

## THE WEEKLY PRINT

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MARCH 30, 2023

## Boy Meets Congress

*Ben Savage, who rose to fame as the teenage lead in the '90s sitcom 'Boy Meets World,' has a new audience: voters*

By Gabby Deutch

**B**en Savage rose to fame playing an adolescent boy on the journey to adulthood as the main character in the ABC sitcom "Boy Meets World," a 1990s staple.

Now, the former child star is hoping to win over a new, grown-up audience — the voters of California's 30th Congressional District.

"I was always involved with projects that intended to do some good and intended to bring people together and intended to encourage a positive message," Savage, 42, said of his acting days in a recent interview with *Jewish Insider*. "It'd be great to see some of that in Washington, D.C."

The West Hollywood resident is facing long odds in the crowded race to replace Rep. Adam Schiff (D-CA), who was first

elected to Congress in 2000 and is running for California's open Senate seat in 2024. He faces West Hollywood Mayor Sepi Shyne, Los Angeles Unified School District school board member Nick Melvoin, former Los Angeles City Attorney Mike Feuer, state Assemblymember Laura Friedman and several others.

It's Savage's second run for office, after he earned 7% of the vote in a bid for West Hollywood City Council last year. "What I took away from that experience is how much I enjoyed connecting with the community," said Savage. The 30th District stretches from West Hollywood to Pasadena.

Savage is pitching a well-worn message to voters: Elect him to bring a new, positive voice to an institution mired in gridlock and full of stale solutions to seemingly

insurmountable problems.

"There's so much division coming out of D.C., and there's a negativity that I think is turning people off from the political process," he explained. "I'd like to see younger people involved. I want to see newer voices involved. And I want to see people that are there to actually get things done and fix things."

His biggest focus is "medical innovation," and working to develop cures for major diseases. "I think we have a culture in the country which is about providing Band-Aids and temporary solutions and temporary fixes to a lot of diseases and ailments that are affecting American families," said Savage, who lost his father and grandfather to cancer. "I think that we're the most advanced industrial nation in the history of

the world, that we should be actually solving diseases.”

For voters in the district, the concerns are more local: “It’s homelessness. It’s healthcare. It’s lack of affordable housing,” said Savage.

Born in Chicago, Savage and his family moved to California’s San Fernando Valley when he was young. His first Hollywood acting role came at age 7 — his older brother, Fred, had by then already been booking gigs for a few years — and Savage touts his nearly lifelong membership in the SAG-AFTRA union as a mark of his liberal bona fides.

“I grew up working union jobs since I was 7 years old, and it was instilled in us very, very early on that you’re providing for others and you’re helping others,” he said of his union membership. “Every time you work, you’re allowing and creating jobs for a couple hundred people.” Savage is otherwise not making his acting career a major talking point on his campaign, although he pointed out that his team recently purchased the domain name [BoyMeetsCongress.com](http://BoyMeetsCongress.com), which redirects to his official campaign site.

Growing up in the 1980s, not yet too far removed from the tumult and promise of the 1960s, Savage said his family “revered” the Kennedy political dynasty and “spoke very passionately about John F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy.”

“Like many Jewish households, I grew up in a very passionate household, [where] politics were discussed regularly,” he recalled. “The importance of standing up for your country, for your community, of getting involved and helping the less fortunate, of staying active — that was kind of instilled in us from a young age, combined with a sense of the blessings and how lucky we all were to be living in this country.”

Savage’s grandmother was born in Eastern Europe, and half of her siblings stayed behind after she immigrated to the United States. Those who stayed did not survive the Holocaust. He grew up knowing her story, but she rarely spoke about it. (Savage’s sister, a teacher at the Brentwood School, recently staged a play about the Holocaust at the private secondary school.)

“In the Jewish culture, it’s all about celebrating life and being excited about things that are happening now and being passionate and, you know, *L’chaim*,” he said.

Savage became a bar mitzvah at the Stephen S. Wise Temple, a Reform congregation in Bel Air. In 2020, he played the Jewish love interest in “Love, Lights, Hanukkah,” one of the few Hanukkah movies produced by the Hallmark Channel.

Fighting antisemitism is front and center in Savage’s campaign. “There needs to be a much bigger conversation about antisemitism in this country, and the way we deal with it,” said Savage.

“I’ve seen popular national figures make disparaging antisemitic remarks and make insulting remarks and then pass it off as, they were only kidding. ‘It was a joke, or ‘Lighten up,’” he said. “Little by little those jokes add up, and then it becomes acceptable, and then it becomes OK. And then there’s not a big deal when there’s a shooting on Pico Robertson and a transient says that he was motivated because he’d read online that Jewish people are all greedy.”

He said that combating antisemitism takes “awareness” and “encouraging more civility, and increasing stronger anti-hate legislation. But obviously that comes up against the free speech debate,” Savage noted, suggesting that legislation to fight antisemitism might infringe on people’s free-speech rights. “I know that that’s a constant debate.”

Savage has not traveled to Israel but hopes to do so soon. “Everyone I know that visits there just talks about how it’s such an inspiring place to be and how it reinvigorates their love of Israel and also being Jewish, which is really special,” said Savage. “It’s the only Jewish state in the world, so I think we should be doing all we can to make sure that Israel is safe and protected.”

He said the U.S. has a role in bringing peace to the region but stopped short of saying how he would hope to do that. “I’m in favor of anything that can be done to achieve peace in the region and ensure a long-lasting peace,” Savage said, calling a two-state solution “obviously the ideal goal.”

Savage did not share an opinion about Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s proposed judicial reforms, but said that the scenes from the country in recent weeks are “not a good look.”

“I’m going to let the people of Israel and the Israeli government work out their issues,” he said, but “it’s just not a good

look for Israel to spill out all their domestic turmoil for the whole world to see, to watch, to unfortunately encourage Israel’s enemies.”

His overarching goal when it comes to foreign policy is “making sure that America maintains its role as a leader in the world, and we provide examples for people and we take care of people,” Savage said.

The primary election is a year away, and at this point, Savage is sticking to broad messaging rather than proposing any particular legislation — on foreign policy or other issues. So if he wins the election, what does he hope to work on first?

“It’s almost like saying to a kid in a candy store, ‘You can pick anything you want,’” Savage said. “There’s so many issues that I want to get involved in. But the medical innovation, to me, is the most important.” ♦

# Chicago's Jewish community could swing mayoral race

*Crime and education emerging as top issues as Paul Vallas and Brandon Johnson square off on Tuesday*

By Matthew Kassel

As Chicago's mayoral campaign approaches its end with next Tuesday's election, the two candidates, Paul Vallas and Brandon Johnson, have stepped up their efforts to win support from the Jewish community, a politically active voting bloc that could be pivotal in the highly competitive contest.

In just the past week or so, the rival Democrats have each sat for private listening sessions with Orthodox Jewish leaders, appeared in dual forums hosted by the local Jewish federation and made separate arrangements to address congregants at one of the city's oldest synagogues.

The 11th-hour overtures to a range of key Jewish groups and activists in metropolitan Chicago, home to the third-largest Jewish population in the United States, have come as polls show a tightening race between Vallas and Johnson, who advanced from a crowded election in late February that knocked the incumbent, Mayor Lori Lightfoot, out of contention.

The Orthodox Jewish community — a crucial demographic that traditionally votes as a bloc — is likely to coalesce behind Vallas, a moderate Democrat and former chief executive of Chicago Public Schools who has vowed to expand the city's police force and promote school choice.

In February's nine-way mayoral election, Vallas, 69, performed best in some of the city's most heavily Orthodox areas, winning two precincts in the 50th Ward with more than 80% of the vote. Across the entire ward, where the majority of Chicago's Orthodox community is concentrated, he claimed 50% of the vote, defeating Johnson, a Cook County commissioner and outspoken union organizer who has embraced a progressive platform, by more than 30 points.

The lopsided ratio might be interpreted as a highly localized response to their opposing approaches on crime and education, which polls show are the top two issues in the race. "I'm hearing from a lot of my constituents that public safety is probably the top concern," Avroham Kagan, a Chabad rabbi in downtown Chicago who met with Vallas and Johnson during the first round of voting, said in an interview with *Jewish Insider* on Tuesday. "That's been the most common thread."

The candidates are divided on how to handle the city's rising crime epidemic. Johnson, 47, has advocated for more accountability from Chicago's police department while emphasizing community-based partnerships with law enforcement. During the campaign, he has backtracked on recent comments in which he described the movement to defund the police as a "political goal."

Vallas, by contrast, rose to prominence by channeling fears over violent crime rates that increased during the pandemic. His tough-on-crime message, including a vow to fill nearly 2,000 police vacancies and aggressively prosecute misdemeanors, won him an endorsement from the Fraternal Order of Police, which Johnson has seized on to suggest that Vallas secretly harbors Republican views.

Meanwhile, Johnson's close affiliation with the Chicago Teachers Union, which endorsed him even before he announced his candidacy, has fueled speculation that he is beholden to its interests. He has rejected those claims. The union, from which Johnson is on leave as a paid organizer, has opposed the continuation of a tax credit scholarship program that has benefited low-income students who attend Jewish

day schools. In alignment with Orthodox leaders, Vallas has expressed support for the state legislation, which is set to expire this year.

Shlomo Soroka, the director of government affairs for Agudath Israel Illinois, characterized the preservation of "true Torah education" as "an existential need" that is linked directly with fighting antisemitism. "Yeshiva and day school enrollment are growing every year and the community is growing every year," he told JI.

Still, he said that Orthodox voters in Chicago, whose population he estimates at more than 20,000, now feel "uniquely vulnerable" to violent crime amid a national surge in antisemitic incidents, which rose significantly last year in Chicago and the broader Midwest, according to a recent report conducted by the Anti-Defamation League.

"Our neighborhoods have historically always been very safe, and we've experienced a very serious uptick in violent crime in our areas," he said in an interview with JI on Tuesday. "While overall crime may be down, Chicagoans in many neighborhoods don't feel safe."

The Orthodox community is particularly exposed because its members are "visibly Jewish," he told JI, and therefore easily targeted. He said the community "needs to see the issue being addressed effectively," citing hopes for an increased police presence during Shabbat as well as Jewish holidays when community members are also forbidden from working.

He raised those issues, among others, in recent meetings with Vallas and Johnson, he said. "They were receptive to our concerns," Soroka told JI, acknowledging that both

candidates “obviously have different styles and different ideas about different things.”

While neither candidate promised to deliver votes in the state capital to uphold the education bill, Vallas and Johnson were otherwise supportive of combating antisemitism, he said. “Brandon said that your Jewish identity, your culture, your language, your mode of dress, it shouldn’t be something to be afraid of,” Soroka recalled. “It should be celebrated, and anyone that tries to take that away from you, that is the definition of antisemitism.”

Days earlier, however, Johnson had struggled to define antisemitism during a closed-door candidate forum hosted by the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago at its downtown offices, a recording of which was obtained by JI.

“Any speech or any effort to delegitimize Israel and its right to exist, that’s how I view antisemitism,” he told attendees, briefly pausing between some words as he tentatively began his response. “And that definition isn’t far away from just my own personal experiences,” said Johnson, who is Black. “It’s like, when Black men say we can’t breathe, you should believe us. Don’t delegitimize my humanity or my existence, and so when there are efforts to do that, that’s how I would categorize or define antisemitism.”

Some participants who spoke with JI said they were surprised by the relatively limited scope of Johnson’s answer and felt it had demonstrated a lack of familiarity with Jewish communal issues such as security concerns, which he had also been asked to address. “I was shocked that he stumbled like that,” said one attendee. “I have seen countless candidates and politicians speak on this issue. Probably one of the worst fumbles I have seen.”

The initial question had not been particularly “complex,” said the attendee, noting that the moderator gave a “two-minute introduction to antisemitism” covering recent incidents of antisemitic vandalism in Chicago as well as “teachers misrepresenting the Holocaust” and college students who are asked to “leave their belief in Israel’s right to exist at the door.”

In the same answer, Johnson also expressed a commitment to “making sure that we hear and see and view the expertise

and the lived experiences of the Jewish community,” adding: “I’m actually a little disturbed by the fact that you have forces that do not want to see the history of the Jewish community told.” He said he was “very much committed to making sure that we are bringing communities together.”

In a statement to JI after this story was published on Thursday morning, a spokesperson for Johnson’s campaign, Ronnie Reese, said the commissioner “is fully aware of and concerned about” rising antisemitism. If elected, Johnson will have “a liaison on staff to be a direct point of contact for the community” and “will work with partners in public safety to ensure there is a presence in areas in the communities that have been impacted,” including kosher markets and synagogues.

Elsewhere in the forum, Johnson weighed in on the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement targeting Israel. He was asked specifically if he would support anti-BDS legislation in Illinois as well as a resolution passed by the City Council in 2015 urging a pension fund in Chicago not to invest in companies that engage in boycotts of Israel. While he did not explicitly commit to either, he clarified that he is opposed to BDS. “The divestment movement is not aligned with my values,” he said.

Johnson’s campaign did not respond to a request for comment from JI on Wednesday.

For his part, Vallas, who faced the same questions while meeting with the federation recently, said he is against BDS and would support the legislation and the resolution, according to two attendees who were present for the discussion. In explaining his own view of antisemitism, meanwhile, Vallas deferred to the working definition promoted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

A spokesperson for Vallas’ campaign did not respond to a request for comment from JI on Tuesday.

While neither candidate “has a long history of Jewish communal engagement or involvement,” said Daniel Goldwin, the executive director of public affairs for the Jewish United Fund of Metropolitan Chicago, the city’s federation, they have both “been active in reaching out to different parts of the Jewish community.”

On Saturday, for example, Vallas

appeared before congregants of Anshe Emet Synagogue, a Conservative congregation in the Lakeview neighborhood of Chicago, where he spoke with the senior rabbi, Michael Siegel. In response to a question about how he intends to address antisemitic incidents, Vallas said his “first order of business would be to pass” a public safety ordinance that allows the city to “prosecute and impose sentences for people who commit hate crimes.”

“We have the power to do that,” he explained, noting that his administration would have “zero tolerance when it comes to hate crimes.”

In his discussion with the federation, Johnson, who is scheduled to appear at Anshe Emet on Saturday morning, suggested that he would work to ensure that Chicago police officers are given adequate training to recognize and investigate hate crimes.

Leonard Matanky, a rabbi who leads Congregation K.I.N.S., an Orthodox synagogue in West Rogers Park, said in a recent interview with JI that he believes “there is a greater amount of support for Vallas” among Jewish voters, citing his budget experience as a longtime superintendent in several major cities as well as his efforts to promote Holocaust education.

But progressive Jewish activists say they are more enlivened by Johnson, who earlier this month held a rally with the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs alongside several Jewish elected officials, including Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), who is backing his campaign. The group’s recently launched political arm, JCUA Votes, which is focused exclusively on domestic issues, has also endorsed Johnson in the runoff. Its volunteers are currently engaged in door knocking and phone banking ahead of Tuesday’s election.

With the election set to take place just a day before Passover, there have been some challenges in ensuring that Orthodox voters cast their ballots before they have left town or become too busy in making preparations for the holiday, according to Soroka, the government affairs director of Agudath Israel Illinois.

The group itself does not make endorsements, and he declined to share

which candidate he suspects the Orthodox community will support. But he said the organization has otherwise engaged in a “comprehensive” vote-by-mail program that he described as successful.

“I think you’re going to see very solid turnout from the Orthodox community,” he told JI. “Our community could go either way in any given race and help determine the outcome of a close election.”

*Ed. note: This story was updated at 1:20 p.m. ET on March 30, 2023, to include comment from Johnson. ♦*

MARCH 29, 2023

## After praising Netanyahu, Porter ‘concerned’ about ‘far-right voices’ in his coalition

*“The potential erosion of democratic principles, including an independent judiciary, should be of concern to Americans,” Rep. Katie Porter said at a Democrats for Israel California event*

By Matthew Kassel

Before she took questions from Jewish voters during a virtual candidate forum on Tuesday evening, Rep. Katie Porter (D-CA), who is running for U.S. Senate in California, took a few minutes to express concern over Israel’s right-wing governing coalition and its now-suspended judicial overhaul, which has spurred mass protests in recent weeks.

“I am concerned about the inclusion of some of the far-right voices in Israel’s coalition government, and I think it is up to the prime minister to provide leadership that lifts up voices that are consistent with Israel’s values, rather than voices who are tarnishing Israel’s democracy and its commitment to its values,” Porter said. “The potential erosion of democratic principles, including an independent judiciary, should be of concern to Americans.”

“We have to hold Israel, and we want Israel to hold us, to our shared values of democracy and human rights,” she added.

Porter’s remarks followed recent comments to *Jewish Insider* in which the Irvine Democrat mostly shied away from explicit criticism of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whom she met in February during a House delegation visit to Israel sponsored by J Street. “I was extremely impressed with his willingness

to kind of grapple with us at some of the toughest issues that Israel’s facing,” Porter said in an interview with JI after her first trip to the Jewish state.

Speaking at the event on Tuesday, which was hosted by the advocacy group Democrats for Israel California, Porter explained that she had “pressed very hard” for the delegation to sit down with Netanyahu in Jerusalem because, she said, “I think he needs to hear directly from U.S. lawmakers that we expect our ally Israel to live up to the hallmark of our special relationship, which is protecting democracy, protecting human rights” and “protecting fundamental freedoms.”

Meanwhile, the congresswoman said she was “pleased” that Netanyahu had “delayed the judicial changes” on Monday. “The best path forward for Israel and all of its citizens is going to be compromise,” she noted.

“As the protests over the last several weeks, and especially this weekend, have shown, Israeli leaders need to find a different path forward with regard to the judiciary and with regard to strengthening its democracy,” Porter told participants, adding: “We need to continue to stand with the people of Israel, and to hope that they can move toward a better resolution than the one that has been proposed.”

Porter, a leading progressive lawmaker who represents a swing district covering Orange County, met virtually with pro-Israel activists a week after her opponent in the Senate race, Rep. Adam Schiff (D-CA), had addressed such issues in a similar event hosted by Democrats for Israel California as part of a candidate series. Before that event, Schiff, a Jewish Democrat from the Los Angeles area, told JI in an interview that he was “deeply concerned about” Israel’s governing coalition and “the participation of some of the more extreme voices within Israeli politics.”

Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA), who is also running to succeed outgoing Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) in 2024, has yet to speak with Democrats for Israel California.

In explaining her own approach to the Middle East on Tuesday, Porter clarified that she has “really tried, very consciously, through my social media and other statements, to make clear to the American people that Israel is an ally, that the vision of a democratic Jewish Israel is important, particularly in a time of increasing antisemitism.”

But, she added, “we cannot have this attitude that we cannot criticize Israel policy. Israel is a democracy, and criticism, challenges, questions, come with being a



democratic state.”

“I think one of the things I’m proudest of is my continued insistence that we need to hold all of our allies, and most especially our most important allies, like Israel, to

following and obeying international laws and American laws,” Porter said later in the discussion. “I’ve been proud to support military assistance, Iron Dome and other kinds of assistance to Israel.”

“It is important that we’re in conversation with Israel about our expectations for how they use that assistance,” she said. “I think that makes us a better partner to Israel.” ♦

MARCH 28, 2023

## What’s next for Israel’s judicial reform protests?

*Prime Minister Netanyahu announced that he would put his judicial reform plan on hold in order to restore calm, but his coalition partners are urging him to move ahead*

By Ruth Marks Eglash

After a tumultuous 24 hours in Israel, with mass spontaneous protests, national strikes and political posturing, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu tried to restore calm on Monday, announcing that he would put his plans for judicial reform on hold, at least for the next month, pending broader discussions with opposition leaders.

Netanyahu’s promise of a timeout, however, came just as pro-government supporters, spurred by key members of his own coalition, also took to the streets calling to push ahead with reforms that aim to restyle the make-up of Israel’s Supreme Court and rework some of the basic laws that make up the country’s de facto constitution.

Even as the legislation is temporarily stalled, it remained unclear Tuesday if Netanyahu’s steps were too little, too late and whether they could both restore order in the streets and keep his coalition intact.

Opposition leaders, former Prime Minister Yair Lapid and former Defense Minister Benny Gantz, welcomed Netanyahu’s timeout, saying they would work with him to reach a consensus on the proposed constitutional changes, but many of the anti-government demonstrations continued, with some protest groups

declaring that they would not stop until this government was removed.

“The announcement of Netanyahu and his extremist ultra nationalist partners, reveals that they plan on continuing on with the judicial coup,” the Umbrella Movement of Resistance against Dictatorship in Israel, a group that serves as the logistical arm uniting all the various protest groups, said in a statement. “As long as the legislation continues and is not completely stopped, we will protest in the streets.”

Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, head of the right-wing Religious Zionism party, also said he would push on. In a video statement, he urged pro-government supporters to rally for the changes. “We must not stop the reform,” he said. “We must not surrender to violence, anarchy, military service refusals and wild strikes. We are the majority, let’s make our voice heard. We won’t let our vote and the state be stolen from us.”

Amotz Asa-El, a fellow at the Jerusalem-based Hartman Institute, told *Jewish Insider* that the government still appears determined to implement the controversial reforms and still has the ability to pass legislation. However, he said, after the force of the protests, “it just won’t work now.”

“The people feel the power that they’ve suddenly wielded,” noted Asa-El, a former *Jerusalem Post* editor. “It feels great and they will return to the streets to rock the boat until all this is undone.”

Asa-El said that while it was the judicial reforms that initially sparked the protests, there was something deeper that is likely to keep the momentum going.

“The political grievance against Netanyahu transcends his natural opposition,” he said, explaining that even some of those who voted for the longtime leader and once belonged to his inner circle, such as former Mossad head Yossi Cohen and former Shin Bet Internal Security Director Yoram Cohen, feel that “Netanyahu went the Trump way, meaning that he made a strategic aim of pitting people against the people.”

“This is deeply disagreeable to most Israelis, to those I call middle Israel,” added Asa-El. “And this is where he [Netanyahu] miscalculated and where this critical mass of Israeli society responded with unpredicted ferocity. Nobody knew that this energy existed, and it just erupted like a volcano.”

“I think that the political landscape is ripe for the rise of an alternative that will be led by a centrist consensual configuration,”

he theorized. “Who that might be I have no idea, but someone could emerge.”

Adam Shinar, a senior lecturer at the Harry Radzyner Law School at Reichman University in Herzliya, disagreed, saying that Netanyahu’s government remained strong despite the unrest.

“This government still has 64 seats out of 120 seats,” he told JI. “No party in the coalition wants to have an election right now because the likely scenario is that they will lose voters.”

A poll published Monday by Israel’s Channel 12 News showed a dramatic drop in support for Netanyahu’s religious-right coalition from those 64 seats to only 54. It noted that if elections were held today, the opposition could form a 61-seat coalition – even without the support of the

predominantly Arab Joint List.

“He [Netanyahu] has made a number of misjudgments but he has not lost yet,” observed Jonathan Rynhold, head of the political studies department at Bar Ilan University near Tel Aviv.

“All leaders in power for a long time lose touch of reality,” Rynhold explained. “That is true of everyone, [former British Prime Minister] Tony Blair wrote about it in his memoir.”

“These days, Netanyahu listens to his son and his wife, who are on the far right, and the people who he is dependent on in his coalition,” he added. “That is his reality and that has led to make miscalculations among what is going on in the public and the army.”

Anshel Pfeffer, a journalist with *Haaretz*

and author of *Bibi: The Turbulent Life and Times of Benjamin Netanyahu*, told JI that the prime minister would do whatever he could to keep his coalition intact, although after events of the last few days it was no longer clear if he was still in control.

“He’s not in control of this coalition as he promised he would be,” Pfeffer noted, adding that the unrest had revealed stark divisions among Netanyahu’s coalition partners.

“Three months ago, we were talking about this being a very cohesive coalition, about how they were all on the same page,” he added. “Now they are all blaming each other for being the ones responsible for this not working and it doesn’t look very good for the one who was this great architect of this great victory.” ♦

MARCH 27, 2023

## Vertical farming rises to new heights in the UAE and Saudi Arabia

*AeroFarms opens world’s largest R&D vertical farm in Abu Dhabi, seeking to address mounting food security challenges in the Middle East and other arid regions*

By Melanie Lidman

*The article first appeared in The Circuit.*

From Newark, N.J., to Saudi Arabia, David Rosenberg preaches a gospel that contends bountiful, nutritious produce can be grown without soil and sunshine.

Instead, the agricultural entrepreneur builds sprawling vertical farms where kale, arugula and baby lettuce are bathed in magenta light, roots suspended in the air and cultivated with nourishing mist. He believes that techniques pioneered by his company, AeroFarms, may provide answers to the challenges of food security for billions of people living in arid regions and places

where climate change poses a growing threat to agriculture.

“If we use zero soil, we can do a lot more with less,” Rosenberg, the Newark-based company’s co-founder and CEO, told *The Circuit*.

Last month, AeroFarms opened a 65,000-square-foot (6,040-square-meter) facility in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, that it touts as the world’s largest vertical farm focused on research and development. The company was one of four that split a \$100 million grant from the Abu Dhabi Investment Office, or ADIO, aimed at supporting development of agricultural technology. Later this year, AeroFarms will

break ground on a vertical farm near the Saudi capital of Riyadh capable of growing 2.4 million pounds (1.1 million kilograms) a year of crops in a joint commercial venture with the kingdom’s \$620 billion Public Investment Fund.

“There’s not much arable land [in the Gulf] and not much fresh water, but there are abundant sources of energy,” Rosenberg said, adding, “there’s a lot of capital and a spirit of, ‘Let’s build and embrace new technology.’”

The global vertical farming market is expected to quintuple in size in the next few years, increasing from \$4.3 billion in 2021 to nearly \$20 billion by 2028, according to

a report from The Insight Partners. Vertical farming can produce some 240 times greater yields on 99% less land, compared with conventional farming, the report said.

AeroFarms already runs two commercial vertical farms in Ithaca, N.Y., and Danville, Va., selling 11 different varieties of packaged greens to retailers such as Walmart and Whole Foods, where the approximately \$4.50 a bag price is comparable to field-grown bags of salad. The company focuses on specialty greens with high levels of nutrients, including kale, watercress, mustard greens and arugula. It is testing more than 550 varieties of crops, including 70 types of berries. Premium fruits like strawberries are likely the next big crop for vertical farms, though indoor pollination remains a challenge.

While leafy greens are an ideal market because they grow quickly with minimal space requirements, the UAE facility in Abu Dhabi is looking at a wider variety of crops, including the possibility of growing trees. AeroFarms, for example, is partnering with Cargill Cocoa on a pilot project in Abu Dhabi to grow cocoa trees, which are producing catastrophically low yields due to climate change and warming temperatures. As much as 90% of the fruits and vegetables in the UAE are imported.

"AgTech is a priority sector for the Abu Dhabi government, and our long-term goal is to support the development of innovation that will contribute to solving challenges of regional and global importance," ADIO Director-General Tariq Bin Hend said at the mid-February launch of the facility, known as AgX.

Rosenberg, who has an MBA from Columbia University and represented the U.S. at World Cup fencing tournaments, winning three championships on the national team, is a serial entrepreneur. Before AeroFarms, he founded Hycrete, based on a weatherizing system his grandfather invented that enables buildings to use less cement. He's been honored by the World Economic Forum as a Young Global Leader and was a member of the Global Agenda Council on Water Security.

As an American Jew whose company does business in Israel, Rosenberg said he's had no trouble working in Saudi Arabia and other countries that don't have diplomatic

ties with the Jewish state. In the UAE, which normalized relations with Israel in 2020, he's found a fascination with AeroFarms' use of Israeli technology. "They want to lean in and find more collaboration" with Israel, Rosenberg said.

Like other vertical farming companies, AeroFarms uses aeroponics, which means plants are grown in trays with their naked roots dangling in air. The roots are misted with a combination of water and fertilizer on a regular basis. Plant roots love oxygen, and there's no way to get more direct oxygen than doing away with soil or any growing medium and baring it all, Rosenberg said. Because the water is applied directly to the root, rather than the soil surrounding it, he said, AeroFarms uses 95 percent less water than commercial farms.

Inside the warehouses, the lettuce trays stack up 12 levels high, requiring a cherry-picker-like apparatus to stay abreast of the plants' developments 35 feet (10 meters) off the ground. Plant biologists clad head-to-toe in medical-grade clean suits keep a careful watch over every aspect of plant growth, using automated sensors, machine vision and artificial intelligence to provide second-by-second updates about everything from temperature, pH, humidity and CO2 content of the air, and the nutrient solution sprayed on the roots. The plants are seeded and raised in optimal lighting and temperature conditions, encouraging fast growth.

AeroFarms is not alone in the UAE's vertical farming market. Last week, the Italian company Zero opened a 10,000-square-foot vertical farm as a proof of concept that was funded by an agricultural unit of Abu Dhabi's ADQ holding company. By the end of the year, Zero and ADQ plan to open a commercial vertical farm in the AgTech Park in Al Ain, located some two hours east of Abu Dhabi.

One challenge to vertical farming is rising energy costs. Rosenberg said AeroFarms looks for ways to incorporate renewable energy into its farms, cycling irrigation and lighting for off-peak times to reduce costs. The biggest use of energy in indoor farming is lighting. Rosenberg said AeroFarms uses blue and red LED lighting that casts a magenta light over the warehouse, facilitating photosynthesis and

requiring less energy than white lights.

Profitability is a serious problem for large-scale indoor farming because of the high upfront costs. AeroFarms' one-acre facility in Newark, N.J., cost \$39 million to build in 2015 when an acre of farmland in Iowa cost \$8,000. A Cornell University study in 2020 found that a head of lettuce grown at an indoor farm in Chicago was twice as expensive as a head of lettuce grown in California fields.

"Vertical farming is not an answer for everything," said Oz Kira, a senior lecturer and agricultural researcher at Israel's Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. "There are crops that cannot be grown vertically, at least not in the current state."

Kira, however, sees vertical farming as an important part of the answer for increasingly urbanized countries, where land is becoming scarcer, and populations continue to grow.

The global population is expected to increase by 2 billion people in the next 30 years, requiring more food production at the same time that agricultural land is disappearing because of development and desertification. Unlike field farms, vertical farms can be located in cities, which means there are lower transportation costs and produce reaches store shelves quicker, Kira said.

Even as the technology continues to improve, Rosenberg said he does not expect that vertical farms will completely replace conventional farming. "Some plants should be grown in the field some parts of the year, some should be grown in greenhouses and some should be grown in vertical farms. The economics are moving in that direction."

He said agriculture needs to find innovative answers to feed the earth's growing population, as conventional farms suffer from terrible droughts and catastrophic flooding brought on by extreme weather changes.

"It's not a question of what we *can* grow, it's about what we *should* grow," Rosenberg said. "We need to ask, are we solving a problem. There is so much that makes it really hard to farm in the field, and unfortunately that trend is continuing." ♦



# Biden admin considering new Middle Eastern census category that would include Israelis

*If adopted, the proposed changes to the race and ethnicity question would go into effect for the 2030 census*

By Gabby Deutch

The Biden administration has proposed a major policy change in the way people living in America define their racial or ethnic background on federal forms and the 2030 census. The proposed language would for the first time add a Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) category to a question about respondents' race or ethnicity. The MENA category, which has been heavily supported by Arab American advocacy groups, would also include Israelis.

Until now, people from countries as varied as Jordan, Israel, Morocco and Iran were placed under the "white" category on the census. If implemented, the policy shift would mark the first major change to the federal census' race and ethnicity guidelines since 1997.

The race categories on the 2020 census and in other federal forms are African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian or Pacific Islander or Other.

The changes would also merge the census' two race and ethnicity questions — currently, respondents are asked about their race and their ethnicity in separate questions — into one, using the language, "What is your race or ethnicity?" It would also for the first time include Hispanic or Latino as a standalone option under the race category, rather than as a subset of "white."

"The purpose of the census is for obviously congressional reapportionment, but also where services from the federal government should be delivered," said Dillon Hosier, CEO of the Israeli-American Civic Action Network, a Los Angeles-based advocacy organization. "We see this as a massive corrective action to ensure that this community isn't invisible as it relates to the census and other issues that are connected

to it."

After checking the MENA box, census respondents would have the option to write in a more detailed marker of their identity, including Israeli. "Examples include, but are not limited to, Lebanese, Iranian, Egyptian, Syrian, Moroccan and Israeli," the proposed census language says.

Studies from the U.S. Census Bureau have shown that people from the Middle East and North Africa do not identify with any of the currently listed racial categories. A 2021 Pew study found that half of Americans thought the 2020 census did not reflect their identity very well. The Census Bureau asks about the question because information about race "is critical in making policy decisions, particularly for civil rights," its website says.

The proposed federal rules change was announced in late January. The public can submit comments on the proposal, which is published in the Federal Register, until April 12. As of March 27, more than 8,800 comments have been posted. On average, roughly 100 new comments were posted a day, most of them supportive of the new MENA category.

Supporters gave a wide range of reasons for backing the new language. Some said that having accurate data about the number of people of Middle Eastern and North African descent would help eliminate health disparities. Others said that inaccurate data might mask discrimination in hiring and education faced by people from the region.

The proposed census changes have been supported by some civil rights groups, such as the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, and a wide swath of Arab-American civic organizations. U.S. Jewish organizations — including the Israeli-American Council, which represents the

Israeli Jewish community — have largely stayed away from the issue. William Daroff, CEO of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, told *Jewish Insider* his organization does not have a position on it.

"I just think that we do need a better appreciation of the unique experiences of these communities and to kind of adjust our engagement accordingly," said Hosier, who noted that only incomplete data exists regarding how many Israelis, and children of Israelis, live in the U.S. Estimates range from 200,000 to a million.

The White House Office of Management and Budget, which oversees the working group that is studying the issue, says the final revisions to the 2030 census should be complete by summer 2024. ♦

# Jewish students from across U.S. duke it out in N.Y. to see whose robots reign supreme

*Center for Initiatives in Jewish Education hosts robotics tournament to promote STEAM in day schools, yeshivas*

By **Tori Bergel**

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

In the American yeshiva world, physically active sports like basketball and hockey sat atop the coolness hierarchy for years, and winning competitions like Yeshiva University's annual high school Sarachek basketball tournament was the height of prestige.

Recently, however, that ladder has grown to include more mentally-focused extracurriculars, as Jewish day schools around the United States have begun to embrace the importance of science, technology, engineering, art and math (STEAM) programming in their classrooms.

In that vein, nearly 40 Jewish day schools and yeshivas from across the country came together at the Fort Washington Avenue Armory in New York City's Washington Heights on Tuesday afternoon to compete in a robotics tournament hosted by the Center for Initiatives in Jewish Education's (CIJE), in partnership with the Orthodox Union's Teach Coalition.

"I was an athlete as a kid. I played sports, every sport. I was a captain on most of the teams I played on, but these kids, a lot of these kids, aren't that, and there's a lot of educational, great things for this, but it's also a huge opportunity for these kids to work on teams, to collaborate together," Philip Brazil, CIJE vice president of development, told *eJewishPhilanthropy*. "A lot of times these are the kids who might be getting 100s in school or maybe some of the kids [whose minds work] differently, and this suits them, and it's giving opportunities to so many kids [who] never had anything like that before."

CIJE was created in 2001 to expand and enhance the education that Jewish students

in the U.S. were receiving. Today, around 200 Jewish schools are in CIJE's network.

"The education system in many countries, even those that were considered third-world countries, were getting much better, and the fear was that our kids, unless we did better things to educate them, would fall behind," CIJE President Jason Cury told *eJP*. "We don't expect all these kids, when they graduate high school and go on to college, that they're all going to be engineers. But we want them to have the ability to think in that way, because you can do anything if you think that way."

In addition to classroom-based programming, CIJE puts on a number of individual competitions and events across the country, with two larger tournaments happening in the fall and spring of each year, according to Adam Jerozolim, CIJE's director of curriculum development. Many of the competing teams came from around the tristate area, but a handful flew in from states as far away as Illinois, Florida and Texas. Schools with larger robotics programs entered more than one team — The Frisch School in Paramus, N.J., for example, had five groups competing in the high school division.

Inside the Armory's Nike Track & Field Center, hoards of elementary, middle and high school students milled around in various stages of competition; battled for points in makeshift arenas; and put last-minute fixes onto their robotic submissions, each of which was built and coded by the students themselves.

"There's coding, there's engineering, every single one of these robots was probably built five times, six times. Because [the students] fail, they realize, 'we got to do something better,' [then] they fail again. [We

are] teaching kids that there's nothing better than failure until you succeed," Brazil said.

The left side of the tournament's stadium held the middle school competition: teams from opposing schools worked together to earn points gained through skills performed by their respective robots. Each team competed in around five rounds — with rotating partners — the scores from which were then averaged for an individual total.

In the center, high school teams battled each other in 2-on-2-style cage matches with more advanced robots, working to both score themselves points and block their competitors from doing so.

"The middle school, which is very interesting, is a lot more wholesome than the high school. They are playing together. There's no competition on the match," Brazil said. "The high school is more of a bang-it-robots-type."

The elementary competition was housed to the arena's right: a similar teamwork-based skills match to the middle schoolers, but with more basic technology and requirements. This was the first tournament since CIJE launched the competition in 2019 that included elementary-aged participants — only eight schools received invitations.

Nearly three hours of qualifying rounds determined which middle and high school teams made it into the playoffs. For the middle school competitors, this would be a final round of alliance matches before the three highest scoring teams would be awarded first, second and third place titles. In the high school division, the winning spots were decided by a March Madness-esque elimination bracket featuring the top eight qualifiers.

In the end, a team from Brooklyn's Mazel Day School won first place in the

elementary division; teams from Mazel Day School and Brauser Maimonides Academy of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., led the middle school competition; and teams from the Hebrew Academy of the Five Towns and Rockaway (HAFTR) in Lawrence, N.Y., and Katz Yeshiva High School in Boca Raton,

Fla., took the high school title.

“This is an amazing opportunity for students in our middle school to come together in a program that supports teamwork, critical thinking, working hard, overcoming challenges, and it’s an opportunity to showcase things that are

maybe not always sports,” Hanna Shekhter, director of STEM innovation and education at Brauser, told eJP. “This [tournament] is another kind of opportunity for a team, an academic team, to come together, and we want to give our students as many opportunities as possible.” ♦

MARCH 29, 2023

## Cooking up connection and cuisine, Our Big Kitchen feeds thousands in L.A.

*OBKLA — with the help of 26 charity partners and more than 5,400 volunteers — has prepared over 27,000 meals and 52,200 cookies since June 2022*

By Esther D. Kustanowitz

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

About 50 adults, ranging in age from their 20s to their 70s, arrived at a space on Los Angeles’ Pico Boulevard that had been home to a string of restaurants over the last 15 years and checked in with a volunteer.

They were handed an apron and a small packet containing a hairnet. Once suitably garbed, they took their places at one of several metal tables in front of cutting boards, chef’s knives and a big tray of raw chicken or fresh vegetables. Over the course of two hours on that Wednesday night in February, the volunteers trimmed and diced poultry and chopped vegetables, they scooped cookie dough onto baking sheets and prepped plastic containers with stickers. By the time they left, the volunteers had met some new people and had prepared more than 300 nutritious chicken fajita meals for people who are living in shelters, on the streets or in other circumstances that make nutritious meals hard to come by.

This is Our Big Kitchen Los Angeles, which borrows its model from an Australian organization that OBKLA’s leadership, Yossi and Chaya Segelman, ran when they

lived there. When the couple moved to Los Angeles — after the pandemic had begun affecting local people and businesses — the Segelmans knew they wanted to do something for the community. They started packing snack boxes in their garage. Today, OBKLA produces more than 2,000 kosher meals a week for 10 community organizations, with Yossi serving as executive director and Chaya as the program manager.

Our Big Kitchen was founded in 2005 in Sydney, by Rabbi Dovid and Laya Slavin. The organization emerged from Laya’s experience providing support to women going through cancer treatments: in addition to giving them wigs to cover hair loss, she frequently brought a meal, and wanted to do more for them and their families. The couple pulled together a group of volunteers and started making large quantities of food to distribute to families in need. The organization grew to serve more than 60 charity partners and roughly 250,000 meals a year in Australia, Yossi said. While the meals are strictly kosher, they are predominantly bound for distribution to the broader, mostly non-Jewish community in Bondi and Sydney.

In June 2022, the Paul E. and Margaret

Feder Family Foundation gifted the Pico Boulevard space to Our Big Kitchen Los Angeles. The 4,600-square-foot space now serves as a tribute to the strength and resilience of the late Margaret Feder, a Holocaust survivor who had worked in the kitchen at Auschwitz. Whenever she could, Feder had smuggled food scraps back to her barracks, where she shared them with her sister and some others, an act that likely enabled their survival. Margaret and her late husband Paul were supporters of a number of Jewish institutions in Los Angeles, including the city’s modern Orthodox high school, Shalhevet, where they were founding supporters and the campus is named in their memory. At the OBKLA facility, a display case contains artifacts from Feder’s life in her memory. According to Yossi, Feder was not only “a phenomenal philanthropist but a great hostess.”

“Even if it was one person dining with her, she could set up a beautiful table setting,” he said, adding that her life had four pillars: her time in Auschwitz, her love for Israel, her love for and pride in her Judaism and her hospitality, which is marked by a single place setting in the display case. “The most amazing thing is [that] her motto was ‘life is beautiful,’” Yossi said. “For someone

that's gone through the suffering and challenges that she did, to be able to say 'life is beautiful,' that's a very powerful message."

During the pandemic, OBKLA's activities were limited, but since the opening of the new facility in June, OBKLA — with the help of 26 charity partners and 5,456 volunteers — has prepared 27,072 meals and 52,280 cookies. Yossi said this marked a 900% growth rate over what had been possible in the old space.

The organization allows individuals or small groups to join prep-and-pack sessions, each of which prepares 200-400 meals at a time. Participants are of all ages, from all segments of the Jewish community, as well as non-Jewish locals who also volunteer to help. OBKLA Connect, the organization's singles sessions, is co-sponsored with various groups that serve young professionals, such as Aish, Pico Shul and the online matchmaking site Saw You at Sinai. In December, OBKLA hosted Worthy of Love Productions' Mama's Challahs program, an opportunity for families experiencing homelessness to bake bread together, while a DJ scored the event with music that created a dance party atmosphere. The families were joined by parents and children from local liberal, social-justice centered congregation IKAR, as part of their Little Mensches family service learning program.

OBKLA has a budget of roughly \$750,000, Yossi said, and three full-time staff members (all pro bono until a recent Jewish Venture Philanthropy Fund grant paid for the ED's salary), two part-time workers and six rotating chefs. High schools and corporate teams are regular visitors, booking OBKLA for an evening (sponsoring a session costs about \$1,800), with groups ranging in size. Some community members sponsor or dedicate a session for a birthday, anniversary, yahrzeit or a bar or bat mitzvah.

In 2022, the organization also received a \$300,000 Cutting Edge Grant from Los Angeles' Jewish Community Foundation to fund its Community Youth Initiative as it grows. The initiative will engage thousands of Jewish middle and high school students, as well as vulnerable youth, in regular volunteer opportunities, in which the students will make and assemble meals — sans cellphones — while connecting with

each other and their Jewish identity.

"When else in their lives are they putting their phones away for two hours and actually being present in the moment, and also working together?" Chaya asked. "There's no hierarchy there. Everyone's working the same and you see kids that are interacting with each other in a different way."

The organization also recently received grants from the L.L. Foundation for Youth and the Harold Brown Foundation.

Yossi said that the sessions are popular because "there are limited opportunities for people to come together to volunteer in a structured, safe, fun environment with your family." Whether it's families connecting, singles meeting or volunteers making new friends, Yossi said, "what we find beautiful is that people are connecting over this activity."

Some volunteers become OBKLA "ambassadors," coming regularly up to three or four times a week to do whatever needs doing, the Segelmans told eJP, whether it's dishwashing, greeting people at registration or shuttling the packed meals to community partners. The meals go to 26 community organizations with which OBKLA is partnered. These include homeless shelters, Salvation Army transitional housing and Jewish organizations like Tomchei Shabbos, which delivers food to those in need before Shabbat. L.A. homeless services organization The People Concern receives about 200 meals a week from OBKLA.

OBKLA has a crowdfunding campaign scheduled for May 16-17, which its leadership expects will draw between 700-800 individual donors, which will be matched by about a dozen major donors.

The organization is moving forward with an eye toward expanding its distribution. Yossi said there is a "waiting list of charities" that want to receive meals but only if OBKLA can deliver it directly to them. The next initiative, he said, would be to fund a refrigerated van or two along with a delivery team, which he described as a six-figure investment.

After running 350 sessions over the last year and a bit, the organization is a well-oiled machine, Yossi said. Thanks to their experience and the help of their chefs, they have the purchase order down, they purchase in bulk for dry ingredients and know how to put orders for fresh

meat and poultry. They know the food safety procedures. Six rotating chefs, who otherwise work at catering companies, Michelin-star restaurants, local businesses and wineries, are on contract with OBKLA.

The focus is on fresh, nutritious restaurant-quality food, Chaya said, explaining that when families are in shelters, the food they receive is often repurposed or canned from food banks. "We want kids to feel they're not eating someone else's leftovers," she said.

"We're preparing the meals with *kavod* [respect]," her husband said. "Our goal is really to ensure that there isn't a person, certainly within our local reach, that goes hungry." ♦