

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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MAY 2, 2023

The buzz is gone: Ben Smith and the end of social media-driven journalism

The Semafor publisher's new book charts the media startup craze in NYC that led to BuzzFeed and Gawker

By Matthew Kassel

The day before BuzzFeed announced, in mid-April, that it was shuttering its news division, Ben Smith, the intrepid journalist and digital media pioneer, was seated in a Manhattan coffee shop and waiting for a tea that would never arrive as he contemplated the rise and fall of the social web.

As the founding editor of *BuzzFeed News*, where he lent a crucial layer of institutional authority to an upstart media site known for viral quizzes and cute animal photos, Smith had sought to balance an intense need for clicks with an otherwise dogged focus on scoop-driven reporting that won a Pulitzer Prize while ruffling the feathers of the legacy media class.

The proposition, largely dependent on referral traffic from social media companies like Twitter and Facebook, was never as tenable as it may have seemed at BuzzFeed and competitors of its ilk, which have struggled to stay afloat or no longer exist. "It has not ended particularly well for that generation of companies," Smith, 46, told

Jewish Insider during a recent interview in Little Italy, not far from the offices of his new media venture, *Semafor*, which launched last fall.

But even Smith, who co-writes a dishy weekly newsletter on the media industry and was previously a media columnist for *The New York Times*, acknowledges that he had not anticipated the sudden demise of *BuzzFeed News*, which he left in 2020 after a decade-long run. "I had no idea," he said in a brief email to *JI* days after the closure.

In many ways, however, Smith had already written its epitaph in his richly reported and somewhat rueful first book, *Traffic: Genius, Rivalry and Delusion in the Billion-Dollar Race to Go Viral*, which hit bookshelves on Tuesday.

Smith's debut book chronicles the trajectory of the media startup craze in New York City through the prism of two storied websites and the people who created them: Jonah Peretti, the idealistic data whiz who founded BuzzFeed in 2006, and his acid-penned foil, Nick Denton, the British-born

reporter who had launched Gawker, the now-defunct gossip blog, four years earlier.

"It's sort of an untold story," Smith explained. "It was a real moment of dynamism and interesting stuff happening. And it was all right around here. It was right here."

Smith, who came up as a political reporter at New York broadsheets, was never a part of that scene, even as he admired its chief actors mostly from afar. "I actually had always felt a little like there was this part that just predated me, my face pressed to the glass," he told *JI*.

"I remember meeting Jessica Coen, who I thought was so cool, who wrote for *Gawker* when I was writing for *The New York Observer*, and asking her how many views she had a day — how much *traffic* she had," he clarified. "She told me 100,000 views, and I just spat out my drink. Then she asked me how many views I was getting, and I changed the subject. I was embarrassed because it was like 1,000, which I thought was a lot."

He would later draw far greater numbers while working at BuzzFeed, where he oversaw the publication of such viral news sensations as “the dress,” which set off a furious debate over the perception of color; a watermelon brought to explosion by an expanding coil of rubber bands; and, most controversially, the so-called Steele dossier, a trove of salacious and unverified allegations concerning former President Donald Trump.

Smith continues to stand by his decision to post the document online, even as he was criticized as reckless and drew litigation. “The notion that America could just be in this place where there was a secret document that all of the elites and most journalists had seen, and we were saying, ‘Trust us, if you see this, it will burn your eyes out, you can’t look at,’ does not feel like a tenable position,” he said. His mistake, he added, was that he had “overestimated the extent to which people would take our caveats and take the context and try to see what they make of the claims and understand some things were unverified.”

Still, the recovering online traffic junkie — who, in his book, details the visceral sense of excitement he felt as the dossier began to circulate online — ultimately concludes that the mad rush for clicks obscured a more sinister trend.

“The thing that genuinely surprised me in the reporting that became the conclusion,” he told JI, “was the degree to which the sort of right-wing populism and the most unhinged elements of digital media, which overlap but aren’t the same, were really totally there from the start, just literally there from the start.”

The narrative that Smith had long understood to be true, he said, was that former President Barack Obama had “represented the culmination” of what he characterized as a “youth-led digital social media movement.” But actually, “it was Donald Trump, and that reorientation was pretty interesting for me,” he said. “That Trump wasn’t the reversal of that trend; he was the culmination of that trend.”

While the book meditates on the roots of the right-wing digital mediasphere, including sections on Andrew Breitbart and Matt Drudge, among other figures, his main vector for exploring the dynamic is a former

BuzzFeed staffer named Anthime Gionet.

An alt-right provocateur who rose to prominence during Trump’s first presidential campaign, Gionet, better known by his online alias, Baked Alaska, was among the rioters who stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, which he had giddily live-streamed for his followers. He was later sentenced to 60 days in jail.

To Smith, Gionet, who briefly worked for BuzzFeed’s entertainment division in Los Angeles, “was in some ways this incredibly pure product of that era,” he said.

“He had gotten into media by making Vines where he poured milk on his head because that’s what people on Vine wanted, and would just do anything to please this social media audience,” Smith told JI. “When being a Nazi became that, he just optimized his sort of empty persona into that in a way that just felt very pure, actually. The fact that it brought him to this central historical moment, it just seemed to capture a lot of where the reporting took me.”

Though Gionet didn’t speak with Smith while he was writing the book, he interviewed a number of major players, including the two rival protagonists, Peretti and Denton. The former *Gawker* publisher has kept a low profile since his site was forced into bankruptcy seven years ago following a high-profile lawsuit that was secretly funded by the billionaire tech investor Peter Thiel.

Denton would only cooperate via written communication, fitting for a serial media entrepreneur who is now at work on a new storymaking app that will, he believes, help precipitate what he calls “a Talmudic internet,” according to the book.

For his part, Smith, who admires Denton, seemed skeptical if also somewhat amused by his gestating project. “I think Genius was the closest anybody got to a Talmudic internet, but it didn’t quite work,” he said in the interview. “Mobile sort of disrupted the attempts to build these complex, annotated internets, because it works better on a large scroll than on a tiny screen.”

“If the rabbis of old had been forced to work in mobile,” he told JI, “the Talmud would never have happened.”

Smith, who is Jewish himself, got his start in journalism as an intern at what was then known as *The Jewish Daily Forward*,

where he worked during the summer of 1998. “I totally fell in love with reporting at *The Forward*,” he said, noting that he had studied Yiddish as part of an effort to understand his beat.

Does he still remember the language? “A *bissel*,” he joked.

Later, he spent time abroad as a reporter in Latvia before eventually landing at *Politico*, where he helped usher in a new era of fast-paced online reporting that became an industry standard among his peers. He went on to BuzzFeed and then the *Times*, his last job before co-founding *Semafor*, where he oversees a staff of about 35 journalists covering American politics as well as global news developments.

Smith, whose mother and grandfather were both commercial writers, said he had never intended to publish a book. At BuzzFeed, he would “always tell people that they’d be crazy to write books because they’re just like inaccessible PDFs,” he said. But he changed his mind when he came to view the book simply as a reporting project on a subject that has long been of interest to him. “It was definitely an opportunity to answer a bunch of questions I actually have.”

He finished the book after *Semafor* had been launched. “The thing that working on the book helped me to realize while at *Semafor* was the extent to which that era has ended,” he said of the social media-driven period he documents in *Traffic*, which concludes in 2022. “You could really sort of draw a line under it.”

In his new role, he said he has already “learned a ton of lessons” about starting a media company during what he characterized as a moment of “very dramatic change” within the industry. “You need to be incredibly attuned to the distribution system of the moment, and what’s changing and where the audiences are and all these things,” he said. “But the answers to those questions are totally different than they were 10 years ago.”

“That whole moment of ‘what the world needs is, like, everybody talking about and sharing the exact same things and yelling at each other, everyone in the entire world in the same space yelling at the top of their lungs,’ nobody wants that anymore,” he argued. “I think what I’m seeing at *Semafor*, and what we’re seeing in media, is people

want direct connection to human beings. They don't want to feel like everything is algorithmically mediated."

Meanwhile, though he believes that "media is very, very national," most stories are "very, very global, whether it's the rise of social media, the rise of the far right, or COVID," he told JI. "You really can't understand them correctly as domestic. I think there's a lot of opportunity to be smarter about that stuff without, by the way, saying 'your petty problems don't matter at all.'"

The rise of antisemitism, for instance, "is a huge global story," he said. "If you think that's only about Trump, it's only about the

U.S., you're sort of missing this big global picture."

Even as he has continued to cover the media industry at *Semafor*, he acknowledged that he is not pursuing the beat as aggressively as he did at the *Times*, where his scoop-heavy weekly columns were a must-read among journalists. "Media is a great beat, and I did feel like I had been covering it for a while," he said, noting that a colleague "has been doing a ton of the work" on their shared newsletter at *Semafor*.

"The media is also a small world as a beat," he added. "I did think at the *Times*, like, you're just sort of waking up every morning and punching one of your friends

in the face. And that gets a little old."

The book, he suggested, was an opportunity to get some distance from the industry he is currently navigating while coming to terms with a previous era.

"What I was trying to do," he explained, "is really give insight into the origins of where we are now, where this all came from, and how these people in this part of Manhattan were thinking about it when they were sort of toying around with all these forces 20 years ago."

And how it ended?

"We were all here," he said, "for the ending." ♦

MAY 1, 2023

The Israeli opposition official fighting for more women at the table

Na'ama Schultz was the first female director general of the Israeli Prime Minister's Office. Now in the opposition, she says, it's even more essential to fight for women's rights

By Ruth Marks Eglash

When she was director general of the Prime Minister's Office, Na'ama Schultz, a longtime senior aide to former Prime Minister Yair Lapid, was driven both by her feminist beliefs and the goal of creating a better future for her three young daughters.

Now, she told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview, it is those two factors that are pushing her to continue the quest to reach a compromise with representatives of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing government on its controversial plan to reform the country's judicial system.

The negotiations have yet to yield a solution but Schultz, who is part of the opposition's team and remained tightlipped about the discussions, insisted, "I really want to give them a chance to succeed."

Schultz, who was the first woman to serve as director general of the Israeli Prime Minister's Office, did, however, express

deep concern over the lack of women in the current government, both in official and supporting roles.

"It's really sad to see the huge drop of women in senior government positions," said Schultz, who was one of nine women to head government ministries, a record, in the previous government.

Under the current government, there are no female director generals in any of the 29 ministries and only a handful hold official positions or key government ministries. This is partly because two of the four political factions in the current coalition – the Haredi United Torah Judaism party and the Sephardi Orthodox party, Shas – do not allow women to run on their slates. In addition, the three parties making up the Religious Zionism faction have only three female Knesset members between them.

"I'm sure that will be reflected in public policy," Schultz continued. "There's no way

that if women are not around the table that the policy will be the same, but that is what we are actually fighting for now."

Schultz said she believed that while sidelining women was not inherent to the character of Netanyahu's own Likud party, the largest in Israel's Knesset, "as they give up on other values to be in this government, they are also giving up on this value, and that is part of the problem."

"That is why I think that we have to do whatever is in our power to bring them back on track," she said.

Schultz, who was also director general of Lapid's office while he was alternate prime minister in rotation with former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, described her longtime boss as "unusual in political life."

"Lapid has always surrounded himself with strong women like me and he, like me, deeply believes that women bring something vital and different to the table,"

continued the mother of three, describing how her journey into public life was guided by clear markers that appeared throughout each one of her pregnancies.

"It might sound romantic or maybe even naïve," Schultz recounted. "I've always been a very socially involved person, but in retrospect, near the end of each of my pregnancies, or just after the birth of my children, something happened that gave me another push to look for meaningful actions that would make my daughters' lives better."

During Schultz's first pregnancy in 2006, the Second Lebanon War broke out and her pilot husband was called away for service. It was a scary time for many Israelis, with Hezbollah rockets raining down almost daily, and was a particularly fragile time for the first-time parents to be apart. During her third pregnancy, in 2011, Schultz recalled how the social justice protests over the high cost of living in Israel highlighted to her the country's socioeconomic challenges.

"I had a lot of signs that pushed me to the public area," she explained. "I went through a process and in the end, it was clear to me that I wanted to do something significant, something that will ensure my daughters have a good, safe and quiet life in Israel."

At the time, Schultz did not really know what exact path she would take, but not long after she'd made up her mind about finding work in the public sector, Lapid, a well-known media personality, announced he was entering political life. It was 2012, and Schultz had been reading his columns closely.

"I really identified with many of the things he wrote, and the values he represented," she told JI. "I thought, maybe this is my opportunity."

In true Israeli style, she put out feelers to try to get in touch with the future prime minister, and thanks to "Israel being a very small country," Schultz snagged a meeting with him.

"Quickly, I found myself becoming a partner in establishing Yesh Atid, a party that has changed the fate of Israel politics, and the rest is history," she continued. "I never imagined this would be the route I would take when I first started."

Schultz remains committed to Yesh Atid today, more than 10 years later, and believes that the opposition party, the second largest

in the Knesset, has "been a huge success politically."

"We created the political center in Israel, and in only a decade we have become a major and lasting player in the political field," she said. "We have the largest grassroots and volunteers' operation in the country – there's no other party that has so many volunteers."

"In 2015, most people thought that we were going to disappear from the political map, but we are still here," Schultz added. "In my opinion, political power is the tool, not the purpose and so, I think that we've made a very big change."

Even as Lapid and his cohorts sit in the opposition with no clear political path back to the top, Schultz said she feels sure he will become prime minister again.

"More than that, I'm sure he should be," said the former director general. "In the short term that he was prime minister, he did an excellent job and I'm really looking forward to seeing what he can do with a full term."

In the year and a half that Schultz headed the Prime Minister's Office, she says that her main achievement was creating an environment of harmony among the various government offices.

"It was the first time that all the director generals of government ministries worked together as a close group," Schultz described. "We had a very good communication working to solve problems. There were no egos, only a deep belief that this is how you are meant to work together."

On the current political issues that are dividing the country, Schultz said she sees the protests over judicial reform in an optimistic light.

"I think they are the best thing that has happened to Israeli society," she explained. "They show awakening values and a great love for the State of Israel – I didn't know that so many people cared so much about this country."

"A large part of the public is fighting for the identity of Israel," Schultz went on. "It's not something technical or to fix some laws, as many people think – this is about the identity of Israel, it is about whether Israel will remain a liberal, democratic Jewish state, or whether the balance between the Jewish and the democratic will be violated."

"This is why it cannot end with one

side winning the situation," she concluded. "When you're talking about identity, you cannot win. We have to talk and agree and move forward together. I really think that we have an opportunity to do something big here that will ensure the continued existence of the State of Israel as a Jewish democratic state." ♦

Criticism of Jordan is getting louder, but not from Congress

'I think most of us on both sides of the House feel that [King Abdullah II] has been a very positive player in trying to bring a resolution of conflict in the Middle East.' Rep. Steny Hoyer told Jewish Insider

By Marc Rod

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee is set to hold a confirmation hearing today for Yael Lempert, currently a top Mideast diplomat, to be the U.S. ambassador to Jordan. The hearing comes at a time of heightened tensions between Jordan and its neighbor Israel, which have long maintained a cold peace.

Jordan, while continuing its long-standing ties with Israel, has been reluctant to embrace the Abraham Accords and the Negev Forum. Amman's management of the Temple Mount has been a source of tensions and accusations that it is inciting unrest, rather than helping to ease it. Jordan has also refused to extradite Ahlam Tamimi, who was involved in the bombing of a Sbarro restaurant in Jerusalem, to the U.S. after being released to the Hashemite Kingdom from Israel in a 2011 prisoner swap.

The pattern of behavior has prompted some foreign policy analysts to call for the U.S. to exert more direct pressure on Jordan, which receives billions in U.S. humanitarian and military aid.

But there appears to be less appetite among lawmakers of either party to shift U.S. posture toward Jordan, whose king, Abdullah II, maintains friendly relationships with and regularly visits members of Congress.

Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-MD), a former House majority leader, accompanied House Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) on a delegation to the Middle East this week that included stops in Jordan and Israel, and a meeting with Jordanian king.

"The king made it very clear that he wanted to work closely with Israel," Hoyer told *Jewish Insider* upon returning to the

U.S. "He has a good relationship with the president of Israel, a good relationship with the prime minister of Israel. And I think most of us on both sides of the House feel that he has been a very positive player in trying to bring a resolution of conflict in the Middle East."

Hoyer said the group did not specifically discuss the Jordanian monarch's view on the Abraham Accords or the Tamimi extradition case.

"I believe he wants to be a positive player in bringing both the Arab community closer to Israel, in terms of economic, cultural and social relations," Hoyer continued. "I think we all had a very positive belief that the conflict between the Palestinians and Israelis needed to be and could be resolved at some point in time, and he said nothing adverse to the Abraham Accords... He has been very courageous, as his father was in the past, courageous on stepping forward on behalf of a peaceful, positive relationship with Israel."

Sen. Mike Rounds (R-SD), who sits on the Senate Armed Services Committee and led a Senate delegation to Jordan last September, rebuffed suggestions that the U.S. should be placing pressure on Jordan.

"Both Israel and Jordan are very good allies in the Middle East," Rounds told *JL*. "If there is a role for the United States to play, I don't think we would hesitate to play the role, but it wouldn't be one of telling one side what to do, but rather finding common ground."

Rep. Anthony D'Esposito (R-NY), a first-term lawmaker who also joined McCarthy's delegation, said the group met with Abdullah for around 45 minutes over dinner.

"I don't think that his view was that there

are... deep issues between Israel and Jordan, at least from the way that he portrayed the relationship between Israel and Jordan," D'Esposito said. "At least from the way that he portrayed the relationship is that there weren't always perhaps agreements, but that they were partners, so to speak, in embracing peace in the Middle East."

House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY), who led a delegation to Israel last week, emphasized that Israeli leaders also described a generally strong relationship with Jordan.

"The leaders that we met with made clear they viewed Jordan as an important partner in the security efforts with respect to the fragile situation in the West Bank, and that there was ongoing dialogue as to how to get to a better place in a productive fashion," Jeffries told *JL*.

Mark Dubowitz, the CEO of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, told *JL* that Congress should be exerting more pressure on Jordan over its "incitement" of violence and harboring of Tamimi in particular, arguing that the kingdom "can't be playing both sides and getting \$1.5 billion a year from us."

Dubowitz proposed that a similar approach to the one applied in the Taylor Force Act could be applied to Jordan for protecting Tamimi.

"We could use the same legislation to put pressure on the king to say, 'Enough. We give you \$1.5 billion. This is a terrorist who killed Americans, and hand her over or we're going to start seriously reconsidering some or all of our aid,'" Dubowitz said.

He said lawmakers should begin with face-to-face pressure on Jordanian leadership, but could escalate to explicit

conditions on aid to Jordan if needed.

“We never hold Jordan accountable in the same way” as other Middle Eastern partners like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Dubowitz added. “I don’t see Democrats in the House and Senate, and Republicans too, ever calling out the king for the ways in which he undermines American security and creates problems for Israel. I think that this needs to be a heart-to-heart conversation between members of Congress and the king.”

Ben Fishman, a senior fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, told JI that it’s unlikely that members of Congress will substantially change their posture toward Jordan or its king.

“People have picked on Jordan going back to the Trump administration for not leaping forward on the Abraham Accords,”

Fishman said. “They have two different arguments in response. A, they have a peace treaty [with Israel] so we don’t need them, and B, the Palestinians need to be represented, which is a non-starter for other participants... I think most people understand both arguments and have not really pushed them.”

“In terms of politics here, I can’t see Jordan becoming more of a political issue or a partisan issue because of the king’s relations with all sides,” he continued.

Fishman characterized the annual issues surrounding the Temple Mount at Ramadan as largely fleeting. And he emphasized that, despite past tensions between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Jordan, the Israeli security establishment has generally stood up in defense of Jordan.

“The bilateral Jordan-Israel relationship is anchored in security,” he said. “Any member of Congress who’s going to Jordan or Israel, meeting with the respective militaries, or even the king, will hear that.”

As for security aid, Fishman argued that “it’s in our interests to support Jordan” to help ensure stability throughout the region, and that there’s little the U.S. can do at this stage to shift Jordan’s relationship with Israel or bring it into the Abraham Accords without progress on the Palestinian peace process.

Jewish Insider’s Washington correspondent Gabby Deutch contributed reporting. ♦

MAY 3, 2023

Nides: ‘Democracy is alive and well in the State of Israel’

The U.S. ambassador to Israel brushed off concerns that Israeli democracy has been imperiled amid the recent turmoil surrounding Israeli judicial reform efforts

By Marc Rod

U.S. Ambassador to Israel Tom Nides said Tuesday evening at the Israeli Embassy in Washington that Israel and its democracy remain strong and stable amid ongoing disputes over Israeli judicial reform efforts.

“Israel is going through a fairly complicated time the last two or three months. I tell people, when they come to me and say, ‘Oh my God, things are on fire,’ I say, ‘What are you talking about?’” Nides said. “Listen, the reality of this is, this is a living breathing democracy in Israel, make no mistake... Democracy is alive and well in the state of Israel.”

Nides was addressing a reception for the Israeli delegation to the SelectUSA investment summit, which seeks to promote foreign direct investment in the

U.S. Investment and business development officials from federal, state and local governments were also in attendance.

Offering a similar argument to other pro-Israel Democrats, Nides said that the ongoing protests both against and in favor of judicial reform, which have resulted in a relatively low volume of arrests, violence and destruction, are proof of the strength of Israeli democracy.

Nides’ comments appear to repudiate warnings from some Democrats that the judicial reform plan could imperil Israeli democracy or the U.S.-Israel relationship, which he described as “unbreakable.”

“This relationship between the United States and Israel is — I knew it was strong, because I wouldn’t have taken this job if I didn’t — but I didn’t know how strong

it was,” he continued. “It’s who we are as people, it’s why we love Israel so much. And by the way, you can also disagree with people, even though you love them.”

Nides had said in February, before the judicial reform legislation was paused, that the Biden administration believed Israel’s “democratic institutions are under stress and strain” and warned that the reform efforts could potentially damage Israel’s economy, prompting backlash from Israeli Diaspora Minister Amichai Chikli.

The 33 companies in the Israeli SelectUSA delegation were chosen by Nides to participate in the conference, and he said he was “in awe” of them. The ambassador emphasized the U.S. and Israel’s mutual interest in Israel’s economic success.

“Ultimately, the economic success of

Israel is all of our success. And not only is it important to America, but it's important to Israel, given that Israel is, if not the most important strategic partner in the world, it's certainly one of [them], and certainly the most important in the Middle East," he said. "So having Israel be a strong, democratic Jewish state is good for us, it's good for the Israelis, and it's also good for the Jews."

He said that he believes that Israel's mandatory military service helps inculcate Israel's "start up nation" ethos. "It creates, in my view, not only this entrepreneur spirit, but this drive and the success and, yes, this

risk-taking."

Nides also said he was "honored" to participate, alongside former U.S. Ambassador to Israel David Friedman, in the March of the Living from Auschwitz to Birkenau to commemorate Yom HaShoah. "If you've never done it, I encourage you to do it, because it's just beyond words," he said.

Israeli Deputy Chief of Mission Eliav Benjamin said in remarks that the reception represented a celebration of "the strong ties between Israel and the United States" and praised the U.S. embassy in Jerusalem, the

U.S. Department of Commerce and Israeli embassy staff for their work to strengthen bilateral relations.

The 75th anniversary of U.S.-Israel relations is "a testament to the enduring friendship between our two nations and the shared values that have brought us together," Benjamin said. "The future is bright, and if history is any indication, our long-standing friendship will continue to provide mutual benefits and innovations for generations to come." ♦

MAY 3, 2023

Could brewing civil war in Sudan unravel its relations with Israel?

Israel has offered to mediate between the warring sides out of a personal interest to save a potential peace treaty that was slated to be signed in Washington later this year, analysts told Jewish Insider

By Ruth Marks Eglash

Amid the armed conflict between two rival military factions in Sudan, warnings are growing that an all-out civil war in the strategically located but turbulent African nation could not only spill over into neighboring countries but also impact the 2020 normalization agreement with Israel.

For Israel, which last week offered to mediate between the two generals now at war, there is growing concern that if a cease-fire is not soon reached, a broader war could also threaten the implementation and expansion of the celebrated Abraham Accords, which it signed in 2020 first with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain and later spurred bilateral normalization treaties with Morocco and Sudan.

In February, Israel's Foreign Minister Eli Cohen traveled to the Sudanese capital, Khartoum, where he met with Sudanese Army Commander Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan, and the two pledged to sign a more declarative peace pact later this year.

"The parties finalized the text of the

agreement," a statement released following the visit read. "A signing ceremony is expected to take place in Washington after the transfer of power in Sudan to a civilian government that will be established as part of the ongoing transition process in the country."

With that transfer of power now on hold – clashes between the two military forces began on April 15 and the latest reports suggest that close to 600 people have already been killed – Israel has a vested interest in helping to mediate a solution not only to keep alive the chances of real peace with the Muslim-majority country but also in order to prevent its arch-foe, Iran, from taking advantage of the unrest.

In a bold statement last week, Cohen's office said that he had been working "through various channels to bring about a ceasefire," including "an offer to host a negotiation summit in Israel with the aim of reaching agreements that will allow an end to the violence and war in the country."

"Foreign Minister Eli Cohen is working to

promote calm, which will enable the signing of a historic peace agreement between Israel and Sudan in the near future," the statement emphasized. The offer was reportedly made in coordination with the United States and various parties in the Middle East involved in mediation attempts.

Yoni Ben Menachem, a senior analyst for the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, said that while Israel's offer to mediate was genuine, it was very unlikely that it would be utilized – just like former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's attempts to mediate last year between Russia and Ukraine.

"Israel has its own interests because it wants to sign this peace treaty with Sudan," Ben Menachem, a former director general of the Israel Broadcasting Authority, told *Jewish Insider*. "Israel has good connections with Burhan, but it can't bridge the gaps between the two generals, and the situation in Sudan is deteriorating."

"I don't know if [Sudan] will cancel the Abraham Accords with Israel, but they might step back a little bit and this, of course,

will have an impact on the other countries,” he added. “There has already been a shift in the Middle East after Saudi Arabia signed this agreement with Iran, and has actually joined the axis of Russia, Iran, China, leaving behind the United States and Israel.”

“This is having major effects all over the Middle East, and this puts the normalization process in danger,” Ben Menachem said.

Jonathan Schanzer, senior vice president for research at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, said that he did not believe the conflict in Sudan would have a wider impact on the other normalization agreements signed with Israel.

“Those will succeed or fail based on their own bilateral merits,” he observed. “The fate of this agreement [with Sudan], however, is entirely up in the air – if there is no functioning state, there is no functioning

normalization agreement.”

Israel’s attempt to mediate, Schanzer said, does carry some weight “given that Israel does not back one side or the other in this conflict, the way a number of Arab states do.”

“Israel is the closest thing to a neutral party in the region, with the singular goal of maintaining diplomacy with whatever government ultimately emerges,” he noted.

But Ehud Yaari, a Lafer International Fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, who has written extensively on the crisis in Sudan, said the chances of Israel mediating in such a complex conflict was unlikely.

“There are so many mediators around trying to fix this conflict,” Yaari said, pointing out Sudan’s strategic location and its wealth of natural resources, including gold. “Apart

from the U.N. mediation, you have the Americans, the Saudis, the East African Community (a coalition of East African nations) and the ex-president of Nigeria. There is no shortage of good mediators and most know Sudan much better than Eli Cohen ever will.”

On Wednesday, South Sudan said that the rival generals had agreed to a seven-day truce, starting Thursday.

While Yaari said he did not believe there would be a swift resolution to Sudan’s conflict, he did say that a real peace between Israel and Sudan was still possible.

“With tender loving care on Israel’s part and sober people handling the case, the prospect of a peace treaty is not over yet,” he said. ♦

MAY 1, 2023

Israeli chef Eyal Shani brings Tel Aviv vibe to Dubai Marina

Newly opened North Miznon introduces such culinary innovations as octopus shishlik and ‘whole animal artichoke’ to Emirati restaurant scene

By Linda Gradstein

The article first appeared in The Circuit.

Eyal Shani, an evangelist for introducing Israeli cuisine to an international audience, says he feels liberated in Dubai.

“I can bring tomatoes and cucumbers from Lebanon, I can bring yogurt from Damascus, beautiful fruits and vegetables from Iran, cheeses from Iraq, and amazing fish from the Gulf – all the treasures of the East and West,” Shani, who opened a branch of his expanding North Miznon restaurant franchise in Dubai’s yacht-packed Marina district in December, said in an interview with *The Circuit*.

In Jerusalem, where Shani, 64, was born, the produce markets are still limited by political barriers with several of Israel’s

neighbors. But in the United Arab Emirates, which normalized relations with Israel in 2020 under the Abraham Accords, the entire Middle East is accessible to his constant hunt for fresh and inspiring ingredients.

That has enabled the chef to create unconventional seafood dishes such as octopus *shishlik*, grouper shawarma and an item he calls “Journey into the Head of a Lokus,” which features a fish known in the U.S. as Dusky grouper bass. Among the many vegetable dishes on the menu are beetroot carpaccio, served with white horseradish snow and sour cream on the side; *sabich* 2.0, described as an eggplant steak on a “storm of tomato and tahini with a spicy boiled egg”; and “whole animal artichoke.” The menu changes daily and sometimes includes the dish he became famous for in Israel, a full

head of roasted cauliflower massaged with olive oil.

The Dubai restaurant, who open kitchen allows diners to watch the chefs at work, is located in the Doubletree by Hilton-Jumeirah Beach hotel. It is Shani’s first in an Arab country, although his empire of nearly 50 locations includes various iterations in New York, London, Paris, Singapore, Vienna and Melbourne, Australia. In Israel, where Shani is a celebrity judge on the television show “Master Chef,” his Miznon chain became popular in Tel Aviv by serving unique dishes in freshly baked pita and paper bags. The North Miznon brand is more upscale.

“He is trying to bring the Israeli spirit and vibe,” Michal Divon, an Israeli journalist and television host working in Dubai for

the UAE's *Khaleej Times* newspaper, told *The Circuit*. "It's the first proper Israeli establishment with an international name and reputation and can introduce people to what Israel is all about."

Among other Israeli chefs who have opened restaurants around the world are Yotam Ottolenghi, Assaf Granit and Meir Adoni. Dubai has nine restaurants with Michelin stars and the list of superstar chefs who have branches in the city include London's Gordon Ramsay, Hong Kong's Alvin Leung and Pierre Gagnaire from Paris.

It was growing up in Jerusalem that led to Shani's interest in Arab culture. He remembers as a child the fence that divided the city into Israeli and Arab sections and stirred his fascination with the other side, which was ruled by Jordan. After the Six-Day War in June 1967, Israelis were allowed to enter East Jerusalem and Shani found that interest in food was a way of bridging differences. He says having a restaurant in the Gulf is the fulfillment of a dream.

"In Israel we have two main borders. One is a border to the west – the Mediterranean Sea – and one is a border to the east," said Shani, who cultivates the persona of a philosopher-chef with a gray beard and unruly head of hair. "The border to the west leads to Europe and the U.S., and the border to the east leads to all the Middle Eastern countries. That border was closed to us.

Opening a restaurant in Dubai was a chance to go through that gate."

Shani never visited the UAE until after signing a contract to open the restaurant. He was preceded by more than half a million Israelis who flocked to the small Gulf country in the wake of the Abraham Accords. With native Emiratis constituting barely 11.5% of the UAE's population, the rest are expatriates who represent 200 different nationalities and create a vibrant cultural and culinary scene.

"Dubai is an unreal place," he said. "You look and say to yourself maybe it's a show or an illusion that they built especially for you – the big houses, the big buildings, the highways in the middle of one of the [toughest] deserts in the world. It can't exist but it does."

Shani works with a group of local partners who persuaded him to open the franchise in Dubai, including restaurant entrepreneur Alberto Barbieri.

"The simplicity of the food is welcome in a place where there are so many people trying to outdo each other," Barbieri told *The Circuit*, adding that Shani "goes to the fish market and the menu is prepared based on what he finds there."

Barbieri said North Miznon is just the first Eyal Shani restaurant his business group hopes to open. There are already Dubai plans for Miznon and HaSalon – a

ritzier franchise the chef created that has a reputation for prompting guests to start dancing on the table. Abu Dhabi, the UAE's more conservative capital, is also a target location.

Among Shani's dozens of restaurants, only two are kosher and the one in Dubai is decidedly not. But some observant Jews living in the city got a chance to taste some North Miznon's popular dishes in March when the kitchen was temporarily made kosher during the Jewish holiday of Purim.

"For the first time we have genuine top-of-the-line Israeli cuisine in Dubai, and it's a sign of the normalization of Jewish life in Dubai," said Ross Kriel, founder of Kosher Arabia, a catering operation that prepares meals for airlines and hotels. "It was very exciting that for the first time we were able to enjoy a kosher version of his menu in Dubai including his tomato mosaic and his famous cauliflower," Kriel told *The Circuit*.

Shani says his audience is global and he would like to attract anyone in the Middle East who wants to help Jews and Arabs move beyond their conflicts.

"I'm doing my food for the hearts of the people and for uniting them together," Shani said. "The first thought I had when I decided to do the restaurant is that I have a chance to show people we are coming for peace." ♦

MAY 1, 2023

Saudi Arabia beats targets in energy, tourism, jobs for women

Increased oil sales boosted Saudi coffers last year, enabling the kingdom to surpass some of the goals outlined in its Vision 2030 blueprint

By Jonathan H. Ferziger

The article first appeared in The Circuit.

Saudi Arabia's efforts to jumpstart its alternative energy and tourism industries while bringing more women into the labor market are running

ahead of targets, though the kingdom still faces challenges to its aspirations for becoming a global financial center.

Citing the annual report on Vision 2030, the blueprint that was presented seven years ago to guide a dramatic revamping

of Saudi society, officials said the improved benchmarks were due to world-leading economic growth in 2022. That growth came from increased oil revenue and bolstered the kingdom's investment funds.

"Despite the global economic hardships,

the country's economy is growing at an unprecedented rate, and its GDP has risen to a higher-than-expected level," Mohammed AlQahtani, CEO of government-owned Saudi Arabia Holding Co. said in a LinkedIn post. He said the government is "on track to surpass its Vision 2030 objectives."

Among the markers outlined in Vision 2030, the annual report said that Saudi Arabia's 25% share of non-oil exports in non-oil GDP beat its target by 6.3%. Excerpts from the Arabic-language report were posted Friday on the Vision 2030 website, which maps out economic and social milestones for the kingdom's development over the next seven years.

Tourism revenue grew by 121% last year over 2021 as the country drew 16.5 million foreign visitors. Saudi Arabia introduced an online tourist visa in 2019, making it easier to enter the kingdom. The report said 909,000 direct jobs were created in the tourism sector, exceeding the 2022 target of 617,000.

The participation of women in the labor market doubled from 2016 and reached 34.5% last year, beating the Vision 2030 target for 2022 of 22.8%.

Bringing more women into the workforce and allowing them for the first time to

drive were among the dramatic reforms introduced by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, when he unveiled the Vision 2030 plan in 2016.

Writing in the report, the prince, who was appointed prime minister last year by his father, King Salman, said the numbers were promising but must improve. "Our country deserves more than what has been achieved," he wrote.

Saudi Arabia led the G20 group of the world's largest economies last year with 8.7% growth in GDP, followed by India at 6.7%.

Middle East risk manager Ghanem Nuseibeh said it was impressive that the Saudis exceeded the "very ambitious" goals set in Vision 2030, while noting the "low bar" from which tourism and the status of women started when the document was written.

"The challenge moving forward will become more difficult," Nuseibeh, founder of London-based Cornerstone Global Associates, told. "This is because moving forward would require upgrading the infrastructure ... and convincing foreigners and expatriates to move to Saudi, which is also not going to be easy or cheap."

Saudi Arabia issued a notice in 2019

requiring multinational companies to locate their regional headquarters in the kingdom in order to sell to the public sector, effective in 2024. Many expatriates are reluctant to move to the country because of its conservative Islamic lifestyle, which prohibits alcohol consumption and has a legacy of restrictions for women, even though the driving ban and dress requirements have been liberalized.

Saudi Aramco, the kingdom's national oil company, posted 2022 net income of \$161 billion, which was the highest profit of any publicly traded company in the world. Its chairman, Yasir Al-Rumayyan, who is also chairman of Saudi Arabia's \$680 billion Public Investment Fund, said at a March conference in Miami, Fla., that he expects the sovereign wealth fund to grow to \$1 trillion in assets by 2025 and at least \$2 trillion by 2030.

"Will expats swap Dubai for Riyadh? That's the big question," Nuseibeh said. "Saudi Arabia can do it, they have the right leadership to implement it and they have the ingredients to make it happen. But turning those ingredients into reality will take time." ♦

APRIL 28, 2023

Jewish-run group breaks ground on new housing development for neurodiverse adults in L.A.

Director of Cornerstone Housing for Adults with Disabilities says he hopes complex will allow its residents to live independently, stay part of the community

By Esther D. Kustanowitz

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

For Michael Held, last week's groundbreaking of The Bhatia Family Village, a new housing community for neurodiverse adults in the heavily Jewish Pico-Robertson neighborhood of Los Angeles was "as perfect as it could

be." The project had been years in the making, but standing with his partners in the effort, shovels in the dirt in an audience of community leaders, "there was really a feeling of joy," Held told eJewishPhilanthropy.

Held is the founder and executive director of ETTA, an organization that launched in 1993 to provide programs and

services to adults in the Jewish community with developmental disabilities, now often referred to as Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities, or I/DD. Though Held and his organization are Jewish, The Village will cater to people of all backgrounds, providing services to residents based on the input of neurodiverse adults and their family members, as well as the "philosophy of

inclusion that's become part of the disability world," Held said.

Within a few years after ETTA's creation, the families who benefited from its services were already asking about long-term housing, and today the organization's residential services department, named after local philanthropist Jack E. Gindi, runs four group homes in the Los Angeles area. Each of the homes has a maximum capacity of six adults with various intellectual and developmental disabilities such as autism and Down syndrome. About eight years ago, the organization also started supporting people who lived in apartments but needed one-to-one support to be independent. Between the group homes and the apartments, ETTA currently supports 50 adults with developmental disabilities.

"ETTA and many other organizations, both locally and nationally, have gotten involved in teaching communities about inclusion and creating inclusive practice, at schools and recreational programs, camping and so forth," said Held, also the executive director of Cornerstone Housing for Adults with Disabilities, a separate 501(c)(3) spun off from ETTA to manage the real estate development of the project. "But the hardest thing to tackle is housing because it's expensive and permanent." The people behind The Village hope that their efforts will help make better housing an option for people with I/DD, especially as many of their caretakers are aging. According to the California State Council on Developmental Disabilities, more than 80% of people in the state with I/DD live in a family home, and 62.6% of them — about 102,755 — are living in a family home with an aging caregiver.

Prospective residents of The Village must have the capacity for independence, meaning they can handle their own medications and hygiene, and don't require an overnight staff member devoted to their care. Some of The Village's trained staff will be available as needed overnight but will not stay in residents' apartments (unless there's a specific physical disability or a safety issue). Formal admission parameters and registration will be online in January of 2024.

Rents will be local market rate — approximately \$2,000-\$3,500 for studios, one-bedroom and two bedroom units —

with eight of the 64 apartments reserved for lower-income people and approximately 10 for neurotypical residents to "add some balance to the building," as Held put it. "Some [of the latter residents] may be in graduate school in a relevant field, or may want to be part of the mission of what this building represents," he added. Residents are likely to be in their mid-20s and older, but there is no upper age limit.

All of the residents in ETTA's group homes receive entitlements through the California regional center system, which assesses individuals' needs and provides financial support accordingly. Through its "self-determination" program, the Department of Disability Services (DDC) may provide an adult living independently with between \$60,000 to \$300,000 annually based on the level of support that is needed for them to live safely and independently, "meaning, the more severe the challenges, the more support they receive," Held explained. The amount of benefits for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities varies state to state, with California among the more generous states, he added. People who apply for residency at the Village may be able to use some of those benefits to defray housing and/or additional care costs.

Because neurodiverse adults often experience loneliness, as well as difficulty in starting relationships or knowing what activities to do, ETTA specialists will be on-site to promote fitness, health and wellness and steer residents toward work in a rooftop garden, Held said.

Anita Bhatia, executive director of the Ramesh and Kalpana Bhatia Family Foundation, which is supporting The Village with a donation of \$5 million, said this was a personal issue for her family.

"As the parent of a neurodiverse teenager, I am acutely aware of the housing crisis in our country for children like mine," she said in a statement.

"That is why our family is proud to invest in innovative and forward-thinking solutions for the developmentally diverse community like The Bhatia Family Village. This game-changing project exemplifies what can be accomplished when families, community members, business leaders, and government officials work together towards

a singular purpose. Our hope is that this will be the first of many 'Villages' throughout the United States," Bhatia continued.

Previous North American efforts to create supported, independent apartments have been situated in suburban or more rural areas, where land is less expensive, Held said, but the Cornerstone board, which includes Jewish real estate developer and philanthropist Kam Babaoff, rejected that option as it would, in effect, cut off people with I/DD from the city and from local Jewish community.

"It's contrary to our values: respect the dignity of each person who has a disability is a core Jewish value, that we're the same," Held said. "They have the same heritage, the same God, the same capacity to be part of a community." He added that none of the other projects that provide housing for neurodiverse people provide proximity or integration with a neurotypical population.

"The existing models do a good job of providing a nice environment for an adult who's neurodiverse, quality programming and support. And they all tend to give the families a lot of peace of mind, because their adult kids are living in a healthy environment," Held said. "But when we think of Jewish values...it's hard to imagine feeling successful and contributing to a Jewish adult's life by putting them in a setting that's 40 miles from the Jewish community. That's something that the board of directors took to heart to pay a premium to be in the Pico location," he said.

The organization has already raised \$26.5 million toward the \$57 million projected cost of that premium: \$17.5 million in private donations and \$9 million from the California state legislature. Cornerstone's funders include a number of donors above the million-dollar level, many of whom have children with disabilities, "and community members who are charitable and understand the necessity of our Jewish community stepping up to develop this project," Held said.

"Like every human being, adults with I/DD deserve the option to live in an independent, supportive community," Eric Schwartz, Cornerstone board member and parent advocate, said in a statement. "Unfortunately, when it comes to housing in Los Angeles, the deck is stacked against

them. However, The Bhatia Family Village presents a model of a community where like-minded people can understand, support and cheer for each other.”

With the board prioritizing values over financial concerns, the organization successfully identified the property on Pico near Glendale, across the street from Young Israel of Century City and the Happy Minyan, and a stone’s throw in either direction to a number of other prayer options. “It’s a natural location for inclusion, meaning opportunities to participate in existing Jewish life and synagogues, community center, opportunities for jobs, easy access to transportation, opportunities for volunteering,” Held said.

Cornerstone has deep roots in the Los

Angeles Jewish community, and the Village was inspired by and built on foundational Jewish values of inclusion and dignity, Held said. “Based on those values, it was important to us to create a space that is open and inclusive to all people who have intellectual and developmental differences.”

Although most people involved in the project are Jewish, the Cornerstone website deliberately uses more general language to convey the universal values of inclusion, Held said. Also, because the organization has tax-exempt bond financing, its policies are non-discriminatory, and Cornerstone is not a religious institution. The Bhatia Foundation isn’t Jewish either, but connects to the Village through its mission to support “intellectual and physical diversities.”

The ground floor of the building is intended for retail, where residents will also be able to work. “Whatever retail operation we [sign] a lease with will be obligated to hire individuals with developmental disabilities,” Held said.

The Village will also feature a large open space for programs, lectures, classes and meetups. “There’ll be a lot of natural organic points of connection because people know each other,” said Held. “So the people in the neighborhood will know people living in the village...we hope and expect that residents will want to invite people from the neighborhood into the building. So we see a lot of opportunities for a meaningful type of relationship-building with the community.” ♦