

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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APRIL 3, 2023

Israel's consul general in Dubai builds new ties

'The end goal is to make it normal to have Israel, Israelis and Israeli culture here in Dubai,' Liron Zaslansky told Jewish Insider of her mission in the Gulf state

By Ruth Marks Eglash

Liron Zaslansky is no stranger to Israeli diplomacy. A veteran of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the 44-year-old diplomat has served at no fewer than six missions from Europe to South America and the Arab world. But now, as Israel's first-ever consul general in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, she is embarking on new territory – literally.

"We are the first generation of Israelis here," Zaslansky, who received her diplomatic credentials last September, two years after Israel signed the historic Abraham Accords normalization agreements with the UAE and Bahrain, told *Jewish Insider* in an interview.

"We are laying down the foundations of the bilateral agreements that were signed between our countries," she continued. "And we are doing our best to get to know the other side and to let the other side know us; it's a great responsibility."

While there have been some logistical hurdles to setting up a diplomatic operation from scratch – Israel's consulate in Dubai formally opened the doors to its permanent offices earlier this week – Zaslansky said

she sees starting such a mission as an opportunity, rather than a challenge.

"It's been up to us to meet people, to initiate relations and to see how we make contact with the authorities here in Dubai," Zaslansky said. "So, you can look at that as a challenge, but I see it as an opportunity because we get to start afresh, and that is something that does not happen very often."

Living in Dubai with her husband, Ohad Horsandi, who is Israel's deputy ambassador to the UAE in Abu Dhabi, and their three children, Zaslansky said the family received an unexpectedly warm welcome in a place that less than three years ago had no formal diplomatic ties with Israel.

"My theory is that it takes at least a year to get used to a new place, until you're settled in, until your family is settled in, and until you all feel at home," she theorized. "But in Dubai, that happened almost immediately – after only two or three months, it felt like we'd been here for forever."

With postings in Brussels, Berlin, Costa Rica and even as Israel's special envoy to the Arabian Gulf from 2008-2010, Zaslansky noted that in the UAE, where the bulk of

its residents are not natives, the focus is specifically on making new people feel welcome.

"It's a country that wants its residents to feel comfortable and they do that extraordinarily," she said. "There is a pace of events, doors opening and an effort to make sure you don't feel like the new kid on the block."

Responsible for developing Israel's public diplomacy in the Gulf state, fostering its business and economic ties and providing services to the thousands of Israelis who visit the Emirates each week – there are currently 12 daily flights between Tel Aviv and Dubai – Zaslansky said she is taking a slow and methodical approach to her country's newfound regional ally.

"We've been working slowly and thinking carefully about everything," she said, sharing with *JI* the three main pillars of her focus in Dubai.

"First, we are trying to create a higher profile for Israel in Dubai," explained Zaslansky. "We want to give Emiratis and other nationals living here a glimpse of Israel because [before the Abraham

Accords] the region was used to only seeing Israel through the pages of newspapers and politics.”

Among the activities that have already taken place, the consul general described Israel’s participation in a food festival — which included the culinary offerings of Israeli celebrity chef, Tom Aviv — and the first-ever Holocaust Remembrance Day event held last January at the Crossroads of Civilization Museum.

“We use a lot of social media to put out our messages because we really want the peace to be brought down to the people-to-people level,” Zaslansky explained. “The end goal is to make it a normal thing to have Israel, Israelis and Israeli culture here in Dubai so that it is not something that is out of the ordinary and so the bilateral relations are the same here as they are in the U.S. or in Europe.”

The second pillar, according to Zaslansky, is economic.

“When it comes to the economy, the opportunities in Dubai are endless,” she continued. “We are trying to find the areas where we can complement each other and are doing a lot in the field of cybersecurity, fintech, construction tech. We are also building the strategic relations between

institutions so that we can make this relationship long-lasting.”

One area where Zaslansky is focusing is on the tourism sector, with an emphasis on encouraging Emiratis to travel to Israel. She estimated that more than half a million Israelis have visited the UAE since the signing of the Abraham Accords, but the numbers flowing the other way are still very low.

“Our challenge is to increase those numbers,” she stated, estimating that since the signing of the Accords, roughly 2,000 Emiratis have visited Israel for tourism or business. “There’s a lot of curiosity, but we don’t see the traffic yet.”

Zaslansky believes, however, that it’s just a matter of time.

“Israelis are very easy when it comes to traveling; you just get on your flight and you go explore, it’s in our nature,” she said. “I don’t think the Emiratis are the same. I think they are more selective, they are used to certain levels of hospitality, and it takes them more time.”

The third pillar involves ensuring that Israelis visiting short- or long-term have all the consular services they need, Zaslansky said, adding that initial challenges, such as Israelis not being aware of or fully

understanding Emirati culture or local laws, appear to have dissipated.

“Those who stayed here or who are coming now are well aware of the differences, especially in business culture, between the two places,” she said. “People ask us for our advice, and we tell them to take their time and first build trust, which is different from Israel.”

Asked about recent events in Israel, including comments by ministers in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government about the UAE or about Palestinians, Zaslansky said that diplomatic relations in that sense “are the same as the relationship between Israel and any other country.”

“The main thing that is different here is the Abraham Accords,” she said. “When things happen in Israel, whether it’s statements, whether it’s the Palestinian issue, we talk about them – the Accords are not only economic, but there is also a very strong political relationship.”

“We might not agree on everything, but we do have the ability to speak about it and, in my opinion, that will make the relationship stronger in the future,” Zaslansky concluded. ♦

APRIL 4, 2023

White House to host virtual Passover Seder

This year’s virtual Seder will be co-hosted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture

By Gabby Deutch

The Biden administration will host its third annual virtual “People’s Seder” next Monday at 5:30 p.m., Shelley Greenspan, the White House’s liaison to the Jewish community, confirmed to *Jewish Insider* on Monday.

“Every year at Passover, Jews around the world begin the re-telling of the Passover story with *Ha Lahma Anya*, which includes

the line ‘Let all who are hungry, come and eat!’” Greenspan told JI. “This is one of the core values of the holiday — that everyone, no matter one’s income level, deserves to celebrate being free at Passover.”

This year’s virtual White House seder, which is co-hosted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, will focus on food insecurity. “Even while there is a feast in front of us,

our neighbors are hungry and we can never truly be free until each and every one of us is food secure,” said Greenspan.

Greenspan declined to say whether President Joe Biden would participate in the Seder, and did not name any White House officials who are participating. ♦

The chaos roiling a luxury Passover getaway in Atlantic City

A New Jersey Passover program fell through days before the first Seder, leaving hundreds with canceled plans for the holiday

By Gabby Deutch

Tickets were purchased, hotel rooms booked, outfits selected — all that was left for hundreds of Orthodox Jews planning to spend Passover at a luxury hotel in Atlantic City was to show up. Or so they thought.

Their hopes for an easy, relaxing holiday where their only responsibility would be to arrive before sunset next Wednesday were dashed this week, when the operator of the extravagant Passover program sent a cryptic email suggesting something had gone seriously wrong.

"We were hit with a huge financial scam, and we are not sure at this point if we can continue," said the Wednesday night email from Aryeh Hospitality, a tour company that has for years operated retreats for Passover and other Jewish holidays at hotels in New York and New Jersey. The email was first published by *Yeshiva World News*.

The Claridge Hotel, where the 10-day program was slated to take place, insists there was no scam — only an alleged breach of contract on the part of Aryeh Hospitality and its owner, Heshy Goldstein.

"The only thing I can say is, the client that we were dealing with was in breach of contract. There was just no other choice but to cancel the event," Jeff Marshall, the hotel's director of sales and marketing, told *Jewish Insider*. Goldstein did not respond to multiple requests for comment from JI.

Weeklong Passover programs at hotels in the United States, Israel and exotic locations around the world have exploded in popularity in recent years. For those who can afford the high cost, the all-inclusive programs offer high-quality kosher food and days of activities for adults and children. For many people, participating in the programs has become a desirable alternative to the onerous process of making their homes

kosher for Passover. They also offer a way for large extended families who do not live in the same place to spend the holiday together.

The programs vary in terms of religious observance, and the one at the Claridge was among the strictest level of observance. Its guests must now make new plans for the weeklong holiday. It is unclear if they will receive a refund.

"Welcome to our family Pesach retreat. Where every guest is treated like family," the Passover program's website says. As of Thursday night, the website did not say the program had been canceled, and still allowed people to inquire about reservations.

Guests who sign up for a Passover program generally do so through a third-party travel company, rather than booking directly with the hotel. Guests pay the program operator, not the hotel; the operator then pays the hotel for the rooms and any other fees, while also paying vendors for necessities like kosher food. Aryeh Hospitality had reserved almost the entire hotel, which has 480 rooms, but the program operator never successfully paid for the rooms. It is not clear how many people had signed up for the Passover program.

On Thursday, Goldstein sent another message, accusing people of "smearing me" and promising to give them "the real story." For days, he wrote, the Claridge had wrongly accused him and his team of not paying the hotel.

"Today when we were ready to start cleaning the kitchen the[y] said that we were playing games with them and although we said we sent them wires, they didn't receive it," Goldstein wrote in the message, which was obtained by JI. He said he showed the hotel the email that he said confirmed the wire transfer, but he noticed that the

transfer had gone wrong.

"If you look closely you'll see an extra 'r' after Claridge .com [and] this proved to the hotel that it wasn't our fault," wrote Goldstein, who said he had been scammed by the incorrect spelling. But, he said, the Claridge would not allow him to try to pay again. "I begged and cried and told them that we will take the loss and pay again but they fell on deaf ears."

Marshall, the hotel employee, said the staff at the Claridge had hoped to resolve the issue.

"We tried to give them every opportunity, because it's going to hurt us greatly too. There had just come a point in time where the contract was breached, and we had to move in another direction," he said.

The Atlantic City program had several speakers and musicians lined up for the event. As of Thursday, they had not been formally notified that the event was canceled.

"I really kind of didn't even find out officially from the guy who's putting together the program. I kind of heard it through the backdoor," Jerry Reiner, the program's chef, told JI. He signed onto the program several months ago. It was his first with this hospitality company, although he has worked other Passover programs in the past.

"I was as much surprised, I guess, as everybody else. Although I did feel like something wasn't completely normal. Normally things on a Pesach program progress a certain way. There's more communication," said Reiner. "It just does seem suspect, but I never knew what was really underlying those feelings. Evidently something was not correct on a financial basis."

This isn't the first time a Passover

program has fallen apart so close to the holiday, although such occurrences are rare. In 2019, hundreds of guests at a program

in Orlando, Fla., faced eviction after the program organizer failed to pay more than \$75,000. Two years later, guests arriving

to kosher villas they had rented — also in Orlando — arrived to find that the homes had been double-booked. ♦

APRIL 4, 2023

Richmond's Levar Stoney, recently returned from Israel, eyes governor's mansion

For Mayor Stoney, a rising star in Virginia Democratic politics, removing Confederate monuments led him to take up the fight against antisemitism

By Gabby Deutch

Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney leads a very Democratic city in a state that is currently home to Virginia's popular Republican governor. The 42-year-old mayor is quick to admit he's got his eye on the governor's mansion, just a few miles from his home in the Old Dominion's capital city.

"I'm going to seriously consider running for governor in 2025," Stoney, a Democrat, confirmed in an interview last week.

But Stoney's driving belief that Democrats should take back control of state government doesn't mean he disagrees with everything Republican Gov. Glenn Youngkin has done since moving into Stoney's city early last year. In an interview with *Jewish Insider*, Stoney commended Youngkin for his work fighting antisemitism, including his creation of the first state-level commission dedicated to addressing antisemitism.

"When I had my first conversation with Governor Youngkin, I told him that when he's doing some great things for the Commonwealth of Virginia, I want to recognize him for that," said Stoney. "When it comes to the commission to combat antisemitism, I think Governor Youngkin was doing the right thing. And I think the recommendations, the follow-through, I applaud that."

Stoney, who leads a city of 226,000, has

become a vocal advocate for the city's 10,000 Jews. As the president of the Democratic Mayors Association and an occasional surrogate for the Biden administration, the second-term mayor has carved out a niche for himself on the national stage. He's also taken an active role internationally. Stoney delivered an address at a December conference in Greece dedicated to antisemitism, and he recently participated in a delegation to Israel for American mayors. The trip was Stoney's first visit to the Jewish state.

"I think it's very, very important that mayors lay out very clearly that antisemitism and hate have no room in their cities," Stoney said. "We've had to tackle hate in Richmond in a different way, sometimes. A lot of the focus has always been on racism, this being the former capital of the Confederacy."

One of the city's best-known boulevards is Monument Avenue, a wide, tree-lined grassy avenue flanked on both sides by stately southern homes — and, until 2021, dotted with imposing statues of Confederate soldiers. Stoney's tenure saw the mayor's position evolve, after he first wanted to add plaques offering context to the statues rather than removing them. Then, when racial justice protesters marched in the city in 2020, he began to order the removal of the city's major Confederate statues. The largest

statue, of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee, was removed in 2021 after a heated political fight and a ruling from the state Supreme Court.

"I think that was probably one of the reasons why I was asked to go on this trip [to Athens], was because of the work I've done on combating racism and the Lost Cause impacts here in Richmond," Stoney said.

In his speech at the Athens Mayors Summit Against Antisemitism, Stoney highlighted the historic relationship between the Black and Jewish communities in the U.S., particularly during the civil rights movement.

"When it comes to the relationship between Black and Jewish communities, we have marched together. We have bled together. We have mourned together. And it's true that we have also quarreled and occasionally stood opposite one another. It is fair to say we've had a special relationship," said Stoney, who is Black.

Now, he argued, Black and Jewish communities stand on the same side of Republicans' efforts to revise state history curricula, which Stoney called "whitewashing history."

"That's a problem for me," Stoney noted. He linked the teaching of historical injustices like the Holocaust and slavery, suggesting that teaching about both will

help better combat hate.

"I believe the reason that we have some of these incidents of antisemitism and hate, it's because we're not teaching it in our schools," Stoney said. "We need to teach our children about the Holocaust. We need to teach our children about slavery. We need to teach our children also about the heroes in the Jewish American community and in the Black community as well."

Stoney said he supported antisemitism-related legislation introduced by Youngkin this year, including a bill that sought to define antisemitism according to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism.

"I would have supported the legislation," he said. "I don't think this is a Republican or Democratic issue when it comes to combating antisemitism, when it comes to combating hate. This is about human rights."

Stoney's recent trip to Israel, on a delegation organized by the American Jewish Committee, was his first. "I've got two words for you: It's complicated. That's what I learned on the trip," he said. The delegation flew home one day after protests and widespread strikes briefly halted outgoing flights at Ben Gurion Airport, and the group saw firsthand the Israeli public debate over Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's now-paused judicial reform legislation.

"It's my hope that, during this pause, we find a way to strengthen democracy in Israel, because Lord knows we don't need a democracy devolving into an autocracy," Stoney said. "We need to strengthen democracy. And when you strengthen democracy, you will use it as a tool to combat hate and antisemitism."

Stoney reflected that the Israel he experienced was very different from what he described as the "Americanized media version" of the country.

"For instance, I didn't know that Arab Israelis and Jewish Israelis all live amongst one another. You would not know that from the American media," he said. "They all want to coexist and live in harmony. Just like we have in this country, in the United States, there's extremism on both sides, who unfortunately impede the progress towards peace."

Stoney prayed at the Western Wall with

this in mind. He wrote "a prayer for peace, not only in Israel, but peace in the United States of America as well," he recalled.

Going on the trip was an easy decision, Stoney said. "It's very, very important for mayors to have a firsthand view of what's going on in Israel because I believe that they're one of America's greatest partners," he said, adding that it also made sense given that his Jewish constituents are supporters of Israel.

"It's very, very important to have an understanding of the communities or the nations that those who live in your community are connected to," said Stoney. Earlier this year, he sent a letter to U.S. mayors, urging them to celebrate Jewish American Heritage Month in May, which he pledged to do in Richmond.

Stoney has worked in Democratic politics since graduating from James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Va., in 2004, when he became a fellow in then-Gov. Mark Warner's administration. In 2013, Gov. Terry McAuliffe appointed Stoney secretary of the commonwealth, making him the youngest member of McAuliffe's cabinet until he ran for Richmond mayor in 2016, becoming the city's youngest-ever mayor at 35. But he says that despite his upward trajectory in the state's Democratic establishment, he has always understood the state to be "purple" — and blamed Democrats' 2021 loss, at least in part, on low voter turnout.

"Sometimes this happens," Stoney conceded. "Nonetheless, I think there are some lessons that we can gain from the 2021 loss. That is, we have to continue to focus on kitchen-table issues as the Democratic Party. I think every parent, no matter whether they're Democrat or Republican, rich or poor, left or right, they want their children to be successful."

This comment could be read as a jab at McAuliffe, Stoney's former mentor who lost to Youngkin in the 2021 gubernatorial race and said in a debate that parents shouldn't have a say in what kids are taught in Virginia public schools.

"I want to make sure every child is able to make it," said Stoney, and pointed to public education, affordable housing, public safety and workforce training as priorities. "I think the Democratic Party has to get back to those essentials, the fundamentals of what

creates a successful life for someone so they can live comfortably."

The field of Democratic contenders for Virginia's 2025 gubernatorial race, still more than two years away, is already crowded with possible contenders. Former Virginia Speaker of the House Eileen Filler-Corn told JI last month that she is considering a bid. Other potential candidates include Rep. Abigail Spanberger and former Rep. Elaine Luria.

The Richmond mayor, who in 2020 appeared in a campaign ad for President Joe Biden and has served as a media surrogate for the Biden administration, has thrown his lot in with the president for his 2024 reelection campaign.

"I think President Biden has been one of the most consequential presidents we've had probably in a generation," said Stoney. "Any individual with that sort of record should run for reelection, and President Biden should run for reelection."

Stoney, though, is term-limited — he's out of a job at the end of 2024. In the meantime, he said, "the main thing is to be the best mayor I can be for the 230,000 Richmonders."

After that, he might still be living in the community he has led since 2017, just in a new address. ♦

Scott Wiener's delicate balancing act

As the Bay Area pro-Israel progressive mulls a House run, he has to navigate Israel's judicial reforms, state Dems and the outsize presence of Nancy Pelosi

By Matthew Kassel

A lifelong supporter of Israel, Scott Wiener, a Jewish Democrat and California state senator, found himself on unfamiliar ground when he gathered with protestors in San Francisco last month to speak out against Israel's right-wing governing coalition as it moved forward with a contentious judicial overhaul.

"It's very painful," he confided in a recent interview with *Jewish Insider*. "I am a strong supporter of the State of Israel. It has a right to exist. It's critical that it exists. It plays such an essential role in the world, for Jews and others." But, he said, referring to Israel's prime minister, "Benjamin Netanyahu is a despicable human being who should not be in power."

Even as Wiener, 52, now seeks to distinguish his passion for Israel from revulsion at its current government, the staunchly progressive state lawmaker has long balanced his social justice activism with a commitment to pro-Israel values. He has pressed that position even amid growing resistance from California's hard-left contingent.

"My approach would be the same in any office I hold," he told JI. "My identity as a Jew is a really important part of who I am, and as a Jewish elected official, it's incredibly important for me to stand up for our community."

If Wiener was speaking conditionally, it was in large part because he had recently launched an exploratory committee to begin fundraising for a potential House bid, the creation of which has fueled speculation over his plans for higher office as Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), a fellow Democrat in San Francisco, prepares to announce whether she will run for another term.

For Wiener, the optics associated with

his early maneuver have required a different sort of balancing act. When news of his committee went public in early March, for instance, he made sure to clarify, in a deferential statement, that he would move forward with a campaign only if Pelosi, 83, decides to retire, opening up a coveted congressional seat in a solidly blue Bay Area district.

The pecking order of San Francisco politics, where Pelosi commands near-universal respect among party underlings, had all but required a disclaimer of the sort that Wiener had issued — lest he risk alienating the powerful former House speaker. And he was even more cautious while speaking with JI last month, declining to elaborate on his new committee altogether, at least for the record.

"She and I have a very warm relationship," he said of Pelosi, who has served in the House for more than three decades. "She's a really wonderful human being, and I think she walks on water."

His allies insist there are no ulterior motives afoot. "He's just being prepared," Sam Lauter, a Jewish community activist in San Francisco who invited Wiener to speak at the recent demonstration against Israel's now-suspended judicial reforms, told JI. "I think he is being 100% genuine when he says that if she runs for reelection, he is all-in supporting her."

Aaron Bennett, a spokesperson for Pelosi, reiterated in a statement to JI last week that the Democratic leader "plans to serve her entire term in Congress" and has filed for reelection "to help win back the House for Democrats."

In addition to Wiener, Pelosi's daughter Christine, a Democratic Party activist, and Jane Kim, a former San Francisco supervisor

who serves as the California director of the Working Families Party, are viewed as possible contenders in a hypothetical 2024 matchup.

With an early boost from his committee, Wiener could have a running start over his prospective opponents, even if he put himself on delicate political terrain by publicly confirming his interest in a race that others have reportedly been eyeing only behind the scenes.

Based on his own experience navigating intraparty tensions as an elected official, however, Wiener, a former supervisor who entered the state Senate in 2016, is no doubt sensitive to such dynamics.

Widely recognized as a leading progressive in the state capital of Sacramento, where he has championed criminal justice reforms and expanding LGBT rights, among other causes, Wiener has faced more localized opposition from the activist left in San Francisco. During his 2020 reelection campaign, he drew a stiff challenge from an avowed democratic socialist whose supporters sought to portray him as a "corporate Democrat" in the pocket of real estate developers.

While his pro-Israel views weren't a factor in the race, Wiener had previously sparred with the activist left over Middle East policy at the state party's annual convention in 2019. In that battle, he was among the most outspoken opponents of a proposed resolution advocating for a one-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which he and other critics denounced as a rejection of Jewish self-determination.

The amendment was ultimately struck down following a contentious floor debate. But that, too, was a "painful" experience, Wiener recalled, echoing his comments on

the protest he attended in February.

"There are people who are otherwise allies who fell on different sides of that issue, and we can agree to disagree," he explained, acknowledging that he believes Israel's settlement policy in the West Bank "undermines" the goal of achieving a negotiated two-state solution. "But my harsh criticism of this government and of the settlement policy does not stop me from strongly supporting the critical need for the State of Israel to exist."

Lauter, who serves as a board member of the advocacy group Democratic Majority for Israel, said that Wiener has played a pivotal role in ensuring that California's Democratic platform remains devoid of anti-Israel language. "I've relied on him in our pro-Israel battles at the state Democratic Party quite a bit," he told JI.

"There are progressive activists who strongly support the right of the State of Israel to exist" and "are very critical of the Israeli government," Wiener said, counting himself among them.

In January, Wiener was elected co-chair of California's Legislative Jewish Caucus alongside Jesse Gabriel, a Democratic state

assemblyman in Encino. The group is now advocating for several priorities, Wiener said, including long-delayed funding for a memorandum of understanding between Israel and California signed in 2014 during the administration of former Gov. Jerry Brown, a Democrat. "We've been unsuccessful so far," Wiener told JI. "But we continue to believe that it's in California's interest to fund that MOU."

The caucus' 18 members are also focused on securing continued assistance for the state's nonprofit security grant program; passing a refugee case management bill; and upholding Holocaust and genocide education, which is required in California, according to Wiener. He said they are "closely monitoring the implementation of California's ethnic studies requirements," an initial draft of which had controversially excluded lesson plans about antisemitism.

"I, along with every single member of the Jewish caucus, voted for the law that requires ethnic studies to be implemented in high school, and I strongly support that," Wiener told JI, clarifying that the caucus would remain vigilant in guaranteeing that "antisemitic elements of the original draft

model curriculum," which were removed, "don't get backdoored in at the local level."

Wiener, who is gay, has for his part faced an onslaught of homophobic and antisemitic death threats on social media during his time as an elected official, recent screenshots of which he shared with JI. He said that Pelosi has been particularly supportive amid the harassment. "When I've had death threats, she always asks me how I'm doing," he said.

As he awaits an update from the long-serving incumbent, Wiener vowed that, no matter the office, he would continue to speak out on such issues, not least including Israel, which in recent cycles has increasingly emerged as a divisive topic, particularly in Democratic primaries for open blue House seats.

"If there is an open seat, and if I am a candidate, my position will be the same as it's always been," Wiener said. "I am who I am, and I don't tailor my views to where the winds are blowing at the moment. I have strong core values around Israel and around democracy in Israel. That's who I am, and that's where I am. That's not going to change." ♦

APRIL 5, 2023

Tech meets religion with world's first AI-powered Haggadah

The ChatGPT Haggadah begs the question of how, if at all, technology fits into religion

By **Tori Bergel**

In a world where edible 3D-printed cakes and Artificial Intelligence-crafted novels exist, it was only a matter of time before the entirety of the human experience became fair game in the pursuit of technological innovation. Now, tech is meeting religion. The result? A ChatGPT Haggadah.

Before last week, Julie Shain, senior

editor for the *Daily Skimm* and creator of the first-ever ChatGPT Haggadah, never had an interest in AI. The new technology was in the headlines and even made it into *theSkimm*'s morning newsletter, but the idea of penning an entire book using ChatGPT had never crossed her mind.

That is, until her husband mentioned the

very real possibility that AI could uproot her chosen field in the near future.

"I was in a state of denial," Shain, 31, told *Jewish Insider*. "I'm a writer and an editor by training. What I do is creative, and for me, I was in a state of denial for days about the possibility of GPT to displace me as a profession. I was having an existential crisis,

and where do we take existential questions? A lot of us take them to our religious lives.”

With two children under 3 — one only 6 weeks old — and a new mortgage, it was important for Shain to see how she might fit within this changing climate. Add in the looming presence of Passover, just days away — as well as annual requests by her parents to come up with fresh commentary for their family’s Seder — and she started playing with the idea of merging the two: What could ChatGPT bring to the Passover story?

The answer came in the form of *The AI Haggadah*. Shain, who wrote the Haggadah’s introduction, named herself its editor, compiler and prompter, but left the top author billing to ChatGPT and Sefaria, a free online library of Jewish texts, which provided all of the book’s commentary and traditional text, respectively. The Haggadah’s illustrations are attributed to a separate AI entity, Midjourney, which generated its images based on Shain’s prompts.

The entire project took Shain all of three days. Earlier this week, she made it available for purchase as both a PDF and in paperback through Amazon.

“It feels like putting a leash around some sort of amorphous beast, trying to get GPT to provide you interesting answers. So there is creative energy there, but I didn’t write the Haggadah itself,” Shain said. “I edited some things for clarity and brevity, and I kept pushing and navigating and questioning GPT until I could get interesting answers. So in that way I was like the GPT journalist for this Haggadah, but...I let the rest of it be my interactions with GPT and let GPT speak for itself.”

After some persistent prodding on Shain’s part, she was able to elicit responses from the ChatGPT — which Shain dubbed “ChaiGPT” — that ranged from deeply thought-provoking to downright frightening.

“I was like, hey, come up with a fifth question at the Seder...And it gave me something boring at first, something that I would probably have come up with at Jewish day school,” Shain told JI. “And then eventually it said, ‘What if I told you that you’re the only person at the Seder that’s not an AI in disguise?’”

Many of ChaiGPT’s comments were one-off jokes: “The Lord’s outstretched arm must have made the Israelites feel like they were being led by the world’s largest traffic cop,” one reads, but the chat bot also managed a number of insightful textual commentaries.

Of the “*Arami Oved Avi*” passage in the Haggadah’s *Magid* section, ChaiGPT made particular note of the text’s focus on the growth of the Jewish people, writing, “The emphasis on Israel’s growth and multiplication in this passage can be seen as a reminder of the potential for exponential growth in the field of AI. As technology continues to advance and new applications are discovered, the rate of progress can accelerate rapidly. As the Israelites grew in numbers and strength, they faced a struggle for survival; similarly, the growth of AI presents both opportunities and challenges that humans must navigate to ensure our own survival.”

In the future, Shain sees a world where AI and ChatGPT are as prevalent in the workforce as autocorrect, and with that likely an increased presence in religion and religious thought. Whether or not such a future would be a positive change, Shain sees both sides.

“There are parallels between the possibility of how we might treat GPT and idol worship. Not in sort of any extreme, potentially dystopic way, but people might ask their moral questions to GPT. People might ask their philosophical, their most private questions to GPT,” Shain said. “Right now, it’s not able to answer anything that would remotely satisfy someone, but who knows, down the future once it continues to iterate off of how language works, it might provide an answer that people find fascinating enough that they turn to that more and more often.”

Shain also sees the benefit that ChatGPT-generated commentary could have on expanding our conversations, but says that ultimately, the decision of how much AI to incorporate lies with the rabbis.

“I don’t think we should be passively accepting technology into our lives and allowing it to intersect with religion passively,” Shain expressed to JI. “I think it needs to be a grappling, a wrestling with technology, a wrestling with the concept of whether it belongs in our religious worlds, in

our moral worlds, or not.”

At the end of the day, Shain hopes *The AI Haggadah* makes space for those who use it to begin “confronting tough questions.”

“I think it’s really important that each of us in our own curiosity, looking at our own talents and interests, confront this question head on and begin to explore GPT on their own time, in their own way,” Shain said. “My hope is that through this experience of reading this Haggadah, people will be inspired, they’ll laugh, and they’ll also be forced to ask really interesting, thought provoking questions at their Seder.” ♦

Still under fire, Ukraine's Jews seek 'spiritual power' this Passover

Jewish groups distribute tens of thousands of boxes of matzah, prepare for hundreds of communal seders across the country for the beleaguered community

By Judah Ari Gross

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

The war in Ukraine is still raging more than a year after Russia invaded the country, but for Ukrainian Jews, the upcoming Passover holiday will be a time for togetherness, with thousands set to gather for large communal Seders, as well as smaller ones in people's homes.

Preparations for Passover this year were easier than last year, when the festival fell a little over a month after the start of the invasion and the country was still in a state of major upheaval and uncertainty, according to a number of people involved in the efforts. Now, however, the Jewish community – and the country as a whole – is facing a different challenge: a war with no clear end in sight.

The feelings and themes that will be discussed at the seders will reflect that, according to Rabbi Irina Gritsevskaia, the executive director of Midreshet Schechter in Israel and the head of Ukraine's Masorti community.

"Last year, there were a lot of refugees so that was more the focus. This year is more about salvation and hope. People feel like [the war] is not going to end so they need more spiritual power to keep going," Gritsevskaia told eJewishPhilanthropy this week, speaking over the phone from Poland as she made her way by train to Kyiv, where she will remain for the holiday.

She will lead a Seder with more than 100 people in Kyiv, including children from the wartorn city of Kharkiv who will have a chance for respite and a chance to interact with other Ukrainian Jewish youngsters. "They will meet other kids from Kyiv and have meaningful conversations about what

Pesach means today. I am so interested to hear what they'll say," Gritsevskaia said.

"The longer it lasts, the harder it gets, especially for the kids. It's a whole generation of kids who aren't having a childhood. They started with [the] corona[virus] and now they have the war years," she said. "That's why it's so important for them to have these Jewish experiences, to get out of their regular life and to be with other people."

The Masorti movement in Ukraine will host another Seder in Chernivtsi that more than 110 people are registered to attend. There will also be smaller Seders in Odesa and Kharkiv.

"I think people prefer the communal Seder. It's an opportunity to meet each other. It's something large and meaningful. It shows that the community is still there, that not everyone has left," Gritsevskaia said.

"The winter was very hard. We had to supply generators and warm clothes. And there's still a feeling that there's no end to it," she said.

For Inna Vdovichenko, the head of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee office in Odesa, the Passover Seder is a "symbol of freedom, a symbol of togetherness," both of which she said the Ukrainian Jewish community needs now.

After more than a year of war, members of the Ukrainian Jewish community are looking forward to an opportunity "to hug each other, to eat food together," Vdovichenko told eJP.

JDC, which has operated in Ukraine since before the fall of the Soviet Union, will host more than 200 Seders of varying sizes across the country, some in person and some online. In total, JDC believes that upwards of 10,000 people will attend its ritual meals. The organization will also provide Seder

kits so that hundreds of Jews can host meals in their own homes.

"JDC has a long history of helping Jews throughout the region to observe Jewish tradition. We organized our first public Seders two years before the fall of the Soviet Union and have been ensuring that Jews have access to matzah, food, and safe spaces they need to observe the holiday," JDC CEO Ariel Zwang said in a statement.

Vdovichenko said the number of people who are planning to attend JDC Seders has far exceeded expectations, apparently driven by this need for togetherness. At one Seder in Odesa, "we estimated that 500 elderly people would be coming. It's going to be over 1,000," she said.

To thank them for their dedicated work over the past year, JDC is also giving special "thank you" packages to its staff and volunteers with special foods and snacks, Vdovichenko said.

"At the heart of the Passover story are resilience and hope, two qualities embodied by Jews in Ukraine, across the former Soviet Union, and among refugees remaining in Europe. In helping our fellow Jews celebrate the holiday of deliverance, we're providing a critically needed sense of optimism for the future," Zwang said.

Chabad, a dominant force for religious life in Ukraine, will host 90 community Seders across the country, including in some of the cities and villages seeing fierce fighting.

"We will make sure every Jew can feel liberated this Passover, even as the war continues," Rabbi Avraham Wolff, director of Chabad of Odesa, said in a statement.

JDC is delivering over 50,000 boxes of matzah to Ukrainian Jews, as well as other food packages, largely thanks to

funding from Jewish Federations of North America, UJA-Federation of New York, the Claims Conference and the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews.

Chabad too will be distributing such Passover food packages to tens of thousands of Jewish families, also thanks to donations

from IFCJ and the Orthodox Union.

Gritsevskaia said last year she had to bring in far more food supplies for her communities, but this year they are more able to get what they need from Ukraine as local production is up and running. As people's physical needs are somewhat better

provided for, she said she is focusing her attention on preparing for prayer services over the holiday.

"But we are still bringing a lot of matzah," she said. ♦

APRIL 3, 2023

Eight wines for Seder night 5783

JI wine columnist Yitz Applbaum previews the must-drink wines for this year's Seder

By Yitz Applbaum

I apologize to my faithful readers: I have been a bit too busy to deliver my regular wine column the past few weeks. But I could not fathom missing my yearly Pesach recommendations – the eight cups of Seder. Four cups we drink in the service of God, and four cups we drink to celebrate the remarkable Pesach meal we will be feasting on.

The first cup of wine is the **Odem Mountain Forest Red Blend 2021**. This blend of Cabernet, Syrah and Nebbiolo opens with soft notes of strawberry and leads to a mid-palate of cantaloupe juice. The finish will take the edge off of the seder and is meaty enough not to require any food.

The second glass of wine is the **Jezreel Alfa Special Reserve 2018**. This wine is a blend of Syrah, Argaman (off-spring of Souzão and Carignan) and Cabernet. This wine has a very Middle Eastern flavor that engulfs your entire mouth. There are strong tannins in the mid-palate and the finish is of a Moroccan tannery.

The third becher of wine must be the **2018 Nevo Petit Verdot**. It has a monolithic mouth feel from start to finish, and the tannins mellow after your third sip.

The fourth and final goblet should be filled to the brim with 2019 Yarden Cabernet. I love the simplicity and complexity of this

wine all wrapped into one great bottle. It opens with big berries, which turn to muscular, spicy, dark raspberry in the middle palate and heavy French oaked dark chocolate cradling your palate on the finish. This wine will have you singing "next year in Jerusalem!"

For the meal, I suggest trying as many of these four wines as possible:

Shiran Riesling 2021. This winery is housed in Kiryat Arba and has a reputation for thinking out of the box. The 2021 Riesling takes your palate on a journey from mango sweetness to acidic grapefruit all in one fell swoop. It has a soothing finish and is a great way to start your meal.

Next comes the **Flam Camellia 2021**, which is a blend of ninety percent chardonnay and ten percent sauvignon blanc. It is a bright and energetic wine that blends apple overtones, vanilla bean ice cream, and a subtle finish of expensive olive oil.

Back to the Shiran winery, the **2020 Shiran The Conductor** is a blend of petite syrah, petite verdot and cabernet Franc. This wine is bold and refreshing. The front palate is full of blackberry, the mid-palate is of dried apricots and the long finish makes you yearn for another pour.

And finally the wine to finish off the

meal: The **Ben Haim 2017 Cabernet Franc**. I have known the Ben Haim family for a generation. They produce wine that stays as close as possible to the true character of the grape. This Cab Franc has a sprinkling of merlot blended in to soften the strong ripe tannins. The truffle nose is prominent in your glass. The finish has earthy tones, and if you savor this drink till after you finish your seder, the wine morphs into a sensual, seductive, flowery liquid... you will wake up mid-way through the second Seder. ♦