

THE WEEKLY PRINT

A big tent at the Lubavitcher Rebbe's tent; Cormac McCarthy's long-held admiration for Jewish achievement culminated in his final two novels; Montana Senate race to test influence of GOP establishment in key battleground state; In rollout of antisemitism strategy, White House steers clear of the Jewish state; State Dept. diversity chief: First Amendment protects diplomat with racist, antisemitic blog; Dan Shapiro rejoins Biden admin to focus on boosting the Abraham Accords; UAE, Israel create 'Crystal Ball' platform to fight hackers; and NT-Tao seeks to generate nuclear fusion with compact reactors.

JUNE 23, 2023

A big tent at the Lubavitcher Rebbe's tent

50,000 Jews gathered Thursday in a quiet neighborhood in Queens to remember the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who died 29 years ago this week

By Gabby Deutch

Veronica Motiram-Mizrahi and her family were in a hurry when they arrived at the Ohel on Thursday.

The Boca Raton, Fla., resident, her husband and their adult children had to get to a daughter's medical graduation. But first, they wanted to pay their respects at what Chabad adherents call "The Ohel," or tent, the structure where the Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson and his father-in-law are buried.

The Mizrahis' visit would prove to be anything but quick: Thursday was the anniversary of Schneerson's death, and tens

of thousands of people had come to the Ohel to pray. People visit year-round (24/6, as Chabad puts it: everyday except for Shabbat, when Jews typically do not visit cemeteries) to pay their respects to the two Jewish giants.

But Schneerson's *yahrzeit* — the anniversary of his death in 1994 — holds a special power, drawing religious pilgrims from around the world each year on the third day of the Hebrew month of *Tammuz*. They lined up to wait for hours to read handwritten prayers in the presence of the souls of these two rabbis.

The Mizrahis, too, stayed.

Motiram-Mizrahi began to cry when asked what brought her to the Ohel on Thursday. Her daughter stepped in to share a story that was now family lore.

On the morning of Motiram-Mizrahi's wedding 32 years ago, she had gone to the Chabad-operated mikvah in Brooklyn, a customary practice for Jewish brides on their wedding day. But upon hearing it was her wedding, the woman working at the mikvah took Motiram-Mizrahi out a back door and into Schneerson's office. She had never met him before.

He gave Motiram-Mizrahi six dollar bills — Schneerson, who for decades was the leader of the global Chabad movement, would often give people one dollar each, to prompt them to give *tzedakah*, or charity — and said, “You’re going to have a really open home and have six children.”

Motiram-Mizrahi and her husband now have six children, ranging in age from 23 to 30.

People came from the five boroughs of New York City and nearby Long Island. They came from across America, and from around the world. Roughly 50,000 people would visit the Ohel over the 24-hour period of the Schneerson’s *yahrzeit*, one Chabad official estimated, including overnight Wednesday night, when the crowds swelled.

Shouts of “Yisroel” and “Chana” and “Rivka” echoed across the packed sidewalk, which served as the meeting ground for impromptu reunions. Curious inhabitants of the modest homes that surrounded the cemetery sat on lawn chairs on their front stoops, taking in the scene and watching as people fresh off their planes dropped suitcases in a designated luggage area before lining up to enter the Ohel.

Outside the entrance to the cemetery, Yossi Mazig stood out in his casual jeans and a T-shirt next to the Hasidim who lined up at the entrance to the Ohel in black hats and long black coats. Mazig leaned nonchalantly against a fence.

“I come all the time over here,” said Mazig, an Israeli who lives in New York. He had just emerged from the Ohel after waiting an hour and a half. It would be his last time visiting before he moves back to Israel next week.

Over the course of his life, Schneerson transformed Chabad from an insular branch of Hasidic Judaism into a worldwide movement focused on outreach to Jews of all backgrounds and religious sensibilities. His *yahrzeit* drew adherents of the Hasidic sect, but it also attracted thousands of other Jews — Orthodox, unaffiliated and everyone in between, evident in the clothing that ranged from women in leggings to men in business suits to little boys in *kippot* that could barely stay on their heads.

“I came here to pray,” Mazig said, “that it’s going to be better for *Am Yisrael* [the people of Israel]. The Rebbe cared about *Am*

Yisrael.” Earlier in the day, Rabbi David Lau, the Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel, read from the Torah in a prayer service at the Ohel.

This Jewish pilgrimage site feels almost out of place in America. But in Israel, gravesites of learned Jews are commonplace. The tomb of Maimonides, the famed 12th-century scholar, sits a short walk from the central bus station in Tiberias, in northern Israel. Mount Meron, in the Golan Heights, is home to the tomb of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, a second-century sage. And for many Jews — especially Sephardic Jews, whose ancestors trace their roots to Spain — visiting the gravesites of learned Jewish teachers is an important religious practice.

“This is *hatarbut shelanu*,” our culture, said Mazig, himself a Sephardic Jew.

One Chabad rabbi who flew in from Boulder, Colo., scrolled through dozens of texts on his phone from friends and congregants back home who had sent him the names of sick family members and friends. Before he went to the Ohel, he would print out a piece of paper with all of their names to remember to pray for each of them.

In the long line to the Ohel, grandmothers pushed strollers, and parents tried to explain to young children what, exactly, this whole thing was about. Ohel staff members pushed carts containing the Book of Psalms, and some people read from them the entire time they stood in line. TV screens showed videos of Schneerson speaking or praying.

There were metal carts at the entrance of the Ohel, where people placed their leather shoes as a sign of humility. Then, shoeless visitors walked forward — directed by young Ohel staff members who spoke Yiddish to each other — to enter the stone structure.

Inside, the two graves sit next to each other, surrounded by a fence that visitors walk around, pausing at its edge. One after another, each person took a piece of paper out of their pocket and paused to silently read it. Before leaving the Ohel, they ripped the paper apart and tossed it into the gravesite. It was like a Jewish wishing well, overflowing with thousands of shreds of paper that held supplications written in English, Hebrew, French, Spanish and more. On some of them, you could see drawings made by children.

After each visitor left the Ohel, many stopped to pray against its stone wall, reminiscent of Jewish visitors to the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Some also paused at the graves of Schneerson’s wife, Chaya, or his mother, Chana. Young women customarily brought their wedding invitations to leave at the graves of these women.

Before departing, one child pulled on her mother’s hand. “I’m hungry,” she said. “When can we eat?” ♦

Cormac McCarthy's long-held admiration for Jewish achievement culminated in his final two novels

The author's decision to make the Western siblings in 'Stella Maris' Jewish has continued to puzzle McCarthy scholars

By Matthew Kassel

When Cormac McCarthy published his final two novels in quick succession late last year, it did not go unnoticed that he had created his first major female protagonist: Alicia Western, the tortured mathematical genius at the center of *Stella Maris* — a hauntingly rendered transcription of her therapy sessions at a psychiatric institution in rural Wisconsin.

In form and focus, the book was an unusual departure for McCarthy, a titan of American literature who died two weeks ago, just short of his 90th birthday. His best-known protagonists had long been recognized as almost mythic avatars of a certain kind of masculine stoicism embodied by Alicia's brother, Bobby, a laconic salvage diver whose story is told in a companion novel, *The Passenger*, which is more conventionally structured.

Equally intriguing, however, was that McCarthy had made the siblings Jewish. It was a curious biographical choice that has continued to puzzle McCarthy scholars who have scoured the books for insights into his decision. The most reasonable explanation, it seems, is that McCarthy was motivated, at least in part, by a commitment to historical reconstruction: The siblings' father, a brilliant physicist who studied with Einstein, worked on the Manhattan Project, where a number of Jewish scientists helped design the atom bomb.

The Westerns are tormented by their connection to the project and the destruction it ultimately wrought. Bobby, for instance, "fully understood that he owed his existence to Adolf Hitler," McCarthy writes in a characteristically portentous passage. "That the forces of history which had ushered his

troubled life into the tapestry were those of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, the sister events that sealed forever the fate of the West."

Aside from such musings, though, the topic of Jewish identity is hardly explored in the novels, where McCarthy more notably demonstrates his conceptual understanding of physics in a series of abstruse disquisitions. "I tried very hard to find Yiddishkeit somewhere in there," Rick Wallach, the founder of the Cormac McCarthy Society, said in an interview with *Jewish Insider* not long after the novels had been published. "I don't see it."

But the Westerns' Jewish heritage was likely more meaningful to McCarthy than his own renderings might suggest. In some ways, it could be interpreted as a testament to a privately held — and little-known — reverence for the Jewish experience. The author had "a sincere pattern of admiration for Jewish people and Jewish culture," said Bryan Giemza, an associate professor of humanities and literature at Texas Tech University and the author of *Science and Literature in Cormac McCarthy's Expanding Worlds*, published earlier this month.

Giemza's knowledge of McCarthy's personal sentiments, he said, is based on conversations with people close to the author, who was famously guarded. "He holds Jewish people in great esteem," Giemza confirmed to *JI* before McCarthy's death.

That esteem was cemented in large part by McCarthy's affiliation with the Santa Fe Institute, a nonprofit theoretical research center founded in 1984. McCarthy, who was raised in an Irish Catholic family in Tennessee, had no ancestral connection to

Judaism. But he spent the last decades of his life surrounded by some of the world's most accomplished Jewish physicists who were involved with the institute, where he was a longtime trustee.

It was there that he wrote his post-apocalyptic novel *The Road*, which won a Pulitzer Prize. His engagement, however, wasn't limited exclusively to literary production. McCarthy could also hold his own in regular conversations about math and science over tea with the institute's members, including its late co-founder Murray Gell-Mann, the Nobel Prize-winning particle physicist who became a close friend. Nearly all of the institute's eight founders, meanwhile, had worked on the Manhattan Project at Los Alamos in New Mexico — where the fictional Westerns' father also served.

Geoffrey West, a British-born physicist and a researcher at the institute, said he wasn't surprised when he learned that McCarthy had written a pair of Jewish characters who are prodigious at mathematics. "Most of the people he admired as scientists were Jews, and it's very natural to make one of these people or two of these people Jewish," he reasoned. The decidedly un-Jewish surname "is strange," he acknowledged, even if it bears a resemblance to his own. "But nevertheless."

West, a former president of the Santa Fe Institute who grew up in an Orthodox Jewish household, said he never asked McCarthy why he had given his characters Jewish backgrounds. They only talked "a teeny bit" about the books and "not in any great detail," he said. McCarthy, who rarely engaged with the press, never publicly addressed the matter. His publisher, Alfred

A. Knopf, declined multiple interview requests from JI before his death.

In lieu of a deeper answer, then, readers are left with the books themselves, which offer only a limited number of clues. In one particularly notable passage from *Stella Maris*, however, Alicia provides a key insight into her own relationship to Judaism when she is asked by her Jewish psychiatrist, Dr. Robert Cohen, if she “has any Jewish family connections.” No, she says, adding that she and her brother “didn’t grow up Jewish.”

“But you knew you were Jewish,” Dr. Cohen responds flatly.

“No. I knew something,” Alicia, who has checked herself into the psychiatric ward after experiencing hallucinations, says somewhat puzzlingly, before arriving at her central observation. “Anyway, my forebears counting coppers out of a clackdish are what have brought me to this station in life,” she continues. “Jews represent two percent of the population and eighty percent of the mathematicians. If those numbers were even a little more skewed we’d be talking about a separate species.”

If Alicia is aware that her assessment is “farfetched,” as Dr. Cohen diplomatically suggests, she does not seem to care. It isn’t “fetched far enough,” she claims, even while recognizing that there are limitations to explaining her theory. “Darwin’s question remains unanswered. How do we come by mental abilities that have no history?” she wonders, adding, “How does making change in the market prepare one’s grandchildren for quantum mechanics? For topology?”

McCarthy had long been fascinated by coins and currency, a recurring symbol across his novels, but Alicia’s belief in a kind of heritable Ashkenazi intelligence seems largely unrelated to that fixation. “If I’m not mistaken, that’s lifted straight from *The Bell Curve*, which of course has been pilloried, for good reason,” Giemza, the McCarthy expert, told JI, referring to a long-discredited book that posits a direct connection between race and intelligence. “It’s never good when you get into genetic essentialism.”

In an interview, Giemza confessed that he was “a little surprised” and somewhat “disappointed” to find the passage, even as he acknowledged that Alicia is floating a theory that “a lot of people” would probably be inclined to believe. “If you look at people

of McCarthy’s generation, kind of Anglo-Americans, there is the notion among some that God’s chosen people applies to intellect and ability,” he told JI.

Still, he made sure to clarify that he was not attributing such thinking to McCarthy himself, anticipating that some critics “might be tempted to generalize about Jewishness as *the* common theme” to explain McCarthy’s friendships with scientists — an idea he views as misguided. But he questioned McCarthy’s reason for including the passage at all. “It’s kind of like, well, to what end?” he wondered. “What does it serve?”

It was not the first instance in which McCarthy had suggested a link between Jewish heritage and mental acuity. In his 1992 novel *All the Pretty Horses*, the first installment in his popular Border Trilogy, one character recounts, in prophetic detail, the colonial history that led her ancestors to Mexico. “There had always been a rumor that they were of Jewish extraction,” McCarthy writes, lowercase his. “Possibly it’s true. They were all very intelligent. Certainly theirs seemed to me at least to be a Jewish destiny. A latterday diaspora. Martyrdom. Persecution. Exile.”

McCarthy’s decision to lowercase “Jew” was in keeping with his idiosyncratic aversion to standard grammatical conventions — he also eschewed quotation marks, for example. He had opted for the same usage in *Blood Meridian*, an anti-western that is widely viewed as his finest novel, while referring to a “Prussian Jew named Speyer,” who is among just a handful of minor Jewish characters McCarthy would write into his novels until he gave them central roles in his last two works — where all Jewish references are capitalized.

While it is unclear when exactly McCarthy decided that he would make the Westerns Jewish, early drafts of *The Passenger*, which he began writing decades ago, indicate that it was not his original plan. Lydia Cooper, a professor of American literature at Creighton University in Omaha, has reviewed McCarthy’s drafts written roughly between 2000 and 2004, which were recently made publicly available in an archive held at Texas State University.

“I didn’t see anything in those drafts that gave any indication the Western siblings

are Jewish, and several minor indications they’re not,” she told JI, noting that there are references to Bobby being educated by nuns. In another draft, according to Cooper, “we are told that Bobby Western’s father had married before and not told their mother that he’d been married previously because his first wife ‘was Catholic.’” That line mostly echoes the published text, with one notable exception: Their father’s first wife became an “Orthodox Jew.”

No obvious reason is given to explain why the Westerns’ father would hesitate to reveal to his second wife that he had been married to an Orthodox Jewish woman. But Cooper suggested that might be beside the point. “McCarthy didn’t just shift the main characters to being Jewish,” she said, “but he was intentional about it, to a certain extent.”

From a biological standpoint, “it doesn’t matter” that the siblings’ father’s first wife was Jewish rather than Catholic, “but it creates a bit more context for the father’s backstory,” Cooper elaborated. “If I had to describe it, it feels to me like McCarthy decided his protagonists needed to be Jewish, and he transposed their identities, like a musician shifting the same melody to a different key.”

Notably, she said, “most of the lengthy sections on physics from both novels aren’t in” the papers she reviewed. The absence of such material, she observed, suggests that McCarthy had likely begun to depict his characters as Jewish “around the time that he really started delving into the physics.”

Meanwhile, Giemza said he had learned that Alicia is modeled, in part, on a woman who had been a “visitor” at the Santa Fe Institute but is not, to his awareness, “of Jewish ancestry.” The Jewish element, he speculated in an email to JI, “seems to be a kind of artistic imposition, to what end, we will long be musing.”

In a new paper recently presented at an online salon hosted by the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association, Wallach, the Cormac McCarthy Society founder, seeks to examine how the “Westerns’ Judaism” functions in a manner that is “more significant than a historical referent to” what he calls “the Los Alamos ethnic mix.”

“As we can see, the most apparent signification is its resonances with the age-

old theme of persecution and exile,” he writes of Bobby in particular, who is pursued by threateningly anonymous agents after he finds that a body is missing from a sunken jet during a salvage dive off the coast of New Orleans. “Stripped of his worldly goods and threatened with likely imprisonment, Bobby is forced to flee, a ‘wandering Jew’ set on an aimless retreat through heartland America and ultimately driven abroad to a sanctuary in Spain.”

Bobby’s persecution “by this nameless, faceless government,” Wallach said in an interview with JI, is reminiscent of what he characterized as a kind of Kafkaesque nightmare.

But like most of McCarthy’s books, it is far easier to discern Catholic influences rather than Jewish themes. Perhaps most notably, *The Passenger* opens with Alicia’s suicide, her lifeless body found hanging “among the bare gray poles of the winter trees” on a “cold and barely spoken Christmas day.” It concludes during Holy Week in Ibiza, where McCarthy finished his second novel, *Outer Dark*, in the 1960s.

That book, set in the Appalachian South around the turn of the 20th century, features what is likely the first overt Jewish reference in McCarthy’s oeuvre. It’s a humorous exchange in which one character asks guilelessly, “What’s a Jew?” The answer, delivered by an amiable hog herder, is that a Jew is “one of them old-timey people from in the bible.”

Among the most meaningful demonstrations of McCarthy’s understanding of Judaism comes from an unexpected source: His screenplay for *The Counselor*, a 2013 crime thriller directed by Ridley Scott. In one scene, an unnamed Jewish diamond dealer unspools an oracular description of what he regards as the unique fate of the Jewish people. “There is no culture save the Semitic culture. There,” the dealer begins. “The last known culture before that was the Greek and there will be no culture after. Nothing.”

Speaking to the titular counselor, he goes on to argue that the “heart of any culture is to be found in the nature of the hero,” adding: “Who is that man who is revered? In the western world it is the man of God. From Moses to Christ. The prophet. The penitent. Such a figure is unknown to the Greeks.

Unheard of. Unimaginable. Because you can only have a man of God, not a man of gods. And this God is the God of the Jewish people. There is no other god. We see the figure of him — what is the word? Purloined. Purloined in the West.”

“How do you steal a God? He is immovable,” the dealer concludes. “The Jew beholds his tormentor dressed in the vestments of his own ancient culture. Everything bears a strange familiarity. But the fit is always poor and the hands are always bloody.”

To Gienza, McCarthy’s assessment, told through the dealer, is “pretty darn interesting,” he said. “Here, he shows an awareness of all the trauma of Jewish history and displacement,” he told JI. “But more, he seems to suggest that, for example, American sort of WASPy culture — whatever the American mold is for any kind of Anglo-American Protestant identity — is itself a type of theft. That Christianity is little more than a secondhand elaboration on Judaism.

“I’m not going to ascribe this to McCarthy, but I suspect that this is him,” Gienza said. “I think we get an insight into perhaps his understanding of Jewish identity and history.”

McCarthy’s reverence for abstract mathematical concepts was, perhaps, intertwined with that understanding — not least with respect to Alicia. “Some of my colleagues have asked this question: Do you think the almost mystical way she talks about mathematics has any kind of relation to her thoughts about Jewishness or just religion in general?” Stacey Peebles, an associate professor of English at Centre College in Kentucky and the president of the Cormac McCarthy Society, said in an interview with JI. “There’s probably something to be said for that, because the way she talks about math is almost like a divine presence.”

“What does it mean to think about something that is so separate from the world we actually inhabit and that you can’t visualize?” Peebles mused. “I mean, it starts to sound like God at a certain level — or, at the very least, some kind of expression of faith.”

Relatedly, West, a theoretical physicist who thinks in grand abstractions, said he has long pondered why so many Jewish

scientists have been drawn, in a manner of speaking, to a discipline that involves no less a task than decoding the universe. “That, I have speculated, is because of the stubborn Jewish determinism that there’s one God,” he told JI. “That’s it. One God, which has permeated Jewish thinking from biblical times.”

“Somehow, that got morphed or evolved into the search for ‘everything is unified,’ and so it’s not surprising that Jews would end up being at the forefront of trying to understand grand unified theories of the elementary particles and the origins of the universe,” he explained. “Even though most of us are secular, deep down in our archetypal subconscious, there remains this ‘one God’ kind of concept.”

There is little reason to doubt that McCarthy, a stubborn outsider himself who felt most at home in the company of scientists, would find something to admire in that theory. ♦

Montana Senate race to test influence of GOP establishment in key battleground state

Tim Sheehy, backed by Republican leadership, launched his Senate campaign on Tuesday, setting the stage for a potentially bruising intraparty clash

By Matthew Kassel

The battle for a key Senate seat in Montana appears to be headed for a bitter primary clash between a hard-right congressional firebrand and a political newcomer handpicked by GOP leadership.

Tim Sheehy, a businessman and former Navy SEAL officer, launched a widely expected Senate campaign on Tuesday, setting the stage for a potentially bruising showdown with Rep. Matt Rosendale (R-MT), a combative conservative who has indicated that he is plotting his own bid.

In an increasingly familiar scenario, the hypothetical primary matchup would pit an establishment favorite — albeit one with no experience in electoral politics — against a two-term incumbent who has defied Republican leadership while stirring controversy for his engagement with right-wing extremists.

The race to challenge Sen. Jon Tester (D-MT), a vulnerable three-term incumbent who defeated Rosendale in 2018, promises to be among the most closely watched Senate contests of the 2024 election. Not only could the race determine the balance of power in the upper chamber, but it could test the influence of the GOP establishment in primary campaigns — particularly in the wake of an election cycle in which party leaders struggled to recruit winning Senate candidates in a handful of pivotal races.

The primary is also a personal test for the leader of the Senate Republicans' campaign arm, Sen. Steve Daines (R-MT), who encouraged Sheehy to run. Immediately after Sheehy announced his campaign on Tuesday, Daines, a former Montana congressman, gave his endorsement to the fledgling candidate, wasting no time in his effort to consolidate support before the field widens. His nod was soon echoed by Sen. Tom Cotton (R-AR), and more endorsements

from top Republican lawmakers are likely to follow as the campaign unfolds, according to a source familiar with the race.

Rosendale, for his part, claimed to be unintimidated, even as he fell short of clarifying his own plans. "Congratulations to Mitch McConnell and the party bosses on getting their chosen candidate," he declared in a series of barbed tweets on Tuesday. "Now Washington has two candidates — Tim Sheehy and Jon Tester — who will protect the DC cartel. Unfortunately for them, Montanans don't take orders from Washington."

In a campaign kickoff video, Sheehy, 37, cast himself as part of a new generation of traditional conservative leaders, recalling his decision to join the military in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. In 2014, he left the Navy and settled in Montana, where he is the co-founder of a successful aerial firefighting company. "Whether it was in war or business, I see problems and solve them," he said, while adding that his campaign "is about service, God and country, not politics as usual."

Sheehy, who is independently wealthy, will be capable of self-funding — a key selling point for Republican recruiters. Meanwhile, establishment GOP donors indicated that they are eager to back the new candidate over Rosendale, who angered Republicans when he opposed Rep. Kevin McCarthy's (R-CA) bid for the speakership in January.

"The first question we have to ask ourselves is, do the Republicans want to win in Montana or lose?" Eric Levine, a top Republican donor in Manhattan, said in an interview with *Jewish Insider* on Tuesday. "If they want to lose, they'll nominate Matt Rosendale, who is a Trumper and an extremist and one of the one of the five nutcakes who would not vote for Kevin

McCarthy for speaker. If they want to win, they'll nominate and back Sheehy."

According to Levine, the donors he regularly speaks to "wish Rosendale would just go away" and "remain really, really angry about his failure to vote for Kevin McCarthy." He dismissed a recent poll showing Rosendale, who represents the eastern half of Montana, with a substantial lead over his potential primary opponent, suggesting it was simply too early to draw any firm conclusions.

Even without support from some major donors, Rosendale, 62, could receive a boost from the ultraconservative Club for Growth, which backed his first Senate campaign five years ago. But the congressman, who pulled in a meager \$127,000 last quarter, is trying to improve his fundraising as he weighs a rematch. Two top Republican donors who live outside the state said he has persistently solicited campaign contributions from them, even as his requests have gone unheeded.

"He pings me all the time," one donor in Chicago told *JL*, noting that he is more enthusiastic about Sheehy's campaign. "I've never talked to him," he said of Rosendale, who previously served in both chambers of the Montana legislature as well as state auditor. "But I know his name because he reaches out a lot." Another donor, in Texas, estimated that Rosendale has called him "15 times" — overtures he has "avoided," he said, because he has not yet begun closely following the primary.

Rosendale could not be reached for comment regarding his plans for the race.

While Sheehy is relatively unknown to voters and has yet to define his positions on a range of issues, there are some areas where he can be expected to draw a distinct contrast with Rosendale — perhaps most prominently on foreign policy.

The congressman is an isolationist who has staunchly opposed U.S. funding for Ukraine, whereas Sheehy seems to be in favor of backing the war-besieged country, according to past posts published on his LinkedIn page.

In some instances, Sheehy appears to have advocated for an unusually aggressive response to Russia's invasion. "Sweden and Finland are next? We've seen this movie before....stop him now before the price tag for putting Putin down will be a lot higher," he wrote in one post a year ago, referring to Russian President Vladimir Putin. "Georgia, Crimea, Syria, now Kiev — then what? Estonia? Finland? Sweden? Gofund me pages and twitter likes aren't enough. Soldiers, planes, bombs and bullets will be needed against this Tyrant."

A spokesperson for Sheehy's campaign did not respond to a request for comment from JI on Tuesday.

Despite such differences, Rosendale's foreign policy doctrine has in some ways resisted easy classification. He is, for example, broadly supportive of Israel, even as he frequently aligns with a libertarian-leaning House colleague, Rep. Thomas Massie (R-KY), who has opposed supplemental funding for Israel's Iron Dome missile-defense system and consistently votes against pro-Israel legislation.

"Matt Rosendale has on file at AIPAC a positive position paper on the American and Israel friendship," Jerry Weissman, a former

executive board member at AIPAC who lives in Montana, said in a text message to JI this week. "I have not seen anything he has said or done to change that position."

Weissman said he was unaware of Sheehy's positions on Israel. "I will seek him out and see what he is or is not," he confirmed. Jewish Republican donors, who were likewise unfamiliar with Sheehy's approach to Middle East policy, said they did not expect any surprises from the candidate.

During the last election cycle, Rosendale was among a sizable group of congressional lawmakers to earn an endorsement from AIPAC's political action committee. But he was not included in its first round of 2024 endorsements, released in March. The reason, according to a source familiar with the process, was that AIPAC had expected that he would run against Tester, and its members did not want a House endorsement to be misapplied to his Senate bid.

The pro-Israel lobbying group, which is bipartisan, has backed Tester's campaign for another term — in keeping with a long-held practice of supporting so-called "friendly incumbents" up for reelection. The source clarified that AIPAC would likely have supported Rosendale if he were running for Congress again.

Marshall Wittmann, a spokesperson for AIPAC, declined to comment.

Meanwhile, the Republican Jewish Coalition, whose political arm has previously endorsed Rosendale, is unlikely to weigh

in on the Senate primary, according to a person familiar with the group's thinking. The RJC has rarely engaged in primaries, with the exception of some races in which it opposed candidates who had been accused of espousing antisemitic views, including Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA).

That Rosendale has occasionally drawn criticism for associating with right-wing extremists does not seem to have been a major source of concern for Jewish Republicans. In March, for instance, he came under scrutiny for appearing in a photo with two prominent neo-Nazis outside the Capitol. The congressman later claimed he had done so unwittingly and was "not aware" of their views when he was asked to pose with them.

"I absolutely condemn and have zero tolerance for hate groups, hate speech and violence," Rosendale told a local newspaper in Montana, stressing that he "did not take a meeting with these individuals."

Chaim Bruk, a Chabad rabbi in Montana who has known Rosendale for years and appreciates his outreach, said he trusted the congressman's explanation. "I have no reason to believe, based on my engagement with him over 10 years, that he has an antisemitic or white supremacist bone in his body," he told JI. "That being said, as a rabbi, I know people should be more careful who they take photographs with." ♦

In rollout of antisemitism strategy, White House steers clear of the Jewish state

During hour-long panel at Aspen Ideas focused on fighting antisemitism, Biden officials avoided any mention of Israel

By Gabby Deutch

On a windy, sunny summer morning in Colorado, two senior White House officials joined a panel conversation about combating the rise of antisemitism, where they promoted the Biden administration's National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism.

At the Tuesday Aspen Ideas Festival event, which was moderated by journalist Katie Couric and included racial justice advocate Eric Ward, Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff and White House Homeland Security Advisor Liz Sherwood-Randall spoke about the recent trial of the Pittsburgh synagogue shooter, condemned the neo-Nazis who flew swastika flags outside synagogues in Georgia last weekend and criticized former President Donald Trump for his comments after the violent 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Va.

The nearly hour-long conversation did not touch on one issue that, despite its appearance in the 60-page strategy, has been absent from White House public messaging on the document: Israel, and the ways that anti-Zionism can translate into antisemitism.

In an interview last week with *Jewish Insider*, a senior White House official who worked on the strategy declined to share how matters related to anti-Zionism would be handled in the strategy's implementation in the coming year. (In the month since the strategy was published, the White House has declined to make anyone available for an on-the-record interview about the plan.)

"How long is the report? There's a lot in there on all of this," said the official. "We refer you to the text." They then read from the section of the document that refers to Israel: "When Jews are targeted because of their beliefs or identity, when Israel is singled out because of anti-Jewish hatred,

that's antisemitism. That's unacceptable."

"The vice president has said this," the White House official added, pointing to Vice President Kamala Harris' speech at an Israeli Independence Day event earlier this month. She read the same passage from the strategy about Israel being "singled out because of anti-Jewish hatred."

In an interview with *JI* in January, Emhoff said, when asked whether he discussed debates around Israel with Jewish students he had recently met with, "My message to them was the same to everyone. Like, I just really want to hit the issue of antisemitism and talk about that. And, just, that's the thing that unites, in my opinion, Jews."

In late May, a student speaker at the City University of New York Law School graduation delivered a commencement speech attacking Israel and Zionism that was widely condemned as antisemitic by Jewish community officials, New York politicians and the CUNY board of trustees.

The White House official declined to say whether it was concerned about, or aware of, the incident at CUNY. The official pointed to a letter that the U.S. Department of Education's assistant secretary for civil rights sent to college administrators across the country last month, alerting them to "nationwide rise in reports of antisemitic harassment, including in schools."

"The Department of Education sent out letters to educational institutions to remind them of their obligations in this area and continue to enforce its authorities to prohibit antisemitic and other forms of discrimination," said the official. "We've got to make sure that we're offering concrete examples of ways that schools and campuses can engage in efforts to prevent and address antisemitism."

After the Aspen panel, Emhoff and Sherwood-Randall participated in a roundtable with faith leaders, philanthropists and activists about the White House strategy. One participant told *JI* that while Emhoff and Sherwood-Randall did not speak about Israel, multiple attendees mentioned anti-Zionism, particularly as it plays out among college and high school students.

As the strategy was drafted, the White House faced pressure from major Jewish organizations to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism, which defines some critiques of Israel as antisemitic. The IHRA definition has been adopted elsewhere in the federal government, such as at the State Department. In 2021, Secretary of State Tony Blinken articulated the Biden administration's support for IHRA.

The White House strategy said the U.S. "has embraced" the IHRA definition, and that it "welcomes and appreciates the Nexus Document," an alternative definition of antisemitism preferred by some progressives. The debate over language and definitions reflects a larger debate about when and whether certain types of attacks on the Jewish state should be considered antisemitic.

The White House language led to a wide-ranging constellation of praise that served as something of a Rorschach test rather than any clear statement of policy: Mainstream Jewish organizations viewed the language as an endorsement of IHRA, while groups on the left who oppose the IHRA definition applauded the Biden administration for not fully backing IHRA.

"They can say whatever they want," Ambassador Deborah Lipstadt, the U.S. special envoy to monitor and combat

antisemitism, said of those who celebrated that the Biden administration did not formally adopt IHRA. “But the strategy says the United States government embraces the IHRA definition,” she told *JI* earlier this month.

On Friday, the White House official declined to offer any further explanation of the White House position.

“It addresses this exactly the way that we want to do so,” said the administration official. “The report continues the approach of the United States government on the definition of antisemitism.”

Further, they added, “we are sticking with the approach that we’ve had on this matter, and we’re moving forward with all the agency actions to try to make a real difference in people’s lives.”

The White House’s hesitation to explain its approach to defining antisemitism stands in stark contrast to the way the matter has been discussed by the State Department’s Lipstadt. In several recent interviews, Lipstadt — a prominent historian of the Holocaust and a supporter of the IHRA

definition — has continued to publicly embrace IHRA. But as a Senate-confirmed ambassador, Lipstadt has no involvement in matters of domestic policy, such as the recent CUNY commencement case.

The biggest criticism of the strategy has come in response to an item on a fact sheet the White House released alongside the policy plan. In listing external partners that have made commitments to fight antisemitism, the White House highlighted the Council on American-Islamic Relations, which pledged to teach houses of worship about security measures to protect against violence.

Several Jewish advocacy organizations, including the Anti-Defamation League, have expressed confusion — and concern — about CAIR’s inclusion, given the history of the organization’s leaders defending Hamas and condemning Zionist groups as an “enemy,” to cite a few prominent examples.

Lipstadt has acknowledged the Muslim civil rights group’s checkered past: “I know CAIR is problematic,” she told *The Jerusalem Post* recently, but said they should be given

a chance. “There are other groups and individuals that have problematic histories that are now talking about antisemitism.”

The White House has sought to sidestep commenting on CAIR’s inclusion, noting only that they are not part of the actual strategy.

“Not in the report. One of the independent organizations that offered independent recommendations,” the White House official said of CAIR.

The best prism through which to view the strategy’s success — and the hardest to measure — is to examine whether it resonates with everyday Americans, the official suggested.

“It makes reference, again and again, to our commitment to use the bully pulpit to address antisemitism,” said the official. “We understand that this is critical, that we come together as a whole nation to address this problem. This is a problem for everyone. It is not simply a problem for the Jewish community.” ♦

JUNE 27, 2023

State Dept. diversity chief: First Amendment protects diplomat with racist, antisemitic blog

Amb. Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley, whose job is to promote inclusion in her role as the department’s first DEI officer, will step down from the position this week

By Gabby Deutch

In 1977, neo-Nazis planned a march in the heavily Jewish Chicago suburb of Skokie, Ill., inadvertently sparking one of the biggest free speech battles in American history.

Should people holding the most vile beliefs imaginable be able to march publicly while espousing those views? That fight ultimately went all the way to the Supreme Court. The answer, it turned out, was yes.

Now, nearly half a century later, a similar

question is being considered by the top leadership at the U.S. State Department. While representing America as a diplomat, U.S. Foreign Service officer Fritz Berggren operates a racist and antisemitic blog that promotes white nationalism — and like the Jewish community members in Skokie who sought to see the Nazi protest canceled, many Jewish diplomats and their allies want to see Berggren disciplined.

“It is a painful, painful situation to have

one among our number who is willing to voice statements as he has made,” the State Department’s chief diversity and inclusion officer, Ambassador Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley, said of Berggren. “But the law is the law, and freedom of speech — the First Amendment — is what governs all of this.”

Berggren remains a Foreign Service officer more than two years after his connection to the website was first revealed. His case has frustrated his fellow diplomats,

many of whom want to see Berggren fired for his continued use of hateful language that has been viewed as threatening.

As civil servants, Foreign Service officers cannot be fired without cause, and the due process protections of federal employees mean any termination must clear a high bar. Earlier this month, Ambassador Eric Rubin, the president of the Foreign Service union, said that Berggren's actions are so egregious that they would warrant his firing.

But in an interview, Abercrombie-Winstanley, whose job is to promote inclusion in her role as the department's first DEI officer, argued that First Amendment free speech principles are actually what keep Berggren employed. She pointed to that infamous Skokie case as an explanation for why Berggren has not been fired.

"It clearly is not proceeding as most of us would like, or in the way that we would like, or as quickly as we would like, but the law is the law, and there are many, many occasions where it protects not what we as individuals want protected. I mean, there's a long history of that," Abercrombie-Winstanley said.

Abercrombie-Winstanley remembers the conversations that happened around the Skokie incident. "And [I remember] being told they have the right to do it. That is our nation. We fight to protect that," she added.

But in Skokie, the protesters were exercising their right to free speech and freedom of assembly in a public space — not seeking continued government employment with no consequences. Berggren's actions aren't protected by the First Amendment, but by the 1980 Foreign Service Act.

Abercrombie-Winstanley, a former U.S. ambassador to Malta, will step down on Friday from her position as the State Department's first diversity chief. In a conversation with *Jewish Insider* last week, Abercrombie-Winstanley, who is 66, identified what she viewed as her strongest success in the position — compiling detailed demographic data from across the department's thousands of employees to identify where racial and gender diversity have fallen short — while acknowledging that the Berggren case remains a point of "dissatisfaction" for her.

"You hear my dissatisfaction. You are not going to hear satisfaction from anybody, up and down. You will not. Perhaps gratitude

that the laws are there, because they will protect all of us in turn," she said.

Abercrombie-Winstanley said that in this case, her opinion about Berggren's conduct is irrelevant to the question of whether he keeps his job or not. Instead, she said it comes down to the lawyers who are not yet willing to dismiss a government employee over his public comments. (Critics have alleged that the State Department hasn't dismissed Berggren because they fear a public legal fight with Berggren.)

"It is certainly different in the public sector than in the private sector. Your protections on freedom of speech [are] paramount for those who are in the public service space. So all I can say is, I'm not in a position to comment," she said. "What I think doesn't matter. It is what the lawyers think, and what the law says. I'm just not expert enough even to just comment on the law."

She said that the investigation into Berggren's conduct remains ongoing, but she cannot say whether any disciplinary actions have been taken.

"By law, I can't comment on it," said Abercrombie-Winstanley. "All I can say is that it's terrible."

Another investigation into antisemitism at the State Department is also ongoing. In 2021, a swastika was carved into a State Department elevator near her office. No culprit was ever identified, and Abercrombie-Winstanley isn't optimistic that will change.

"My office ran a town hall after the swastika was found to really make sure that we gave voice to the range of employees who were deeply disturbed by it," she said, adding that the matter was taken "extremely seriously" by department officials. "The investigation continues. It will be very, very difficult to come to the conclusion that I think all of us would like to have."

A Government Accountability Office report issued in 2020 found that State Department employees from racial and ethnic minorities were less likely to be promoted than their white counterparts. In order to understand the issue better, Abercrombie-Winstanley created the department's first demographic baseline report, which was published last week and provides a detailed look at workforce data broken down by race, gender, disability

status and rank.

On this issue — unlike the Berggren case — she fought the State Department lawyers, and she won.

"One of the first things that we did when we started this office was to, some might say negotiate, I would say mud-wrestle, with the rest of the building, especially the lawyers, with being able to gather disaggregated data on the workforce," Abercrombie-Winstanley said.

The Office of Diversity and Inclusion does not use the data to set specific goals for how many people of a certain race or gender should be hired, because "that would be against the law," Abercrombie-Winstanley noted. But the data shows general areas where she thinks the department could be more diverse, such as at higher ranks, where there are fewer women and people of color.

Some of the State Department employees who support Abercrombie-Winstanley's work argue that she has not fulfilled some of her promises.

"There are some conflicting opinions on how effective the whole effort is," said one department employee, adding that it appeared to some that she had "made it a box-checking exercise."

To those who allege she hasn't accomplished much, Abercrombie-Winstanley suggests she has at least laid the groundwork to begin to change the storied department's centuries-old culture. (For decades, the department's workforce was only somewhat jokingly described as "pale, male and Yale.")

"We didn't get here in a couple of years, so I think it would be unreasonable of anyone to expect that we have all the solutions within a couple of years," she said, pointing out some changes the department has already implemented — like posting all open positions publicly, rather than just hiring people via word-of-mouth connections, or putting out more information about religious accommodations so the hundreds of U.S. missions around the world don't schedule major meetings on Rosh Hashanah or Eid, and other holidays celebrated by religious minorities.

Conservative activists and Republican lawmakers have recently targeted diversity efforts at public universities and attacked private companies for hiring diversity

officers. Earlier this month, while testifying at a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing, Abercrombie-Winstanley found herself sparring with congressional Republicans who argue that her job is “mandating division.”

“If you watch that hearing,” Abercrombie-Winstanley told *J*, holding a hand over her heart and sighing deeply, “I responded, ‘Look at who’s in front of me.’ The range of political views was up there on that dais. ... What they do in government, representing the American people, the Department of State does internationally, representing the American people. And I believe we have a responsibility, I think greater than other government agencies because we are America’s representatives.”

Abercrombie-Winstanley does not pay this criticism any mind. “I’m sure it’s politically incorrect to say it’s a no-brainer,”

she said, when asked why she thinks her work is important. “But I’m saying that [this] is a very straightforward, easy to understand position, and one that I think every American will support.”

After joining the Foreign Service in 1985, Abercrombie-Winstanley’s postings included Tel Aviv, Cairo and Jeddah. A native of Cleveland Heights, a Cleveland neighborhood that used to be heavily Jewish, Abercrombie-Winstanley learned Hebrew in her public high school and later studied abroad in Tel Aviv.

“That is what launched me into my international career: studying about Israel, about history, having amazing teachers that inspired my interest in traveling and learning about the Middle East and the world outside of Cleveland, Ohio,” she said.

Abercrombie-Winstanley recalls facing racism and sexism in her own career.

“I am old enough to have been mistaken for the person who makes the coffee, frequently. And I will tell you, I do not know how to make coffee, to this day, on purpose,” she said. “I don’t get mad about it. There’s no point in that, and in the end, you’ve got a mission to do. You want to be successful. You have to overlook slights, or missteps. And that’s good manners anyways.”

She isn’t leaving her position because of any barriers she faced implementing her diversity agenda. Instead, it’s to retire with her husband back in Cleveland.

“I did not anticipate returning to government,” said Abercrombie-Winstanley, who had departed the Foreign Service during the Trump administration.

The State Department has not yet announced her successor, but Abercrombie-Winstanley said they will do so soon. ♦

JUNE 29, 2023

Dan Shapiro rejoins Biden admin to focus on boosting the Abraham Accords

The appointment comes amid a congressional effort to create an ambassador-level position focused on normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia

By Gabby Deutch

Amid a concerted U.S. push to normalize ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia, the State Department announced on Thursday that former U.S. Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro would be appointed the department’s senior advisor for regional integration, a newly created position.

Shapiro “will support U.S. efforts to advance a more peaceful and interconnected region, deepen and broaden the Abraham Accords and build the Negev Forum,” Secretary of State Tony Blinken wrote in a tweet.

The appointment comes as the Senate considers whether to approve a bill — which

was already passed by the House — that would create an ambassador-level special envoy position focused on the Abraham Accords, the 2020 agreements that normalized ties between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.

“We think it’s an excellent decision and are supportive of the administration’s appointment,” said Jacob Long, a spokesperson for Rep. Ritchie Torres (D-NY), one of the sponsors of the Abraham Accords ambassador legislation. “It doesn’t change our push to have the position of a special envoy for the [Abraham Accords] codified into law because administrations will change and not every [administration]

may see it as a priority, so it needs to be made permanent through legislative process.”

But in a Thursday press briefing, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller suggested that an ambassador-level position is not needed to advance the Abraham Accords.

“The Senate-confirmed piece is — I don’t think is necessary,” Miller said. “There are a number of Senate-confirmed officials already working on this.”

He pointed to Blinken, who raised the issue in a recent trip to Saudi Arabia and discussed it at a Wednesday event at the Council on Foreign Relations, and U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern

Affairs Barbara Leaf, to whom Shapiro will report.

“We think he can perform all the duties he needs to perform to advance the agenda as the senior advisor,” said Miller.

Rep. Mike Lawler (R-NY), the other lead sponsor of the legislation, agreed with Torres that Shapiro’s appointment as senior advisor does not diminish the need for a special envoy focused on normalization.

“While the appointment of former Ambassador Daniel Shapiro to the position of Senior Advisor for Regional Integration is welcome news, it does not take away from the fact that we must get the Special Envoy for the Abraham Accords Act signed into law, to ensure that all administrations share the same goal for Israel and the Middle East — lasting peace,” Lawler said in a statement to JI.

House Democrats had floated Shapiro as a strong choice to be nominated for the envoy

role if and when the legislation is approved. He previously served as an advisor to the State Department’s Iran envoy, Rob Malley, in 2021 and 2022.

Shapiro comes to the State Department after serving as director of the N7 Initiative, an Atlantic Council program sponsored by the Jeffrey M. Talpins Foundation that seeks to further normalization in the Middle East. (Ed Husain, a Georgetown professor and former advisor to former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, will be replacing Shapiro at N7.) Shapiro declined to comment on his new position.

“Bringing in new countries to normalize” will be one part of Shapiro’s job, said William Wechsler, the N7 Initiative’s senior director. But he will also have to “demonstrate the benefits of normalization to the average person in the region in countries that have already normalized: the economic benefits, the social benefits, the cultural benefits, the

people-to-people, the business-to-business [ties].”

Early in President Joe Biden’s term, right-leaning foreign policy critics of the Biden administration questioned whether he would maintain the Trump administration’s commitment to the Abraham Accords.

“Thankfully, we’ve passed that initial trend that we saw,” Wechsler said. “What we see from this decision is that the administration is fully not just supportive, but directive, by trying to drive a new regional integration.”

JI Capitol Hill reporter Marc Rod contributed reporting.

This story was updated to include the comments of State Department spokesman Matthew Miller and Rep. Mike Lawler (R-NY). ♦

JUNE 28, 2023

UAE, Israel create ‘Crystal Ball’ platform to fight hackers

Emirati cybersecurity chief Mohamed Al Kuwaiti meets Netanyahu, addresses international conference at Tel Aviv University

By Shoshanna Solomon

The article first appeared in The Circuit.

The United Arab Emirates and Israel are working together on a new strategy to battle cybersecurity threats.

Mohamed Al Kuwaiti, the UAE’s head of cybersecurity, introduced the “Crystal Ball” project in Tel Aviv on Tuesday, a digital platform for detecting and repelling hackers. Microsoft, Israel’s Rafael Advanced Defense Systems and Abu Dhabi-based CPX are providing the technological backbone, and an unspecified number of countries will

also participate.

“Cyberthreats do not distinguish between nations, do not distinguish between entities or people,” Al Kuwaiti said in an address to the annual Cyber Week conference at Tel Aviv University. “That is why we need to unite against those threats, and the Crystal Ball, that we are aiming for the whole community, will be the first step toward that.”

Al Kuwaiti, who met on Monday night with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in a group with other national cyber directors attending the conference,

said the platform will enable partner countries to “easily and seamlessly share information.” The collaborative international effort will be strengthened by the combination of abilities, processing power and volume of data, he said.

The mission is to “design, deploy and enable regional intelligence enhancement” through collaboration and knowledge-sharing to combat national-level cyberthreats, according to a slide Al Kuwaiti showed during his presentation.

The UAE and Israel normalized diplomatic relations as part of the September

2020 Abraham Accords, leading to the bolstering of both commercial and strategic ties between the countries. Al Kuwaiti said the connection with Israeli tech companies has been especially helpful in his country's transition to a digital economy.

The Crystal Ball platform was presented by Israel and the UAE on Monday to heads of national cyber directorates from Germany, Singapore and the U.S. at Microsoft's Israel office.

"We are dealing with the same cyber threats," Gaby Portnoy, director general of the Israel National Cyber Directorate, said in a statement. "The threat landscape is widening along with new technologies and greater motivation by the attackers. We need to jointly deal with the challenges and use our knowledge and new technologies for better and quicker protection."

The meeting with Netanyahu was held at the headquarters of the Israel Security Agency, or Shin Bet, whose director, Ronen Bar, spoke at the Cyber Week conference

about the agency's increasing use of artificial intelligence.

"The ISA and AI have one thing in common," Bar said. "We both make a living by looking for patterns and anomalies." He said the agency has also developed its own Generative AI tool that can be used like OpenAI's ChatGPT.

Another AI innovation being tested by the ISA is an airport security system that he said would "dramatically change" the screening process before flight check-in.

"Maybe one day we will abandon the traditional favorite question for all of you: Did you pack by yourself," he said.

Bar said the ISA is setting up a technology incubator to help startups develop generative AI products to address security and intelligence needs. He said AI will help the agency in several areas: prioritizing information; boosting intelligence capabilities by identifying patterns and deviations from patterns; becoming a tool in the decision-making process; and helping

to forecast trends and the likelihood of their realization. For the agency, he said, generative AI will be a "partner" at the decision-making table, but not a "decision-maker."

Speaking at the conference on Monday, a former Pentagon official warned that both government and business aren't paying enough attention to AI's potential dangers.

"I think that Israel should be very concerned about what algorithms Iran may be trying to develop or acquire overseas," said Ezra Cohen, the former acting under secretary of defense for intelligence and security who is now vice president for corporate strategy at Oracle Corp.

"Now I'm not saying that we should be treating AI today like a nuclear weapon or anything like that, but there should be certain procedures that are put in place and I think a lot of these companies are really very juicy targets for the adversary," Cohen said. ♦

JUNE 26, 2023

NT-Tao seeks to generate nuclear fusion with compact reactors

Viewed as a holy grail, fusion is attracting billions in investment and will be a prominent topic at the COP28 climate conference in the UAE this coming fall

By Melanie Lidman

The article first appeared in The Circuit.

Creating a miniature version of the sun in a nondescript office building outside Tel Aviv might be the key to providing cheap, waste-free energy for the entire world.

NT-Tao, an Israeli startup led by a former submarine commander, is one of some 30 companies racing to generate energy through nuclear fusion. Its founders are trying to develop fusion reactors small enough to fit in a 40-foot shipping

container, but powerful enough that each could provide electricity for 1,000 homes.

After raising \$22 million in February from Japan's Honda Motor Co. and other investors, NT-Tao is looking to grab a modest chunk of what some predict could become a \$40 trillion fusion industry. Leaders in the field include Cambridge, Mass.-based Commonwealth Fusion Systems, which is backed by billionaire Bill Gates, and Seattle, -based Helion Energy, which counts Sam Altman, CEO of artificial intelligence pioneer OpenAI, as an investor.

"Fusion energy is really the only abundant source of energy that is clean, and you can get as much as you need," said CEO Oded Gour-Lavie, who co-founded NT-Tao in 2016 after serving 30 years in the Israeli navy. "There's nothing coming close to it."

One problem: the technology doesn't quite exist yet.

When hydrogen gets heated under pressure to around 100 million Celsius, about six times hotter than the sun – even for a fraction of a second – it becomes so hot that the electrons are sheared from

the atoms and the nuclei collide with one another. When two nuclei meet and fuse together, an enormous amount of energy is released. Finding a way to capture the energy generated by that fusion could go a long way towards solving the current energy crisis.

At the NT-Tao lab in the Tel Aviv suburb of Hod Hasharon, the hydrogen is heated into plasma, the fourth state of matter after solid, liquid, and gas, which is generated when temperatures exceed 2,700 C. Because temperatures will eventually approach millions of degrees Celsius in the fusion reactor, the plasma must be suspended in space inside a doughnut-shaped experimental tube. Super-powerful copper magnets hold the plasma, which flows in a circle without touching the sides. Plasma makes up 99% of the sun and Gour-Lavie says the process is like creating a miniature sun.

Fusion will be one of the prominent topics at COP28, the United Nations Climate Change Conference, which starts Nov. 30 and will be hosted by the United Arab Emirates. The conference's president-designate, Sultan Al Jaber, who is also CEO of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, spoke at a climate conference in the UAE last month about the "need to keep pushing for breakthroughs in battery storage, expand nuclear, and invest in new energies like fusion."

The theories underpinning nuclear fusion have been around since the 1940s, but no one has been able to make it work on a significant scale. Last December, the National Ignition Facility in Livermore, Calif., achieved a breakthrough. The experiment set up 192 lasers that were trained on a tiny bit of frozen hydrogen the size of a peppercorn. The combined force of the laser beams created an output of energy that was slightly higher than the input, generating enough excess to boil about two liters of water.

Stoked by the success, investment firms are pouring more money into the nascent fusion industry, which has already captured some \$5 billion in VC funding. The U.S. government has invested about \$700 million a year in fusion research since the 1950s. NT-Tao started an affiliation in May with Princeton University and the

Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory, a U.S. Department of Energy facility at the New Jersey campus. It also collaborates with scientists in Israel, the U.K. and Japan.

Nuclear energy used today is generated through fission, which captures the energy that is released when two atoms split. Fission is the technology that produced the atomic bomb that the U.S. dropped on Hiroshima on Aug. 6, 1945. As a nuclear energy source, the downsides of fission include the history of disasters such as the 1986 Chernobyl explosion, the challenge of radioactive waste disposal and the high cost of building a nuclear plant.

"Our vision is really to democratize clean energy worldwide," said Gour-Lavie, who founded the company with chief scientist Doron Weinfeld and chief technology officer Boaz Weinfeld, who are brothers. NT-Tao's compact reactors could be distributed in undeveloped areas where a regional power grid doesn't reach, or to disaster zones where the grid has collapsed.

Nuclear fusion requires hydrogen, which is accessible in seawater, and a small amount of lithium, which can be mined from deposits across the world. There are no waste products and little danger of explosion, because the moment the plasma stops being heated, the nuclear reaction stops.

NT-Tao is using a hybrid model between two existing technologies for nuclear fusion, the doughnut-shaped Tokamak, a Russian invention from 1958, and the Stellarator, which creates a twisting, circular path for plasma to circulate within a doughnut shape. The company's name derives from the equation for creating the fusion reaction, where N means density, T means temperature, and Tao is the time that the atoms are confined.

While the company doesn't expect to have a commercial product until the 2030s, Gour-Lavie, who commanded submarines in the navy, is confident it is on the right path. Shinji Aoyama, senior managing executive officer of Honda, said in February that the company has "high expectations" for NT-Tao. "Honda believes that fusion energy technology will be a breakthrough technology for affordable, stable, clean energy, and we envision this technology will become increasingly important as electrified vehicles become more popular," he said.

Other experts are intrigued, but wary of attempting to commercialize technology that doesn't exist yet. "Definitely, there's potential, and this is why governments and humanity in general are interested in this kind of energy," said Erez Gilad, a professor of reactor physics who chairs the department of nuclear engineering at Ben-Gurion University in Beersheva, Israel. "However, the way to produce energy from this kind of nuclear reaction, with fusion, is a very long way away," he said. "We have several major problems to solve before we even start thinking about the application and the engineering challenges of harnessing this kind of energy to produce electricity to the grid and to charge our electrical vehicles."

According to a survey from the Fusion Industry Association, the first fusion power plants are expected to come online between 2035 and 2050, and will require a \$7 billion supply chain. Most attempts are much larger than NT-Tao's shipping container approach. The ITER Tokamak, a \$24 billion, 35-nation experiment in southern France, has been building a 23,000-ton machine since 2010, though it has been troubled by ballooning costs and delays.

Energy is "at the heart of most of the things that you need to solve," Gour-Lavie said. "If we make this happen, we can have abundant energy with almost zero waste and it will be relatively cheap. Really, this is about energy being democratized. Nobody sits on the mine of this material. This is in the oceans. Everyone can get this material." ♦