

THE WEEKLY PRINT

'Times' reporter goes inside Israel's identity crisis, 75 years in the making; A pro-Israel progressive, Joe Vogel seeks to make history in Maryland; Mike Feuer pitches L.A. voters on three decades of 'idealism'; The media entrepreneur making antisemitism education go viral; Chicago billionaire Sam Zell, 81, had a close relationship with the UAE's royal family; and Meet the best-selling Israeli author that few Israelis have heard of.

MAY 24, 2023

'Times' reporter goes inside Israel's identity crisis, 75 years in the making

Isabel Kershner, in a new book chronicling Israel's many divisions, crisscrosses the country in search of who the Israeli people are today

By Gabby Deutch

In a new book examining "the new Israel," *New York Times* reporter Isabel Kershner investigates the myriad ways Israel has changed since its founding 75 years ago — a change, she argues, that is no more apparent than when she visits the dairy aisle at the grocery store.

Kershner first lived in Israel more than 30 years ago as a gap-year student learning Hebrew at a kibbutz near Zichron Yaakov, when the socialist ethos of the kibbutz movement was still strong and the high-tech "Startup Nation" was in its infancy.

"You could basically get two kinds of cheese in the local store: yellow cheese or white cheese," Kershner, laughing, told *Jewish Insider* in an interview on Tuesday. "Now you can get, you know, Israeli Camembert and sheep...whatever. It's just become so much more of a sophisticated

country on so many levels, and much more multicultural and fast."

But at the same time that Israel has become an economic powerhouse and a Zionist success story, divisions that were present at the time of the country's founding have morphed and become even more deeply entrenched. It is this identity crisis — what she views as a core contradiction at the heart of modern Israel — that Kershner seeks to describe and unpack in *The Land of Hope and Fear: Israel's Battle for Its Inner Soul*.

"There are problems that have festered for decades and not been dealt with, and they're just becoming more acute. But at the same time, there's a vitality here," said Kershner, who has been at the *Times* since 2007. "You look at the demography, and these competing visions of what the country

should be, and yet at the same time, there's passion on all sides. I think we've seen that from the last few weeks and months with the mass protests on both sides of the political map, peaceful protests of equally passionate people on either side, both carrying the Israeli flag."

Her book was not sparked by the myriad political crises that Israel has faced in recent years: the controversial judicial reform package being promoted by Israel's right-wing government, the corruption allegations against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the continued reality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Instead, she set out to answer one key question: Who are the Israelis today?

There's no single answer, Kershner writes. There never was.

She points, for instance, to the 1948

Altalena affair, when the new Israel Defense Forces sank a cargo ship captained by the Irgun, a rival right-wing paramilitary. Three IDF soldiers and 16 Irgun fighters were killed. Kershner looks at the long-simmering resentment harbored by many Mizrahi Jews toward the country's historically Ashkenazi leadership, accused of looking down on the hundreds of thousands of Jews who came from Arab countries. And she reports on the Arab citizens of Israel, many of whom have found economic success in Israel but still feel a sense of cognitive dissonance and a lack of belonging.

Still, Kershner argues, there is something different about the internal divisions roiling Israeli society today.

"When you look at the historical divisions, all the different camps at the end of the day did have one common vision or one common purpose that they shared," she said. "The bottom line was to establish the state, to build the state, to have the state survive."

Now, anyone involved in the project of creating the Jewish state has seen that dream realized.

"It's a prosperous, mighty country. Yes, it has its social and political problems. But at a macro level, it's miraculous, as many people would say," Kershner explained weeks after the country celebrated the 75th anniversary of its founding. "Now these divisions are over the future character of the place. What kind of a country will this be? If it survives, how will it survive? There is really no common vision for that anymore."

Like the people she profiles in her book — ranging from a disaffected kibbutznik-turned-tech-entrepreneur to a hilltop settler operating an Airbnb in the hills of the West Bank, to working-class Mizrahim protesting for access to a popular recreation area in a kibbutz — Kershner is in Israel for a reason. It's more than just a place to live. And her life in Jerusalem has its own contradictions, too.

"I for some unknown reason was very obsessed with the Arab-Israeli conflict from an early age," said Kershner, who grew up in a Jewish family in Manchester, England. "My dream was to be a foreign correspondent in Israel. So in a way, it worked out and I'm living my dream. But I came not for a job. I came because I was so somehow intrinsically fascinated by this place."

Kershner has lived in Israel for more than three decades now, and her family is distinctly Israeli. Her sons served in the IDF. As a result, she has to navigate the complicated task of covering her home country objectively as a reporter for a foreign outlet, which makes her both an "insider looking out" and an "outsider looking in," she said.

"I am a stakeholder. I've brought up a family here. This is my home. And yet, I'm working for the foreign press," Kershner observed. But the task of observing and chronicling current events in Israel for her is no different, she argues, from American reporters covering American politics: "You just apply the rules, and you're trying to be fair in your coverage, and you're not writing with an agenda. If you did, you wouldn't last very long in the profession."

Reporting on one of the most complicated and scrutinized beats in the world comes with certain challenges. Eagle-eyed advocates read any *Times* coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict ready to find mistakes or missing context or misinformation.

"You get it from all sides," Kershner noted. "You get called a self-hating Jew. You get criticized for having had a son or two in the army. Whatever you do, there will be people who are not happy with it."

In February, Israeli Ambassador to the U.N. Gilad Erdan sent a letter to the *Times*' executive editor lambasting what he described as the paper's "overt anti-Israel bias." When the op-ed editor Bari Weiss, who wrote often about Israel and Jewish issues, left the paper in 2020, she described "constant bullying" by *Times* employees who disagreed with her positions. "They have called me a Nazi and a racist; I have learned to brush off comments about how I'm 'writing about the Jews again,'" she wrote in a resignation letter.

Kershner noted that, as a reporter, she did not cross paths with Weiss, who worked on the opinion desk.

"I don't know if she's right or wrong," said Kershner, who added that she has not felt any changes at the paper in terms of its political identity or the political beliefs of younger staffers. "In my international department, we just work professionally, and in my little satellite bubble here of the

Jerusalem bureau, I haven't felt any change in approach at all on the reportage side of the paper."

"I am not feeling any change at all in the 16 years I've been at the *Times*," she added, "in terms of how I'm supposed to be doing my job."

The criticism of the paper's coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is also pretty much the same it's always been, Kershner argues. What's changed is how it reaches reporters — through social media and viral posts that can quickly make it to a reporter's inbox.

"The tenor of the criticism or scrutiny hasn't really changed," said Kershner. "When I started out in journalism, I think email was just beginning. So yeah, I mean, social networks, social media has made it all the more toxic in a way and it gets directly to you and in your inbox, and people start campaigns and it ricochets."

This is not to say she tunes it out completely.

"I take on board legitimate criticism. And some people do make very valid points," noted Kershner. "At the same time, I try and block out the noise, because I'm not going to ever satisfy the advocates on either side. People that would want you to write according to one narrative or the other, and satisfy one agenda or another, they're never going to be satisfied, and it wouldn't be my job to satisfy them."

Despite the complexity and the noise and the challenges of this moment, Kershner feels hopeful about where Israel is headed.

"It can be a frightening picture and a gloomy picture if things remain on the trajectory they are on. But on the other hand, I came away from my work on this book, which really did involve crisscrossing the country and delving into so many different communities here, with a great faith in the people," she said. "They're not turning their back on it." ♦

A pro-Israel progressive, Joe Vogel seeks to make history in Maryland

“When it comes to Israel, I have faced pushback before for my views,” Vogel tells JI

By Matthew Kassel

Joe Vogel, a progressive state legislator who recently launched a campaign for an open House seat in Maryland, boasts a fairly atypical profile for a candidate seeking federal office. Not only is the 26-year-old Jewish Democrat poised to become one of the youngest members of Congress if he is elected, but he would also be the first Latino as well as the first openly gay person to represent Maryland in the House.

“The urgent challenges of this time,” Vogel said in an interview with *Jewish Insider* last week, “call for new leaders with new ideas, new energy and the courage to really get things done. I think that’s what I’ve brought to the legislature here in Maryland, and that’s what I’ll bring to Congress.”

Vogel’s strong support for Israel also sets him apart, even if he acknowledges that his beliefs haven’t always been received positively by the left. “When it comes to Israel, I have faced pushback before for my views,” Vogel, who called himself a pro-Israel progressive, explained. “But I don’t see being progressive as being in conflict with being pro-Israel. I actually think those are overlapping viewpoints.”

He said he expects to face further pushback during his campaign and, assuming he’s elected, in Congress. “But,” he insisted, “I’m never going to compromise.”

That pledge may resonate in Maryland’s 6th Congressional District, where outgoing Rep. David Trone (D-MD) has established himself as among the most prominent supporters of Israel in the House. Trone, the only sitting member of Congress who is an AIPAC “minyan” donor, has long been an outspoken critic of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against Israel.

Trone, 67, recently vacated his House seat to run for the Senate seat of retiring Sen.

Ben Cardin (D-MD), a pro-Israel stalwart. “Trone sets a very high bar within the Jewish community and thus will be very hard to replace,” said Robert Stillman, a Jewish community leader and pro-Israel activist who lives in the district.

Vogel, for his part, suggested that he and Trone share a “similar approach to a lot of challenges” and “have overlapping priorities,” including on mental health and the opioid crisis, which are among his top causes in Maryland’s House of Delegates. “Israel has always been a priority issue of mine,” he added. “I look forward to being one of the champions on this issue in Congress.”

He expressed a kinship with some younger Democrats in the House “who have been on the forefront of fighting for Israel’s security and longevity,” citing Reps. Ritchie Torres (D-NY), Jake Auchincloss (D-MA) and Jared Moskowitz (D-FL). “This is not a new policy issue for me at all,” Vogel said. “It is a personal issue.”

The Gen Z lawmaker, who represents a district based in deep-blue Montgomery County, has long been engaged in Jewish and pro-Israel activism. Born in Uruguay, where his great-grandparents sought refuge before the Holocaust, Vogel immigrated to the U.S. with his family as a young boy. He attended a Jewish day school in Maryland and was involved with BBYO, a leading Jewish teen movement, as well as other Jewish organizations.

“That really was, in part, what propelled me into community service and then eventually motivated me to get involved in public service,” he told JI. As an undergraduate student at The George Washington University, Vogel spoke out against BDS. He has visited Israel, he estimates, about seven times. “I feel very strongly about the story of the Jewish

people and how lucky we are to be living at a time when we have Israel,” Vogel said, “not just as a refuge but also as this place to celebrate our culture and our history and our heritage.”

Vogel said he is supportive of recent demonstrations in Israel against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s now-stalled effort to overhaul the judicial system. “I feel strongly, as a Jew, as a proud supporter of Israel, to stand with those protesting against the judiciary reforms and call for efforts to strengthen Israeli democracy,” he said. “I’m pro-Israel because I’m pro-democracy,” he added, “and we have to continue to make sure that Israel is that strong, vibrant democracy.”

Ron Halber, the executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington, described Vogel as a “progressive legislator who is openly gay and who speaks frequently about being pro-Israel in LGBTQ circles.” Halber added: “For the Jewish community to have openly progressive, pro-Israel candidates is really huge because we know the seepage of support is coming from the left.”

During his brief tenure in the state legislature, where he has served for just over four months, Vogel has committed to addressing hate crimes in Maryland, where antisemitic incidents rose dramatically last year. He has sponsored legislation, recently signed by the governor, that will establish a state commission on hate crimes.

Vogel said he is in favor of the working definition of antisemitism promoted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. The definition has become a hot-button issue in recent weeks as the White House prepares to release its national antisemitism strategy amid pressure from some left-wing groups that have argued

against embracing the IHRA's approach.

While he believes that "fair criticism of the Israeli government" is acceptable, Vogel argues that "delegitimization" and "demonization" of the Jewish state can set "double standards" that he views as antisemitic. "I think we can say that clearly and loudly," he told JI. The strategy, he stresses, needs to recognize "the intersection between antisemitism and the delegitimization of Israel that we're seeing right now."

Before entering public office, Vogel worked as an intern for Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) and served on Sen. Cory Booker's (D-NJ) reelection campaign. During the pandemic, he founded a remote learning nonprofit and received a master's in public policy at the Harvard Kennedy School. He said he had not considered running for higher office before Trone's seat opened up.

"A lot of folks in our generation feel a pressure to do something and make sure that we actually deliver on the change that we've been waiting for," he said. His priorities, above anything else, are "pushing back against far-right, authoritarian efforts to erode our democracy," he said more broadly. The lawmaker emphasized that he hopes his campaign will show voters that "democracy still works."

Vogel currently has no opposition in the Democratic primary, but other candidates are preparing to enter the race. Lesley Lopez, a state legislator in Montgomery County,

told JI that she intends to run. "I'm seriously considering a run and would love to continue serving my community, this time at the federal level," she said. Meanwhile, Ben Smilowitz, a nonprofit leader who challenged Trone in the 2022 primary, said he's "really interested" in mounting another bid. "I just have to figure out how to do a lot better than I did last time," he told JI.

There are several other Democrats who could also run, including Jan Gardner, a former Frederick County executive; Brian J. Feldman, a state senator in Montgomery County; and April McLain-Delaney, a deputy assistant secretary in the U.S. Department of Commerce who is married to former Rep. John Delaney (D-MD).

Meanwhile, Republicans are eyeing the open seat as a possible pick-up opportunity as the party seeks to defend its slim majority in the House.

"Trone's ability to spend his own money," National Republican Congressional Committee spokesman Jack Pandol said, citing a *Cook Political Report* analysis, "masked the underlying competitive DNA of the district, which is the most competitive in the state of Maryland."

But Republicans haven't been able to land any top recruits, so far. Dan Cox, a far-right Republican who was defeated in Maryland's gubernatorial election last year, told JI that he is considering entering the race. In an email on Tuesday, he said that he and his wife "are praying about the decision to run" for the seat "after being approached

by local and national people asking me to run, but we have made no decision."

"The seat will be competitive and a Republican who loves the people and the Constitution can win," he said.

One complicating dynamic that could throw the race into disarray is the possibility that Rep. Jamie Raskin (D-MD), who represents a neighboring House district in suburban Maryland, will run for Senate, forcing Trone to reevaluate his position in the race and potentially return to his seat. "Everyone's waiting on Jamie," said Halber, the executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington. "It adds another layer."

Vogel, on the other hand, won't have to give up his seat in the state legislature should he lose the primary because he is only at the beginning of a four-year term. Leaving the state legislature after serving for less than a year is unusual, but the young legislator insisted that his desire to run for Congress stems from a growing frustration with what he views as a lack of meaningful progress at the federal level.

"There's something that comes with being from our generation, having spent so long watching our politics and our government do very little on the major threats and challenges that we're facing," he observed, referencing a "new slogan" that he said has been circulating among his peers. "Instead of 'fired up, ready to go,' it's 'fired up, fed up.'" ♦

MAY 22, 2023

Mike Feuer pitches L.A. voters on three decades of 'idealism'

The longtime California elected official, looking to succeed Adam Schiff, leads a crowded field in fundraising. But is it what voters want?

By Gabby Deutch

Los Angeles is a city of stars. The lineup of candidates running to replace Rep. Adam Schiff (D-CA) shows it.

There's Ben Savage, the "Boy Meets World" star who has garnered many adoring national headlines but not much political

capital, according to federal fundraising reports. Also running is Maebe A. Girl, a well-known local drag queen and representative

on the Silver Lake Neighborhood Council.

But analysts say the likely frontrunner in the 30th Congressional District, which is heavily Democratic, will be not these West L.A. personalities but rather one of the several nose-to-the-grindstone local politicians who have entered the race sensing a rare opportunity to win a congressional seat that has been held by Schiff for the last two decades.

"These seats don't tend to turn over all that often. There's probably been two generations of up-and-coming politicians who got old waiting for Schiff to move on," said Dan Schnur, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley's Institute of Governmental Studies.

No one in the race has been on the L.A. political scene longer than Mike Feuer, who until last year was the Los Angeles city attorney. Though the race is still a year away, Feuer who previously served on the L.A. City Council and in the state Assembly, led the other candidates in fundraising in the first quarter of this year, bringing in \$657,000 in contributions.

Feuer's pitch is that he's maintained his idealism throughout his nearly 30 years in public office. He argues that his decades in public service have left him no less impassioned than when he was a young lawyer running Bet Tzedek, a legal services nonprofit that began with the aim of helping indigent Holocaust survivors — and that his excitement, coupled with his experience actually governing, makes him the right candidate for the district.

"I've devoted my entire career to being a very idealistic leader who brings those values to fashioning practical solutions to tough issues," Feuer told *Jewish Insider* in an interview last week.

He starts the race with some name recognition. But in a campaign crowded with other elected officials vying for the same seat, Feuer, who is 65, will have to convince voters that he views the position as more than just another notch on his resume. His most recent campaign for mayor last year ended early. He dropped out of the L.A. mayoral election after consistently polling well below the frontrunners. (Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass endorsed Feuer in the congressional race.)

"When you've got as long of a record as

Mike Feuer, it can be a plus in the sense that there's a lot of people in the community who are familiar with you. But if the community has decided they're looking for newer energy or newer blood, that could turn the other way," said Andrew Lachman, the president of Democrats for Israel California.

The other Democratic candidates include state Sen. Anthony Portantino, Assemblymember Laura Friedman, L.A. school board member Nick Melvoin and West Hollywood City Councilmember Sepi Shyne.

Stretching from West Hollywood to Glendale and Burbank, the district has a significant Jewish population. Feuer grew up a couple hours inland in San Bernardino, where he was one of just a few Jewish kids at his school.

"I felt from a young age the responsibility, as a Jewish kid, to represent the Jewish community in ways that would make my parents and the community proud," Feuer explained.

"Growing up in San Bernardino, for a Jewish kid, meant things like when I was in third grade, the Six-Day War broke out. And my teacher turned to the class and said, 'Mike, would you please explain the Jewish perspective on the Middle Eastern crisis to the class,'" Feuer recalled.

The experience "made me much more empathetic to people than otherwise I would have been, who often are marginalized, and also deepened my attachment to what it is to be Jewish," he added.

He pointed to his family tree as an explanation for why he got into public service. His paternal grandmother left Russia, pregnant with Feuer's father, soon after the Russian Revolution when her family saw that it was too dangerous for them. Her husband pledged to meet her in America, but he never got out.

"If you were a good person, politically, my grandmother's highest compliment was this person is very liberal. She was a big fan of the idea that everybody deserved a chance in life and that government existed to try to lift people up," said Feuer.

His maternal grandparents came to America from Eastern Europe only after the ship they were taking was turned away and docked in Cuba for several months, where the couple met. Feuer's father served as a

pilot in World War II and spent time as a Nazi prisoner of war after his plane was shot down. After he returned home, he decided to pursue what he viewed as "the most important work" — teaching.

"If there's one thing in my life, one moment, that really cemented for me, that I needed to pursue work, for other people, it was that," said Feuer.

Given his family's background, Feuer pledged to keep issues of concern to the Jewish community, including antisemitism, at the top of his agenda.

"I'm very interested to see what the Biden administration is going to be announcing," Feuer said, referring to the White House's forthcoming national antisemitism strategy. "There could be some deep collaboration there," he added.

"I intend to be deeply involved on issues relating to Israel and the Middle East," he said. "For me, this is not a new role at all."

He pointed to legislation he authored in the state Assembly that barred public entities in California from doing business with Iran. "I got involved in those efforts for one reason: that Iran's nuclear ambitions pose an existential threat to Israel," he said.

Feuer's candidacy has earned the backing of some influential segments of L.A.'s pro-Israel community, but the community has not yet coalesced around a single candidate.

Sandy Samuels, a member of AIPAC's national council, recently hosted Feuer for a fundraiser and is enthusiastically supporting him. "He would be an immediate player in Congress," Samuels said of Feuer.

But Howard Welinsky, a Democratic pro-Israel activist, said Feuer isn't his choice for this race. "He never got into double digits in polling for when he ran for mayor, so I think that's why some people think that this is not his race," said Welinsky. He has donated to both Portantino and Friedman, a progressive who is active in the California Legislative Jewish Caucus. (Welinsky has supported both Feuer and Melvoin in other races, but joked that it "gets expensive" when you want to support multiple candidates.)

"From a Jewish community standpoint, there's no bad candidate," said Lachman of Democrats for Israel California.

Part of Feuer's message to voters is that, after three decades in politics, he knows how to get things done. He presented himself as

a consensus-builder, someone who can have real conversations with political opponents.

“That is the importance of listening and collaborating with people, even if you disagree with them 90% of the time, finding that 10% where there is common ground, and where we can move forward is something that’s extremely important to me,” said Feuer.

Similarly, he said he hoped to engage with far-left Democrats who are hostile to Israel.

“I anticipate being in many discussions with those members to try to employ every bit of persuasive skill I have to try to reverse that trend,” Feuer noted. “I think it’s very important for those of us who have such deep, profound ties to Israel to be able to have

candid, constructive conversations, to try to move the pendulum back in a direction that I think is much more productive, which is to have the united Democratic Party supportive of the State of Israel.”

Feuer insists that the compromise that’s required to get things done in politics has not put a dent in his vision. “I’m very impatient about making the world better. I have very little tolerance for the slow, bureaucratic pace when it comes to major issues,” he said.

As city attorney, Feuer was known as a progressive who frequently and loudly stood up to former President Donald Trump. (He told JI he hopes President Joe Biden wins reelection in 2024.) In January 2017, when Trump banned travelers from several Muslim nations from entering the

U.S., Feuer drove to LAX airport to try to lobby for the release of detained travelers. He also made public safety and countering gun violence a priority.

In Congress, his concerns would be similar to what he worked on in Los Angeles: preventing gun violence, reversing the homelessness epidemic, combating the climate crisis and “protecting fundamental rights,” he said, including reproductive rights and LGBTQ freedoms.

“What our nation needs right now is leaders committed to leaving a mark that will change the world for people forever,” said Feuer, “and I’m looking to collaborate with people, even those I disagree with, to get that done.” ♦

MAY 23, 2023

The media entrepreneur making antisemitism education go viral

‘This whole battle of antisemitism is being fought and waged online,’ says ATTN’s Matthew Segal

By Gabby Deutch

On a warm August day in 2017, Arnold Schwarzenegger watched with alarm as former President Donald Trump said there were “very fine people on both sides” of the violent neo-Nazi “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Va. The Austrian-born Schwarzenegger, who has spoken publicly about grappling with his father’s past as a member of the Nazi storm troopers, decided he needed to say something about it.

The bodybuilder and movie star was by that point six years past the end of his term as California’s governor, and he couldn’t count on the audience that his commentary might once have received.

So he turned to a digital media company called ATTN: (pronounced ‘attention’), which specializes in creating viral content with a social-justice twist. It was the early

days of the Trump presidency, when some media organizations were playing outrage at the former reality TV star for clicks. And as an early investor in ATTN, which was created by civic-engagement entrepreneurs Matthew Segal and Jarrett Moreno, Schwarzenegger knew that a video shared widely on social media was his best shot at getting his message across.

“There are no two sides to bigotry. There are no two sides to hate,” Schwarzenegger said in a close-cropped video that looked as though it was being filmed on an iPhone. After a minute, the “Terminator” star looked directly into the camera and said: “Let’s terminate hate.”

Within hours, the video went viral. Tens of millions of views. Dozens of write-ups in other news outlets. Exactly what ATTN promised.

“His goal is obviously not just giving a speech, but it’s getting as many people to watch it as possible,” said Daniel Ketchell, who currently serves as Schwarzenegger’s chief of staff.

This is what ATTN views as its sweet spot: briefly capturing the attention of the distracted masses — those who otherwise may not care about racism, for instance, or antisemitism, or voting — and teaching them a lesson in just a minute or two. Its videos have featured major political voices such as Barack and Michelle Obama, Joe Biden and Doug Emhoff, and ATTN’s social media accounts total more than 6 million followers.

In the years since the Schwarzenegger video blew up, Segal, 37, has devoted significant resources to combating antisemitism.

“Our whole theory of change is, can you find clever and creative ways, sometimes putting chocolate or sugar on vegetables, as they say, to get people to care about things that matter?” Segal, ATTN’s co-CEO, told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview. “It’s catered to people who have shorter attention spans, which is the world we live in, where you’re constantly scrolling.”

Investors have bought into that theory of change — or at the very least, they have identified it as a sound investment decision. ATTN was acquired last year for \$150 million by Candle Media, a Blackstone-backed company that operates the brands behind the popular Israeli TV series “Fauda” and Hello Sunshine, Reese Witherspoon’s production company.

For Segal, ATTN’s focus on antisemitism is not just a business decision but a personal one. Growing up in Chicago’s heavily Jewish North Shore suburbs, his grandfathers told him stories about serving in the military during World War II. One was a pilot, and the other was a doctor.

“You learn about the Holocaust, and how Jews were such a persecuted minority, and that the population of Jews still hasn’t fully recovered,” said Segal. “You feel a sense of being an underdog and you feel a sense of injustice that you want to correct. And that’s very much something that’s core to who I am. I’m happiest when I’m fighting for something.”

Segal’s path to ATTN wound through politics, not media. As a student at Kenyon College in Ohio, he became an advocate for voting rights after having to wait hours to cast a ballot in the 2004 election. That led to the creation of several advocacy organizations working on voter participation. Through it all, Segal figured out a way to tap into the minds of young people looking for a way to engage with the political process.

“The whole goal of that was to leverage media and pop culture to get people to vote,” Segal noted. “But in doing so, I realized that there was more of a dearth of understanding of the issues. You needed to create really compelling storylines, and videos and arguments to get people to care about things, so that they would see the value in their civic engagement and their vote.” That thesis is what led Segal and Moreno, who were at the time running the nonprofit OurTime[dot]

org, to launch ATTN in 2014.

If social change is ATTN’s *raison d’être*, “shareability” is its North Star.

Still, not all of ATTN’s videos are meant to go deep on complicated topics. “You need to stop believing these myths about your cast iron [skillet],” said one recent video, tagged with the hashtag #kitchenhacks. “Concert etiquette that makes everyone hate you,” said another. These are interspersed with short videos explaining the debt ceiling standoff in Congress and talking about better understanding mental illness.

But all attempt to reach the fleeting, elusive goal of virality. Segal has brought the company’s formula for viral success to its antisemitism-focused content.

“You have to sort of retrofit your content and storytelling approach to the way that technology now prioritizes content,” said Segal. ATTN makes longer videos for YouTube and shorter ones for TikTok; videos that fall in the middle perform best on Facebook, ATTN has found. But the algorithms change over time, sending ATTN back to the beginning to figure out how best to reach people.

“Let’s at least flood the algorithms with content that has some degree of substance and caloric value, because so much of it is empty calories,” he argued.

Videos with Holocaust survivors sharing their stories have garnered millions of views and led to primetime TV specials on Holocaust remembrance and Jewish heritage that aired on CBS, MTV and the Smithsonian Channel.

“It’s one thing to know what the message is. It’s another thing to articulate it in a way that it’s effective,” said Tom Werner, the producer of several hit TV shows including “The Cosby Show” and “Roseanne.” He partnered with ATTN to create a Holocaust TV special. “Together, I think we created something that really did have impact and was very powerful and heart-wrenching.”

ATTN recently partnered with the World Jewish Congress to produce a video with Secretary of State Tony Blinken for Yom HaShoah. The two-minute clip of Blinken, interspersed with archival footage of World War II, ran under the banner, “How my stepfather escaped the Nazis.” The video has been viewed more than 2 million times on Twitter.

“They help us break outside the echo chamber of just the Jewish audience,” said Cory Weiss, WJC’s communications director. WJC hired ATTN as its creative agency, so ATTN also produces videos that run only under the WJC banner.

Since ATTN launched in 2014, antisemitism in America has skyrocketed, leading Segal to feel a deeper sense of urgency to address the problem.

“It’s become more important to me as I’ve aged, because you get out in the world, and you see how Jewish people are often portrayed or misportrayed. You see Jewish people who are maligned,” he said. “You see illiberalism on college campuses and throughout society that I think is dangerous for the Jewish people. You see attacks on Israel that really are thinly veiled antisemitism.”

Last week, ATTN produced a video for WJC and the Anti-Defamation League that touted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s working definition of antisemitism, thereby wading into a debate between mainstream Jewish organizations who support the IHRA definition and some progressive groups who argue the IHRA definition does not allow sufficient space for criticism of Israel.

The White House is set to release a national strategy to combat antisemitism in the coming days. Biden administration officials have been conflicted about the matter of how to define antisemitism in light of lobbying from opponents and supporters of the IHRA definition.

“Some people argue such a definition would be a violation of the right to free speech. It is not. In fact, this definition does not change any laws or criminalize any speech. It simply provides the Jewish people the right to define what anti-Jewish hate actually is,” the video says.

ATTN is officially nonpartisan, but its videos skew liberal. Take the Schwarzenegger video going after Trump, or another popular one from that era, “Julia Louis-Dreyfus and these Holocaust survivors have a message for Donald J. Trump and all Americans.” (Attacking Trump proved to be one shortcut to going viral.)

Still, ATTN’s occasional posts about Israel, like a 2022 video praising the country

for decriminalizing marijuana, have been subject to the same hostile comments that are familiar to anyone who posts about Israel online. But that hasn't stopped Segal from wanting to spotlight Israel.

"You see Israel singled out as being innately oppressive. That to me is just a false narrative," Segal said. "We just approach it from the standpoint of, the very idea of

Israel's a liberal idea. It's to give a persecuted minority a state to protect them."

Reshaping the narrative around Israel fits in with Segal's personal commitment to civic education, he noted, and ATTN's interest in promoting news literacy. It's all a matter of how you tell the story, he argues.

"People don't have the attention spans to read history," he added. "If we can make

a small difference by creating a 45-second to two-minute piece that actually someone watches and changes their viewpoint, or says, 'I learned something I didn't know,' that makes a big impact. And that's sort of the thesis behind how we want to inform. Plus, this whole battle of antisemitism is being fought and waged online." ♦

MAY 22, 2023

Chicago billionaire Sam Zell, 81, had a close relationship with the UAE's royal family

Sam Zell's death last week capped a legendary career as a successful risk-loving investor who cultivated warm ties with both Israel and the Gulf

By Jonathan H. Ferziger

The article first appeared in The Circuit.

Sam Zell, the blunt-talking, motorcycle-riding Chicago tycoon who sold his real estate business for \$39 billion and invested disastrously in newspapers, died last week at 81.

Zell made his fortune buying and selling distressed properties, and delighted at being known as "the grave dancer." His 2007 acquisition for \$8.2 billion of the Tribune Co. collapsed a year later when the media giant that owned the *Chicago Tribune* and *Los Angeles Times* filed for bankruptcy.

Born to an Orthodox Jewish family that fled Poland months before he was born, Zell was a firm supporter of Israel and also developed a close relationship with the royal family in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. In a 2007 profile for *The New Yorker*, writer Connie Bruck described how Crown Prince Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, now president of the United Arab Emirates and known as MBZ, was intrigued by the Chicago investor's love of risk.

During a visit to the palace, Bruck wrote, "Zell described annual motorcycle trips that he takes with an eclectic group of friends he calls 'Zell's Angels,' to Italy, Switzerland, Corsica, Sardinia — wherever the scenery

is breathtaking and the roads vertiginous. "I understand that you ride motorcycles," he told the Sheikh. "I'd love to go for a ride with you."

"How about tomorrow night?" the Sheikh replied.

"At eleven o'clock the next evening, the men, wearing jeans and helmets, mounted a pair of motorcycles and raced along Abu Dhabi's tree-lined boulevards," Bruck wrote.

The New Yorker article further described how MBZ's younger brother, Sheikh Sultan bin Tahnoon Al Nahyan, who was chairman of the Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority at the time and is now the UAE national security adviser among other prominent positions, had invited Zell to see a model of a planned development of an island being created just off the coast, in the Gulf.

"Sheikh Tahnoon was eager to hear what Zell thought of his development plans," Bruck wrote. "Accompanied by a small entourage, the two men drove to a hotel and entered a conference room dominated by a model so vast that it nearly filled the space. Sheikh Tahnoon led Zell around the structure, pointing to office towers, malls, hotels, schools, hospitals, apartment buildings, and houses. The towers would be built first, he explained. Zell listened

intently, scrutinizing the model. Finally, he spoke. "Pardon me, Your Highness, but I have a reputation for being direct," he said. "This makes no sense!"

"Zell told the Sheikh that his planners had it all wrong," Bruck wrote. "They should start by building the kind of housing, schools, and shopping centers that would make people want to live on the island. Office towers should be built only after it had been populated. Zell warned the Sheikh not to be influenced by the grand ambitions of his architect — not to build a skyline in advance of demand. Sheikh Tahnoon said that he thought Zell might be right. At Zell's direction, a construction manager began to move pieces of the model around, and an assistant to the Sheikh took notes."

Zell returned to Abu Dhabi many times after that trip, Bruck wrote. "We've invited the ruling family to be investors in our portfolio of companies, and they've invited us to explore homebuilding with them in Abu Dhabi and neighboring countries," she quotes Gary Garrabrant as saying. Garrabrant was CEO of Equity International, a private-equity company owned by Zell which invested in real estate-related businesses outside the United States. "They are taken with Sam because, I think,

he speaks candidly to them and doesn't necessarily affirm their view," Garrabrant told Bruck.

Just three weeks ago, Abu Dhabi-based

Pure Health, the UAE's largest health care group, completed its agreement to invest \$500 million in Ardent Health Services, the fourth-largest privately held acute care

hospital operator in the U.S., which is owned by Zell's Equity Group Investments. ♦

MAY 19, 2023

Meet the best-selling Israeli author that few Israelis have heard of

Joel Rosenberg writes fast-paced, page-turning political thrillers that he hopes will sway U.S. foreign policy and prevent the next terror attack

By Ruth Marks Eglash

Joel Rosenberg's 17 novels have collectively sold close to 5 million copies worldwide. His fans include former U.S. presidents such as George W. Bush and Donald Trump, as well as top officials including former Vice President Mike Pence and former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who, this week on Twitter, endorsed Rosenberg's newest novel, *The Libyan Diversion*, which is already ranked No. 1 in its genre in Amazon's Kindle store.

In the Middle East, Rosenberg has also experienced success, receiving invitations to the palaces of Jordan's King Abdullah II and Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, both of whom had much to say about his wildly popular political thrillers that are often set in the region and inspired by — and sometimes even predict — real events.

Yet, despite being among Israel's most successful writers, few in the country have heard of Rosenberg. The main reason? His readers are predominantly English-speaking evangelical Christians — such as Pence and Pompeo — not Hebrew-speaking Israeli Jews.

Since his first novel, *The Last Jihad*, was published two decades ago, the 55-year-old has focused his work, which also includes the news website *All Israel News*, on the English-speaking evangelical community, mainly in the U.S. — an audience of a mere 60 million people.

An evangelical Christian himself,

Rosenberg, whose father was born Jewish, is one of some 35,000-40,000 evangelical citizens of Israel. He told *Jewish Insider*, "I've just never had a deal to translate the books into Hebrew, even though it would be fun. It is such a small market anyway, that we haven't made it a priority."

Official Israeli government statistics show that about 2% of the population describes themselves as Christians — an umbrella for, among others, Orthodox, Roman Catholic and evangelical streams. It's a tiny community, especially when contrasted with the 2 billion or so Christians, including 600 million evangelicals, worldwide.

"In the context of the United States, we're very sizable and prominent both culturally and politically," said Rosenberg. "And when you've got a president who is listening to evangelical leaders, and very prominent evangelicals influencing policy, then evangelicalism becomes a major topic in the Middle East."

According to Rosenberg, who also describes himself as a communications strategist and a nonprofit executive — he is the founder of an educational nonprofit called The Joshua Fund — the Middle East, and particularly Israel, is also a major topic for the U.S. He believes that it not only drives America's foreign policy but also plays a major role in American politics.

Following a visit to Jerusalem last month by Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who

is expected to announce his presidential campaign next week, Rosenberg — one of the few journalists permitted to ask him a question during a press event — tweeted to some 50,000 followers: "The @GovRonDeSantis Jerusalem blitz proves 'Israel is the new Iowa' — no serious GOP presidential contender in 2024 can skip visiting the Jewish state. Both Evangelical and Jewish Republicans demand nominee has super-pro-Israel credentials."

The centrality of events in the region and their resonance in the U.S. are very much issues that inspire Rosenberg's novels, the author told *J.I.* It is also the reason why many of his books involve intricate plots featuring Islamist terrorists attacking the U.S. or its allies, and brave American heroes who save the day.

For example, in *The Libyan Diversion*, the fifth book in what has become known as the 'Marcus Ryker series,' Rosenberg's long-running character, a retired CIA agent, is called back into service to retrace his steps and make sure that arch-terrorist Abu Nakba — a man responsible for lethal attacks in Washington, D.C., London and Jerusalem — is really dead.

Just like in his previous works, Rosenberg unfurls a tale of good versus evil as he takes the reader on a page-turning journey through Russia, Iran and Turkey. At the same time, he raises what he sees as critical questions about U.S. national security, writing about what he

sees as catastrophic weaknesses along the country's U.S.-Mexico border and the current administration's failure to "understand that a highly dangerous alliance is emerging between Moscow, Tehran and Ankara that could have chilling implications not just for the U.S. but for Israel and our Arab allies in the Middle East."

"Where do I get my ideas? The simple answer is that I study evil people and evil organizations and I believe them, I believe what they say," Rosenberg said. "I think, well, if they could really do all they want to do, what would that look like? How would that play out?"

Rosenberg said the idea for *The Libyan Diversion* was sparked by a conversation he had two years ago with Pompeo, who also served as CIA director under Trump.

"[Pompeo] said one of the things that he worries about is ungoverned spaces in northern Mexico," recalled the author. "He said, 'during the Trump administration, we tried to do everything we could to seal up that border, we made a lot of progress, but it's not done and now Biden's only unraveling that stuff. And that worries me.'"

While Pompeo was not specifically talking about terrorism, Rosenberg said he thought to himself, "what if radical Islamist terrorists, who can no longer easily hijack a

plane and fly it into an American city, can just cross the border?"

"That got me a little freaked out and I couldn't sleep," he remembered. "I just kept thinking, 'that's a novel, that's what I'm going to write about next.'"

On Monday, the day before his new novel was published, an Afghan national, whose name appears on the terror watch list, was arrested attempting to cross the U.S.-Mexico border near San Diego.

While Rosenberg convincingly depicts a CIA agent and an array of political and military characters in his writing, he acknowledges that he himself is no expert and has no direct experience on the subjects. A self-described failed political strategist who once worked with political leaders in Washington and in Jerusalem, including Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Rosenberg's stories have struck a chord with world leaders.

"I could have never imagined being invited by the crown prince of Saudi Arabia to come and meet with him twice and spend more than four hours in total with him," Rosenberg told JI. "He [Mohammed Bin Salman, also known as MBS] told me that his father [King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud] loves political thrillers and that he would put a copy on his nightstand."

"Obviously this is not why I write the novels," he continued. "I write them for the 5 million other people that buy my books, the regular people, but knowing that Pompeo, Pence, MBS, and King Abdullah are all reading these novels makes me sort of take my game up a few notches."

Rosenberg continues to work as a journalist and regional analyst, reporting on events from Jerusalem to the Christian world. He regularly appears on U.S.-based outlets such as Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) and the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) and pens columns in *The Jerusalem Post* and for Fox News.

But he says it's his fictional writing that has the most influence. "On one level, I'm a journalist that's trying to cover the trend lines as well as the actual events that are happening here in Israel in the region, but the novel connects with people differently," he noted. "Fiction has a way of capturing a person's imagination in a way that an op-ed or a news story just doesn't."

"It triggers a different reaction in the brain," Rosenberg added. "It's triggering emotion because if I can grab a person's attention by the cover, by the title, by the first page, by the first chapter, and hold them for 450 pages, I'm getting inside their head and they're finally paying attention." ♦