [aspect] of this whole box," Milbauer told JI over Zoom.

Each box contains a set of wooden candlesticks with candles and a glass collar set, matches, a match-resting dish, an embroidered challah cover and a ceramic *Kiddush* cup — all one of a kind and available in a variety of colors.

Rounding out the box are four Shabbat guidebooks and Oneg's signature conversation cards, which Milbauer sees as the "centerpiece" of the collection. Each card is meant to relate to the theme of that week's *parsha*, or Torah portion, fostering

meaningful conversations around the table.

"Judaism is a communal sport. Our materials are experiential for everyone to participate. Oneg's [conversation] cards were created to spark an exchange of ideas, to talk with each other without interruption or judgment," Milbauer said. "The cards elevate the Shabbat experience, engaging people who'd never even celebrated Shabbat before. I've learned things about friends I would never have known; it's brought us closer to friends and to our family."

Beth Marcus, an Oneg customer from New York, had similar sentiments about the conversation cards and overall Shabbat Box's ability to create an "interactive experience at the Shabbat table."

"The cards give whoever is at our table — our adult kids, friends, those who have not before celebrated Shabbat — a way to get involved," she said.

In addition to Oneg's purchasable products, those requiring further support can go on the company's website for pages dedicated to Shabbat melodies such as "*Shalom aleichem*" and "*Eshet Chayil*," to teach those less familiar with the Jewish ritual how to recite the blessings at their own tables; the Jewish holiday calendar; and Milbauer's blog, which includes recipes and hosting tips from the founder herself.

Milbauer hasn't ruled out the possibility of focusing on other Jewish holy days as well, but she sees Shabbat as "the base of Judaism," which is why she said it will always be at the heart of Oneg.

\*\*\*\*\*

Oneg, is the byproduct of Milbauer's inherent desire to create community.

"I'm about bringing people together in a joyful way, in a beautiful way, both the experience and the thing," Milbauer told JI. "I think we all want to celebrate and connect and laugh and learn; learn from each other and with each other, and tighten our relationships and bonds with our family, our kids, our friends."

Milbauer grew up as a self-described "social action Reform Jew" in Westchester County, N.Y. Her mother ran her synagogue's gift shop and baked challah on the weekends, but to Milbauer, none of it was "infused with meaning."

A lawyer by trade in New York, Milbauer's early career aspirations led her to Los Angeles in order to pivot into the movie business — her father was a producer. After meeting her husband, the two moved to Washington, D.C., where Milbauer had lived as an undergrad, and where, upon her return, she worked for the Recording Industry Association of America until her second child was born, when her focus turned to full-time mothering and volunteering.

It was around that time that Milbauer and her husband began "dipping our toes more into Judaism and Shabbat."

"Judaism is our GPS for life," Milbauer said. "It guides us how to be with family and friends, it guides us how to be in business. It's everything, and when you get that, feel that, know that, you want to share it, and I want my kids to know who they are and where they came from and what their traditions are."

Her three children are now all in their 20s, and while today the family belongs to Adas Israel Congregation, a Conservative synagogue in D.C., when they were first looking to get more involved, they didn't know where to start.

Part of the problem, Milbauer explained, lay in the absence of guiding materials for those who hadn't gone to day school or been taught the rituals early on. Learning sessions with friends, as well as Shabbat meals both at home and around the neighborhood, helped, but, as Milbauer noted, "it was never in a box."

Shabbat became a treasured time in Milbauer's home, so much so that her kids would get upset if they had a weekend without guests coming for dinner. But that initial struggle, mixed with interest in greater observance from family and friends who attended meals at Milbauer's home, first sparked her idea for Oneg.

The second was lit by Milbauer's previous venture, Momentum Unlimited, a global nonprofit aiming to "empower women to change the world through Jewish values."

Formerly the Jewish Women's Renaissance Project, Momentum was created in 2008 by a group of eight women of varying religious backgrounds — dubbed the "Utah 8." Momentum's flagship program is its MOMentum Year-Long Journey,

described by Milbauer as a "Birthright for Mothers."

As co-founder and founding board president, Milbauer stayed with Momentum until December 2022, just shy of 15 years. During the pandemic, when trips abroad were halted, Momentum had to shift its focus toward education, giving Milbauer an opening to establish Oneg.

"Momentum owns education. We're guiding, right? And then Oneg is the joy and pleasure and delight of Shabbat," Milbauer said.

Milbauer still sits on Momentum's President's Council, but her main focus is now on Oneg, which officially launched its family and friends "soft launch" in September 2022. In preparation for Oneg's public launch at the end of June, Milbauer and her team are working to build out the product line — taking ideas from her own tastes as well as from customer reviews.

Becca Schecter, who first met Milbauer on a Momentum trip and now consults for Oneg to help the brand grow, emphasized Milbauer's ability to share her "passion for Shabbat and how life-changing it can be."

Schecter bought a Shabbat Box for her own family, which she noted as having a "huge impact" on helping them connect to the ritual.

"One of the things that resonates the most with me about both Oneg and its products is that they are not designed to make people more religious," Schecter told JI in an email. "They really are a way to bring the most ancient mindfulness practice into homes. In this chaotic world, people of all ages are looking for ways to be more mindful, find more peace and for many, have more gratitude as a way to find happiness. Oneg helps you pause and reflect and share quality time with others."

Oneg's current catalog was a labor of love for Milbauer, who has long seen herself as a "creative at heart" — before Oneg and Momentum, Milbauer had started an interior design business and was dabbling with the idea of creating a "party in a box for adults." In her own home, Milbauer has always enjoyed layering her Shabbat table; placing the old with the new to modernize the holiday while still honoring tradition.

"We're at a time when people crave more than just products," Milbauer said. "We're

the tool for the experience.”

To bring her vision to life, Milbauer worked with a number of local artists: Ellie Goldberg designed the original prototype for the *Kiddush* cup; Joe Goldberg (no relation to Ellie) shot Oneg’s original product photography, which Milbauer credits with helping the brand gain recognition; and Rabbi Gil Steinlauf, whom Milbauer met during his time working at Adas Israel before he left to become executive director at Princeton University’s Center for Jewish Life, wrote the first draft of the Shabbat guidebook and served as a mentor to Milbauer.

“We’re selling connection and community. That’s what we’re selling. And

we’re doing it through the tools of these really beautiful objects,” Milbauer said.

To help widen Oneg’s reach, Milbauer revealed that Oneg’s products will soon be available for purchase at two local shops in the D.C. area, one in Georgetown and one in Bethesda, Md.

The partnerships will put Oneg in front of a larger audience, one that does not necessarily skew Jewish. But to Milbauer, Oneg’s target audience has always been much broader.

“[Oneg is for] people who either want to enhance their practice or people who are curious,” Milbauer said. “So it’s really everybody...it’s humans.”

Milbauer recalled an event Oneg held at

her Washington home, where the company is currently based, as a fundraiser for one of the local schools. Out of all the attendees, Milbauer remembered one woman in particular who grew very excited to see Oneg’s products; despite not being Jewish, her family had begun celebrating Shabbat the month before. That moment really drove home for Milbauer the universality of the holiday and what her products could mean to others.

At its core, Oneg’s mission is simple: “We’re all trying to figure out how to be Jews in the 21st century. If I can help do that, I would feel success,” Milbauer said. ♦

MARCH 23, 2023

## A Brooklyn ‘bridge’ of his own

*Antonio Reynoso, the Brooklyn borough president, has forged close ties with the Jewish community and looks to balance his progressivism with pragmatism*

---

By Matthew Kassel

**A**ntonio Reynoso, the borough president of Brooklyn, coasted to victory in 2021 as an outspoken progressive, notching key endorsements from Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT), state Sen. Julia Salazar and the New York City public advocate, Jumaane Williams, among other influential figures on the activist left.

But more than a year into his role as Kings County’s chief ambassador, Reynoso, a former city councilman from Williamsburg and the first Latino to hold the position, has largely embraced a more measured and perhaps deferential approach to governance than his political allegiances might suggest, even as he insists that his core values remain unchanged.

“I’m a progressive, uber left, and I believe that I have my principles that I abide by,” he explained to *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview at his offices in Downtown Brooklyn. “But I don’t want to impose them on everyone. These communities are very different. They have different needs. And they’ve been here for a long time.”

In his outreach to Jewish leaders, Reynoso, 39, said he has tried to uphold his own vision for the borough by focusing on areas of agreement rather than quibbling over policy differences, particularly as he has made overtures to Hasidic communities that have traditionally leaned moderate or conservative and make up a crucial voting bloc.

There is more than enough common ground, he suggested, citing efforts to counter antisemitism as well as more practicable concerns like addressing food insecurity and organizing street cleanups. “And all the things that we don’t agree on, it’s just like, let’s leave that for another day. There’s no need to fight. There’s no need to engage in hostilities,” he told *JL*.

“I hope that I can push issues that I care about through education and informing people and have them come to the conclusion that it’s a good idea,” Reynoso added. “I don’t want to force anything.”

For the most part, he has found a receptive audience, he said, notwithstanding some divisions over issues including rezoning



and affordable housing development, which are among his top priorities. “That gets pushback in moderate neighborhoods,” said David Greenfield, the chief executive of the Met Council, a Jewish community poverty-fighting agency, and a former city councilman who overlapped with Reynoso in the legislative body. “He’s definitely worked to bridge that divide and reach solution-oriented results.”

To Greenfield, such engagement is significant, especially as progressive activists on the City Council have, in recent weeks, doubled down on a series of hard-left agenda items that have been criticized as uncompromising. “Reynoso is trying hard to be a bridge between the left and the more moderate constituencies in Brooklyn,” Greenfield told JI. “It’s an important effort and, if successful, would make him one of the most important officials in New York.”

As the successor to New York City Mayor Eric Adams, who served for eight years as Brooklyn’s borough president, Reynoso inherited a title that has long been occupied by some of the most gregarious personalities in local politics. Before Adams, the position had been held by Marty Markowitz, an avuncular cheerleader of all things Brooklyn who oversaw the borough’s rise to prominence during the aughts.

But while Reynoso included Markowitz as a co-chair on his transition committee and said he has enjoyed a “great relationship” with the mayor as they have both settled into their respective offices, he explained that he feels no pressure to emulate his predecessors. “That type of promotional stuff is not as necessary as it was back then,” he said of the Markowitz era. “Eric used this office to become mayor, so he had his form. I guess we all have our different personalities, and we all want to use this office to do what we think is right. I’m just looking to chart my own path.”

Until recently, Reynoso had frequently been exploring that path on a bicycle, his preferred mode of transportation. Last summer, he rode more than 50 miles a week, he estimated, visiting constituents in such far-flung neighborhoods as Coney Island, Canarsie and Borough Park, which is home to a sizable population of Orthodox Jews. In January, he enlisted a driver to bring him to work everyday from his home in

Williamsburg, but he intends to return to biking this summer, he said. “It burns a lot of calories.”

Rabbi David Niederman, a leader of Williamsburg’s Satmar Hasidic community, recalled one occasion last August in which Reynoso’s biking habit helped lead to what he described as a particularly good deed. “He was biking here in Williamsburg and a community member, an elderly Holocaust survivor, was trying to put some stuff in his car and could not lift it,” Niederman said in a phone interview with JI. “Antonio stopped and simply helped that person to put his packages in the car. The person wanted to give Antonio money. He said he didn’t need money and that he was the borough president.”

“He’s a really true mensch,” Niederman said of Reynoso, whom he has known for years thanks to Reynoso’s previous position as a city councilman. Even as Reynoso now oversees a much broader constituency than he did as a legislator, the borough president “has been continuously available for issues that we have brought to his attention,” Niederman enthused. “He speaks out against antisemitic incidents,” which have risen sharply in recent years, “and when people dehumanize the Hasidic community, he speaks out for us.”

During his time in office, Reynoso has sought to expand his relationships with Jewish leaders beyond Williamsburg, where he was born and raised by Dominican parents. “Antonio really values learning about communities that he has not historically been deeply connected to,” Mark Levine, the borough president of Manhattan and a Jewish Democrat, told JI. “Plenty of times we’ve spoken about matters related to the Jewish community,” he added. “He is nothing but thoughtful and reflective and open.”

For his part, Reynoso said he is “proud” to now represent the largest Jewish population in the world outside Israel, which he visited as a city councilman. “I want the world to know that, and I want to celebrate them,” he said. “I’ve been having a lot of fun doing that, and I hope that they’ve seen that.”

He recently met with Jewish community members in Crown Heights, for instance, and is planning a Jewish heritage celebration that will likely be held in May, according

to a spokesperson for his office. Not long ago, he spoke with Rachel Timoner, the senior rabbi at Congregation Beth Elohim, a Reform synagogue in Park Slope, in a conversation touching on recent instances of antisemitism among celebrities.

In weighing the issue more broadly, Reynoso said he hopes to promote a “proactive” rather than a “reactive” approach to anti-Jewish prejudice, which has hit Brooklyn’s Orthodox community particularly hard in recent years. “It’s fine for everybody to tweet that they’re angry at antisemitism and ask for more police or whatever it is that folks want to ask for,” he told JI. “But for me, it all comes from education, or ignorance, and we need to start being more proactive about the work we’re doing and informing and educating people.”

He said he intends to launch a task force to combat antisemitism in partnership with the city’s Department of Education, but declined to go into detail because the project is only at an incipient stage. “We’re talking about how we can engage,” he said, while clarifying that he is approaching the matter with some caution because his office is not allowed to dictate curriculum. “But it doesn’t mean we can’t do a better job at talking about the Holocaust at a younger age, or introducing people to different religions.”

“I think it’s all education,” Reynoso told JI. “People just don’t know, and a lot of people are just scared of what’s different, and then they react to that in violent ways.”

Regarding the hot-button issue of yeshiva education, which has come under increased scrutiny following a series of investigations published by *The New York Times* in recent months, Reynoso took an evenhanded view. “I went to Catholic school, so I’m very sensitive to this,” he said. “We can have a high-quality education and have something where, parochially, folks are also getting the education they deserve.”

“My biggest issue is how we get there and who’s involved in getting there,” he added. “It’s easier to destroy than it is to build, and I just can’t stand the conversation just being, like, us against them, or the conversations being about ‘bad versus good.’ We don’t need to do that.”

Gideon Taylor, the executive vice president and CEO of the Jewish Community

Relations Council of New York, said in a statement to JI that Reynoso “has been a friend and effective advocate for the Jewish Community of Brooklyn since his time in the City Council,” having accompanied the JCRC on study tours to Israel and more recently joining the advisory board of its Bridges-NY fellowship, which seeks to connect emerging leaders from differing religious and ethnic backgrounds.

“He truly understands just how damaging the rising hate in our city is, and we are proud to be working closely with him in an effort to combat it,” Taylor added.

In addition to such efforts, Reynoso has pushed for increased investments in maternal healthcare, a commitment he made during his campaign and one among

a range of achievements he highlighted during his first state-of-the-borough address in January.

As he enters his second year in office, Reynoso said he finally feels as if his office is now operating at full steam. In recent months, he finished hiring a staff of 60 full-time employees, including some members of the Jewish community, and is looking forward to working on initiatives related to community board reform and land use, among other things. “I feel like I’m doing something that’s a lot different,” he said, “and that is going to reflect what I believe the new normal should be.”

While his immediate predecessor used the position as a stepping stone to higher office, Reynoso clarified that, in contrast

with Adams, who built close relationships with Orthodox leaders that helped propel him to the mayorship, he has no such designs — even as some of his supporters expect that he will change his mind. “We wish that he continues to grow and he will grow in his job and grow out of his job,” Niederman told JI recently. “After two terms, he will seek higher office because he’s made for that.”

But Reynoso isn’t making any such commitments just yet. “I want to be a great borough president, and I want to be remembered in a positive way,” he said. “The borough presidency is all I’m thinking about. My aspirations in the future are not things that I dwell on. I’m happy here.” ♦

MARCH 17, 2023

## The Mormon bureaucrat in Utah changing marriage in Israel

*Amelia Powers Gardner is a local Utah official laser-set on reducing bureaucratic inefficiency. So how did she become a key player in Israeli public affairs?*

By Gabby Deutch

Amelia Powers Gardner was a low-level elected official whose mission was to make government processes more efficient and less bureaucratic for the 665,000 citizens of Utah County, Utah. So she’s as surprised as anyone that she became something of a revolutionary in Israeli public affairs.

What she viewed as a simple policy change — moving the county’s marriage licensing online — has reverberated around the world, resulting in hundreds of weddings as far away as Russia and raising legal questions that have reached the Israeli Supreme Court. And it happened,

essentially, by accident.

“I didn’t have a really defined purpose,” Gardner, who has worked as a management consultant and an engineer, told *Jewish Insider* of her decision to run for county clerk in 2018. “I started by diving in: What processes are broken? What processes are inconvenient for our citizens, and how can we fix that?”

Gardner, now county commissioner, ended up fixing things for citizens well beyond the borders of Utah County, whose largest city is Provo. Her first project was to allow for totally virtual wedding licensing, a process she began in 2018 and which finally

went live in January 2020.

Two months later, the world shut down with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Couples who planned to wed in spring 2020 were unable to get the requisite marriage licenses because municipal offices were closed. Gardner was soon getting calls from couples all over the country and from government offices as high up as that of New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, urging her to issue licenses outside her county.

“Finally, in around April, maybe early May at the latest, I just thought, ‘This is crazy. It has been two months. This is not two weeks to flatten the curve,’” Gardner

recalled. “That’s when we opened it up to citizens beyond our borders of our state and our county, because the idea that a government office being closed meant that people couldn’t perform life or religious ceremonies was so unconscionable to me that I decided that, hey, you know what, we’re gonna offer this service to anyone who wants it.”

Israelis, it turns out, desperately wanted that combination of American don’t-tread-on-me libertarianism and technological ease.

There is no civil marriage in Israel because marriage rules are controlled by the country’s religious authorities. So to get married, Jews must go through Israel’s Chief Rabbinate. For decades, Israeli Jews who wanted to get married on their own terms — either because they did not want to abide by the religious guidelines of the Chief Rabbinate, or could not have a legally recognized wedding because they are gay, or just on principle — would have to leave the country. Many went to nearby Cyprus, creating an entire cottage industry of wedding tourism. Some have even chartered boats to go just far enough off Israel’s coast to exchange vows in international waters.

Now, all they have to do is go online to Utah County’s marriage license portal.

Word spread organically, first in the U.S. and then around the world. Gardner guesses that Israelis first learned of her county through a Facebook group for international long-distance couples. Israelis quickly began using the county’s services. But inadvertently, the county was entering a political minefield.

“At that time, we weren’t aware of the marriage laws in Israel and the lack of civil marriage, and how the Rabbinate controlled it,” Gardner noted. “That all was brought to our attention probably a few months later.”

Israel’s Interior Ministry said it would not recognize the hundreds of weddings performed through the virtual system. But this month, the government lost its court battle against the couples. Israel’s Supreme Court — currently mired in a monthslong political battle as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu seeks to curtail its power — ruled unanimously that the government must recognize the marriages of the more than 1,000 Israeli couples who have used the virtual service.

“I don’t think the political debate has ever really been our purpose. But recognizing that government stands in the way of people, the way they live their lives and their life decisions — that is something that I feel very strongly shouldn’t happen,” said Gardner. The matter feels personal to her. She is a member of the Mormon Church, which, she pointed out, was persecuted for a long time by the American government.

“This idea that the government would interfere with religious ceremonies, or with the way that people live their lives — maybe it’s in my DNA, because that’s my ancestry, but it didn’t sit well with me,” she explained. “I was very happy that we could find a way for people to be able to legitimize their families. I feel that the family is the basic unit of society, and the fact that government would interfere with people creating families, forming families, solemnizing families, was very disturbing to me.”

Israel isn’t the only geopolitical hotspot Gardner has waded into. She recently learned of a lesbian couple in which one woman was Ukrainian and one was Russian, and they wanted to go to Europe together to flee the war. But they couldn’t wed in Russia or Ukraine, where gay marriage remains illegal — yet they couldn’t both get refugee status unless they were married. So they got married via Utah County’s system, and their best friend, sobbing, found Gardner at a conference to thank her.

Utah County remains the only county in the U.S. to offer virtual wedding licenses. Gardner isn’t involved with the marriage system anymore — her county clerk successor handles it, and he has vowed to stick with the virtual portal — but she still gets inquiries from other municipalities asking to license her software.

“The problem is, we built it ourselves,” she told JI, so the county can’t easily share it. But a tech startup is working to build out the technology so that other places can follow Utah County’s lead.

Gardner’s attention is already focused elsewhere: Next up is the health department, and digitizing systems to apply for food assistance.

Her engineering training and business-consultant acumen can’t sit dormant for too long. ♦

# Bahrain's Al Waha backs Mideast startups behind the scenes

*Rain, Calo and other Gulf businesses found early financing from island nation's fund of funds, Areije Al Shakar tells The Circuit*

By Jonathan H. Ferziger

*The article first appeared in The Circuit.*

In the heyday of Bitcoin, the four co-founders of the Rain cryptocurrency exchange saw a tantalizing opportunity when the Central Bank of Bahrain issued regulations allowing certain digital assets to be used for payments and handled by commercial banks.

The move in 2019 toward normalizing crypto trading under a regulatory framework established the small island kingdom as an influential player in the notoriously unregulated industry and generated the interest of venture capital firms from the Gulf to Silicon Valley. Among the early funders of Rain was Bahrain's Al Waha Fund of Funds, lending credibility when Kleiner Perkins, Paradigm and other top venture firms later decided to invest their own money.

In fact, the money from Al Waha was dispensed through a variety of Gulf venture capital firms such as Middle East Venture Partners, VentureSouq and 500 Startups, which helped Rain establish itself as a regional leader among cryptocurrency exchanges. Little public note was made that the money originated in Al Waha, an arm of the Bahraini government that is backed by the tiny island kingdom's \$15.4 billion sovereign wealth fund, Mumtalakat.

Al Waha, which has \$100 million under management, prefers to stay behind the scenes, its director and fund manager, Areije Al Shakar told *The Circuit*. Similarly, Al Waha provided funding for Calo, which analyzes a user's nutritional needs and delivers meals custom-cooked according to the data, through 500 Startups.

"There's a huge opportunity that we've seen, and I think our success has shown that

as a fund of funds, we've been able to back a number of Bahrain-based founders and their companies that springboard out of here and then work across the entire Gulf [region]," Al Shakar said in an interview on the sidelines of last week's Connect2Innovate conference in the capital city of Manama. The event, organized by the Bahraini Ministry of Industry and Commerce and Israel's Start-up Nation Central, brought together some 500 participants from the two countries, according to the organizers.

The conference took place at Bahrain's 46-story Wyndham Grand hotel, which looks like a twisted drill bit piercing the skyline. In the hotel's top-floor ballroom, the conference got underway with Bahrainis in native robes mingling with jacketed but tieless Israelis over glasses of juice – the Wyndham doesn't serve alcohol – and spinach pastry hor d'oeuvres. Among those greeting the participants were Bahrain's Minister of Industry and Commerce Abdulla bin Adel Fakhro, and its ambassador to Israel, Khaled Al Jalahma. The group also watched a video address from Israeli President Isaac Herzog and were greeted by Ambassador to Bahrain Eitan Na'eh and Avi Hasson, CEO of Start-Up Nation Central.

During the interview, Al Shakar said that because of Bahrain's small size, it takes operating and raising funds across the six nations of the Gulf Cooperation Council and beyond for companies to reach a valuation of \$1 billion. That's the marker that separates the most attractive companies, which are adoringly referred to in the VC industry as "unicorns," from smaller, struggling startups.

"What we've seen is that unicorn status really comes because you're able to expand across the GCC," said Al Shakar, a 42-year-

old career banker who previously worked for BNP Paribas, Lehman Brothers and Citibank. She earned degrees in finance from the John Molson School of Business in Montreal and in public policy and management from the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London.

Among other Mideast-focused funds in which Al Waha invests are BECO Capital, Shorooq Partners and BY Venture Partners. Since the Abraham Accords normalized ties between Bahrain and Israel in 2020, Al Waha has also invested in LionBird, a firm with offices in Israel and the U.S. that focuses on digital health startups.

"There's a lot of knowledge transfer that happens," Al Shakar said. "Whether it's fintech, whether it's healthcare technology, there's a lot for us to learn from the Israeli ecosystem."

One of her contacts in Israel is Aaron Applbaum, a partner in Mizmaa Ventures who had met Al Shakar earlier through the Kauffman Fellows program, an international network for venture capitalists, and attended the conference in Bahrain. "She is one of the more talented fund of funds managers I have ever met," Applbaum told *The Circuit*.

Among a series of agreements and memorandums of understanding signed during the three-day conference was a partnership announced by Israeli startup BladeRanger and Bahrain energy company Alpha Solar. The two businesses said they will work together to sell BladeRanger's robotic technology to clean and inspect solar panels across the region.

"I am proud to say that approximately three years after the signing of the Abraham Accords, collaborations, in all fields, are expanding, and we always strive to

grow them even more,” Al Jalahma told the participants at the conference. “I am confident that the technological tools and products developed by the Israeli startup companies will bring great benefit to the

Bahraini economy and vice versa.”

Na’eh told *The Circuit* that Israel is an increasingly attractive place for Bahraini ventures even though business executives have been cautious. “They’re coming to visit

and they’re impressed with our technology. They want to find the next thing,” Na’eh said. ♦

MARCH 22, 2023

## Meet the Jewish restaurateur behind DC’s East London-style eateries

*Daniel Kramer says his love for food came from celebrating Jewish holidays as a kid in L.A.*

By Gabby Deutch

Before he opened the Dupont Circle restaurant that would create what has consistently been named the best burger in the nation’s capital, Daniel Kramer was trying — and failing — to make it in politics.

The Los Angeles native came to Washington in 2008, eager to get a toehold in the Democratic political world. Already several years out of college, the Tufts University alum called it quits after gigs as an intern and low-paid legislative fellow. For reasons that are still not totally clear, even to Kramer himself, he decided to open a restaurant instead.

“I had no idea what I was doing,” Kramer told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview. Whatever he did ended up working: Last month, he opened his sixth full-service restaurant in Washington, a Navy Yard location of his popular Duke’s Grocery gastropub.

The new restaurant, located a block away from Nationals Park, is “serving all your Duke’s classics,” Kramer said, just with more beers on tap and lots of TVs to show sports games. (Duke’s also has locations in Foggy Bottom and Woodley Park, along with a small outpost in the British embassy).

Duke’s Proper Burger (two beef patties with gouda, house-made pickles, charred red onion, sweet chili sauce and aioli on a brioche bun) carries a registered trademark, and the East London-inspired restaurant’s mac and cheese has a cult following.

Kramer is not a chef, and he did not anticipate a career in hospitality, previous stints as a pizza delivery driver and bartender notwithstanding.

“In terms of having it be a career, that was not something I contemplated as a child, and was not something I contemplated when I moved to Washington,” he explained. Instead, Kramer points to Jewish holidays and family meals as the basis for his love of food and all things culinary.

“Like many Jews, and really people of all faiths, there are certain meals or dishes that remind you of your family, of your heritage, or your religion. And I could list off a dozen dishes that made me think of my parents and my grandparents,” he said. “Like many Jewish families, my family definitely has the best latke recipe ever, anywhere. The way that we do our brisket, roast chicken, all these things. Our matzah brei is better than anybody else’s matzah brei.” (“To be clear,” Kramer added, “I am saying these things

facetiously.”)

There’s nothing Jewish on the Duke’s menu, with the possible exception of shakshuka, a North African dish that is now a staple in Israel. And one of Kramer’s other restaurants is a seasonal crab shack that will soon reopen for the spring and summer. But he thinks there’s something Jewish about the way he operates his restaurants and the atmosphere he tries to create.

“It’s a way to stay connected to Judaism, in the sense of welcoming the stranger and treating people the way that you want to be treated,” Kramer said.

Kramer hosts the second Passover Seder every year — “there’s a lot of paprika,” he said, as an homage to his Hungarian roots — and during the pandemic, Duke’s offered takeout for the Seders, as well as for Easter and for iftar dinners during Ramadan.

“It’s less about reaching across the aisle,” Kramer said, noting that his restaurant doesn’t get involved in Washington’s political scene. “I’m more about reaching across faith, and having food as the conduit of bringing people together.”

In 2019, Kramer opened Gogi Yogi, Washington’s first tabletop Korean barbecue spot, in the Shaw neighborhood. He was



tired of driving out to the Virginia suburbs, where there's a large Korean community, for a cuisine he grew up eating in L.A.

"One of the great things about the food scene in Washington is that you're not limited to only certain people being able to cook certain foods or have certain restaurants," said Kramer. "I'm not British," he added, but Duke's takes inspiration from the culinary melting pot of East London, where, Kramer said, "you have a curry shop next to a British pub next to, like, a blue-collar club next to an Eastern European bagel shop."

Duke's original location, on a busy section of 17th Street near Dupont Circle, opened in 2013, when Washington was in the midst of a culinary renaissance. (The

17th Street location, which is now closed for renovations, will reopen later this year for the restaurant's 10th anniversary.) Like the East London hodgepodge of restaurants from around the world that inspired Kramer, Washington offers something similar: a deeply diverse population and a culturally curious community.

"There's always been a lot of different cultures and ethnicities present here expressing their cultures through food," he said. "There are so many talented, interesting, curious people from around the world that are either in D.C. permanently or for a weekend or some time in between."

London doesn't only offer culinary inspiration to Kramer. The city has also

nurtured his love of soccer. Kramer recently became an investor in Hapoel Tel Aviv, and he plans to travel to Tel Aviv this summer for the football club's 100th anniversary.

"I'm looking forward to, whether it's through food or through sport or through Israel Bonds, which I've been involved in, to stay connected with the State of Israel," said Kramer.

So is an Israeli restaurant in the works for the Washington restaurateur?

"I'm not going to say no to any opportunity up front," Kramer said, "but we've got our hands full in a good way with the current operations." ♦