

## THE WEEKLY PRINT

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AUGUST 2, 2023

## Delaware Congressional candidate Sarah McBride casts herself as a staunch supporter of Israel

*McBride, vying to become the first transgender lawmaker in Congress, expressed support for the Abraham Accords and for taking a tougher line against antisemitism in an interview with JI*

By Marc Rod

Delaware state Sen. Sarah McBride, a leading Democratic candidate for Delaware's only House seat, framed herself as a staunch supporter of Israel and the U.S.-Israel relationship, as well as a committed fighter against antisemitism, in a recent interview with *Jewish Insider* — a position that could place her on more solid footing with the pro-Israel community than Delaware's current House member.

McBride, a state senator since 2021 who previously worked on Democratic political campaigns and in the Obama White House with a focus on LGBTQ advocacy, is running for the at-large House seat being vacated by Rep. Lisa Blunt Rochester (D-DE), who is mounting a bid to be the state's next senator.

McBride — known on the national stage as the first openly transgender state senator in U.S. history, an ally of fellow Delawarean President Joe Biden and a 2016 Democratic National Convention speaker — established herself as an early front-runner, with a \$414,000 fundraising haul in her first month in the race. She now faces challengers in Delaware State Treasurer Colleen Davis and Delaware State Housing Authority Director Eugene Young.

Blunt Rochester has previously been supportive of legislation by Rep. Betty McCollum (D-MN) in favor of placing restrictions on U.S. aid to Israel, one of a series of policy positions that have sometimes placed Blunt Rochester at odds

with members of the state's pro-Israel community, even as they've maintained a relationship. McBride, however, told JI she wouldn't be supportive of legislation like the McCollum bill.

McBride emphasized that federal law already contains protections to ensure that U.S. aid "shouldn't be used in ways that contradict our values," and voiced "serious concerns about any policy that would single out Israel and treat it differently than other countries that we support through foreign aid" or hold it "to a different standard."

Disputes between allies, she continued, "are best handled within our existing relationship." She expressed support for the continued fulfillment of the 2016

Memorandum of Understanding for U.S. military aid to Israel.

McBride described the “special relationship” between the U.S. and Israel as “a bedrock of America’s national security and our global values” and as rooted in the U.S. and Israel’s “shared values” and “common goals of global security.”

“I believe it’s a critical relationship. It’s one that I will certainly work in Congress to continue to protect,” she continued. “And I believe that it sits right at the heart of our values as a democratic nation.”

She expressed support for a two-state solution that allows “peace and security” for both the Israelis and Palestinians and is reached through “direct bilateral talks without preconditions or foreign interference.” Any agreement, she added, “must inherently affirm Israel’s right to exist.”

McBride also expressed her support for the Abraham Accords, highlighting the bipartisan support for the agreements across multiple administrations. She said the Accords could “underpin a future two-state solution” and support regional security for Israel and other nations. Expanding the Accords to include an agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia, she continued, would be a “significant step forward.”

She said she broadly supports Biden’s foreign policy agenda, which “strikes the right balance of promoting America’s values, advancing America’s interests, and expanding peace and security around the world” — a characterization that she extended to Biden’s handling of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

To address Iran’s nuclear program, which McBride described as an “existential risk” to Israel and security throughout the region, McBride supports a new nuclear deal, ideally one without sunsets, with strong inspection requirements “and other components to ensure that it’s robust as possible.”

McBride described herself as a leader within the Delaware Senate on combating antisemitism, noting her support, working with faith leaders in the state, for legislation protecting religious pluralism. She was a lead sponsor of the Religious Freedom for All Act, which added religion as a protected class for public accommodations.

McBride added that she has partnered with Delaware House members to sponsor legislation honoring International Holocaust Remembrance Day, condemning antisemitism and marking the 75th anniversary of Israel’s founding.

“This is an issue that I am deeply passionate about,” she said. “We all have a moral responsibility to call out antisemitism whenever it rears its ugly head... In Congress, I will seek to continue to use the elected position that I have to elevate the need for all of us to speak out against antisemitism, to fight against antisemitism, [and] to pass legislation.”

McBride expressed support for the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s working definition of antisemitism, which she said she has and will continue to rely on in her work to combat antisemitism. She said she was “proud” that the State Department endorsed the IHRA definition in 2016. She added that she’s seen, through her work in LGBTQ advocacy, how antisemitism “serves as a safe harbor” for other forms of bigotry.

McBride said that legislation strengthening civil rights protections at the federal level, such as the Equality Act, would help protect religious observers by expanding the definition of public accommodations.

“Right now, the federal definition of public accommodations is fairly narrow, which means that people of faith have very limited protections at the federal level from discrimination in places that open their doors to serve the public,” she argued. “And we should be modernizing those laws to better protect people.”

Opponents have characterized the Equality Act, which focuses principally on protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, as infringing on religious liberty.

Other policy areas McBride said she would prioritize in Congress include paid family and medical leave, affordable childcare, gun safety and expanding healthcare and abortion access.

“I am running for Congress because I believe that government has to work better for workers and families, especially when hard times hit,” she said. “What I’ve seen is that for us to truly meet the needs of workers

and families across the state of Delaware, we need federal action and federal investment.”

In other interviews, McBride has rejected specific political labels or affiliations with any particular group within Congress.

If elected, McBride would be the first openly transgender member of Congress, at a time when Republicans at the state and federal levels have sought to crack down on gender-affirming care, particularly for minors.

McBride said that the election of an openly transgender member would “send an important and potentially life saving message to young trans people here in Delaware and across the nation, that the heart of our country is big enough to love them too.”

She emphasized that she’s “not running just to be the transgender member of Congress or not running just to make history,” but said that her election could “make a difference through cultural change that happens when you have an out transgender member of Congress.”

At the same time, she emphasized the importance of collaborating with colleagues across the aisle, which she said she has done successfully in the Delaware state Senate on issues from health care to anti-corruption measures. She said that, beyond hot-button issues, there are many areas where Democrats and Republicans agree, mentioning foreign policy specifically.

“I have to, as an elected official, recognize that there are going to be people who get elected to public office, who I not only vehemently disagree with, but who I disagree with on issues that are fundamental to my own dignity and humanity,” McBride said. “But in being elected to do this job — if I can find common ground with an individual who I disagree with on every other issue, but the one that’s before us — I won’t say no to collaborating. I won’t say no to finding a solution and a path forward.” ♦

# On Loop, an ancient matchmaking tradition becomes modern

*The new dating app allows users to set up their friends, touching off a wave of excitement across the Jewish community*

By Gabby Deutch

Lisa Babich has already secured her place in *Olam HaBa*, or “the world to come” — at least according to the Jewish maxim that making three successful matches brings the matchmaker a spot in heaven.

Babich, 37, is not an official *shadchanit*, or Jewish matchmaker, by profession. But as the wife of a rabbi at a large synagogue on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, she tries to set up young Jewish singles whenever she can. She’s part of a matchmaking tradition that dates back centuries, one she is helping to bring further into the modern era as an early adopter of the new dating app Loop.

Launched in May, Loop is an online dating platform that bills itself as “the set up network.” Unlike popular dating apps like Tinder or Hinge or Jswipe, where users are met with a seemingly endless series of matches given to them by an algorithm, singles on Loop can only see friends in their network, and friends of those friends. (People who are in relationships are also encouraged to join the app to help match up their single friends.)

“I always say I wish I knew more guys, or I wish I knew more girls,” Babich said. “Then suddenly I have all these profiles, and it’s really great that I can browse through my friends’ people, and then her friends’ people. You definitely meet people and you make connections.” Within weeks of launching, the app took off in the Orthodox Jewish community.

The app’s founders insist that Loop holds widespread appeal. But the three — all Jewish — say the app taps into their own ancient tradition, as well as other dating traditions from around the world. There’s no better cultural moment for Loop to land in, after millions of people tuned into the

Netflix reality shows “Indian Matchmaking” and “Jewish Matchmaking.”

“This is really about bringing Jewish wisdom to the world,” said Moriya Blumenfeld, Loop’s CEO and co-founder. “We love the idea of aunties in Indian culture and *shadchans* in Jewish culture, but a matchmaker could be a friend. It could be a peer. They could be single, they could be not single. It could be your family.”

Early users of Loop say that if it catches on, it has the possibility of being a game-changer — Loop combines the options and convenience of online dating with the trust and comfort built-in to connections made by a friend or family member.

“The algorithm is a human algorithm,” said Joey Barr, a 27-year-old in Cambridge, Mass., who is using the app both to set up friends and to find someone for himself. “There’s no lines of code pushing anyone on me.”

On the app, users are given a prompt to set up a friend. From there, they can look to their own list of single friends — or to “friends of friends,” a much longer list where the user can both see the name and photo of the single person, as well as the mutual connection.

Like other dating apps on the market, Loop shows a photo first. But the user must click through to get any other information, where the potential match has filled in an “About” section listing a short biography, as well as other personal traits such as age, job, religion and politics. Each person also fills out a “looking to meet” section.

Overall, there’s less information than one might find on other apps. That’s by design: “On Loop, the person in the middle becomes the filter,” said Loop’s president, Lian Zucker, who with her brother, Loop’s

Chief Technology Officer Adam Zucker, is a co-founder of the app.

In the nearly three months since Loop appeared on the App Store, it has been downloaded more than 13,000 times, and more than 2,000 set-ups have been made on the app, according to its founders. The company has not yet done any paid marketing, instead attributing the early growth purely to word-of-mouth.

Perhaps the biggest hurdle for a new dating app is reaching a critical mass of users so that singles on the app have access to enough potential matches to keep them interested. Loop has a long way to go before hitting that point. Within the Modern Orthodox Jewish community, where the desire to meet one’s spouse and start a family is particularly strong, Loop is already starting to reach that point.

“The Orthodox community is by and large organized around the family structure, which is very beautiful,” said David Bashevkin, director of education at NCSY, an Orthodox youth group. “The downside of that is that for people who are not in a committed relationship, people who are divorced, people who don’t have children, you can feel [that it is] more challenging to find your place within established Orthodox communities.”

Bashevkin, who is married, joined Loop in the hopes of making matches for others. “I wish I had more time and capacity to spend every morning on Loop setting up my friends. I love the idea,” he said.

Nina Sivan, 24, has lived in New York City for seven years, the last 18 months of which she has spent on the Upper West Side. For a Modern Orthodox woman hoping to find a husband, there is perhaps no better place to do so — with access to plenty of synagogues

and kosher food options, and an infinite number of Shabbat meals where one might cross paths with a future spouse. But that's not necessarily how it works in real life.

"A bigger community does not necessarily mean it's easier to meet people. Usually it means there's already set friend groups, or you show up and you know certain people so those are the people you spend time with," Sivan told *Jewish Insider*.

Sivan, who considers herself on the liberal end of Modern Orthodoxy, has used JSwipe and Hinge — both of which allow users to filter for Jewish matches — to little success. She sometimes asks married friends if they have anyone to set her up with. Often, they'll look through their Facebook friends, pointing out men Sivan might date.

"It's hard to know, are those people even single? Or, I don't know what they're up to in life, or where they live," said Sivan. She downloaded Loop a few weeks ago after a friend mentioned it to her.

"It's very helpful to know who's actually single and who's not, and then also get to see who your friends are," she explained. "And you're like, 'Oh, my good friend knows this person who looks familiar, but I wouldn't have thought to set them up.'" She went on one date from the app that was pleasant but ultimately didn't work out, and set up a friend on a date that went well.

In its early days, Loop's users are still

figuring out exactly how to use the app. There's no swiping, as opposed to other dating apps. (Tinder, which pioneered the concept, was first unveiled in 2012.) To encourage real-life meetings — and discourage the addictive swiping that keeps people on other apps — Loop does not have a messaging feature. Any match must occur over text message, because Loop's founders wanted to solve a problem they saw in other dating apps: the conversation graveyard.

"A lot of the time you get ghosted. A lot of the time, nothing happens from these conversations. It's basically become an entertainment mechanism," said Blumenfeld. "Here, there's a friend in the middle who has the best interests of both people in mind."

While that might be nice in theory, the lack of the ability to message on the app makes it hard for the matchmaker in the middle to respond to a friend's request.

"When a guy or girl will say no to me if I don't have their number outside of Loop, then [I can't] talk to them about it and try to encourage it," said Babich. She has relayed her concerns to Blumenfeld, who spoke recently at a singles lunch at Fifth Avenue Synagogue, Babich's congregation.

Outside of New York's Orthodox community, Loop is still finding its footing. Goldie Davoudgoleh, a Jewish Boston native who is not Orthodox, downloaded Loop

after learning about it from a New York-based friend.

"I haven't spent so much time or mental capacity on it, I think because it has less of a presence here," said Davoudgoleh, who is 25. "I think if it becomes more popular, maybe in my geographical community, and I see that a lot more people I know start to link or Loop with me, then I might be more inclined to look in their network and see who I can connect with."

Loop's belief in the power of networks comes with what could be a challenge for some: Users are limited by their networks and the people in their communities. Barr, who is gay, noted that many of his friends in the Boston area are straight, so his Loop network does not provide him with many options.

"A lot of the people that they know are also straight. So that's certainly one downfall I'm finding for myself right now," he explained. Barr pointed out that filtering by location is also difficult. Friends have tried on multiple occasions to set him up with men in New York, where he does not want to live.

But he and Davoudgoleh both said they plan to stay on the app, and encouraged friends to download it. It isn't just about finding a match for themselves: They want to set up their friends, too. ♦

AUGUST 1, 2023

## Meet the Israeli actress telling the story of Israel's creation – on Netflix

*After taking on the leading role in 'The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem,' Swell Ariel Or tells Jewish Insider that she's heading to Hollywood*

By Ruth Marks Eglash

Israeli actress Swell Ariel Or is only 23 years old, but as the star of a period drama airing on Netflix that for the past year

has been drawing in worldwide audiences, she now finds herself in an important role: sharing with a global audience key elements

of the backstory of Israel's founding.

"The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem," which is based on the novel by Israeli author

Sarit Yishai Levy and launched its second season on Netflix last month, follows three generations of a Sephardi family living in Jerusalem beginning in the 1930s and set against the backdrop of the struggle for modern-day Israel.

“Do you know how many messages I get from all over the world, from people who love the show, who said it was amazing, and tell me that they did not know there were Jews living in Jerusalem before the Holocaust?” Or, who plays the role of Luna, the beauty queen of Jerusalem in the Israeli-made show, told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview.

Not only are many of the show’s fans surprised to learn that Jewish communities resided in Jerusalem long before the founding of the Jewish state in 1948, Or told JI that they are also shocked to learn that most of those communities were comprised of Sephardic Jews, who emigrated to the holy land when it was still part of the Ottoman Empire.

“This community is so under-represented in films and on television. This is a huge win for Sephardic Jews,” she said.

“I really recommend that everyone watch this show, Jews and non-Jews,” Or continued. “Everyone talks about the Middle East so much and they all tell us what we need to do or not do, but not everyone knows the real history of this area.”

Carrying the burden of telling these crucial details of Israel’s history might seem like a tall order for someone so young, and someone who never had any real experience in acting before, but Or, whose personality seems to blend perfectly with the part of a headstrong and ambitious young woman who is very much ahead of her time, is unphased.

“I grew up in Tel Aviv, near the beach in a very free way,” Or said, describing her typical Israeli upbringing and explaining that her parents were “hippies” who decided to give her the unusual name of Swell, slang for a surfer’s wave.

While she did not have the classic and focused childhood of someone who dreams of becoming an actress – her father worked in construction, her mother in a kindergarten, and Or herself did not act as a child – she was drawn to the profession and decided to sign up for an acting class during

her compulsory military service. When she completed the army, the actress told JI, she took a few more courses, secured an agent and then headed out to audition. It took just a year and a half of tryouts for her to land her first-ever acting job. By chance, the role was in one of the biggest television productions ever undertaken in Israel’s ever-growing film industry.

“I always knew I was more film-orientated than theater,” said Or. “And I just got very lucky in getting that role [in ‘The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem’] as my first job.”

In preparation to play Luna, a teenager living nearly 100 years ago, Or said she meticulously undertook historical research, watching other shows and reading books to learn about life in Jerusalem in the 1930s and 1940s, as well as listening to the music of the time. She also took to journaling, filling four volumes of her own thoughts, so she could really feel what it might have been like to come of age back then.

“Of course, this is the story of a Sephardic family living in the 1930s and 1940s and of course, it’s a ‘Romeo and Juliet’ story set in the Middle East, but it is really about the establishment of Israel from the inside and that is very interesting,” noted Or.

“Luna was a character who was born ahead of her time,” she added. “She was very progressive in her opinions, her attitudes and her dreams, and I wanted to understand what it was like to be an ambitious woman in that period and to know where the glass ceiling was.”

“It was so different from today when a woman can do whatever she wants and marry whoever she wants,” said Or, describing how she really tried to understand the inner monologue of the character she’d been assigned to play.

Or said she received some expert advice and guidance, not only from the show’s production team but also from her fellow actors, “Shtisel” star Michael Aloni, who plays Luna’s father, Gabriel, in the show, and Hila Saada, known for her comic role in the Israeli series of “The Beauty and the Baker,” who plays Rosa, Luna’s mother.

“They were just like real parents to me,” Or described, adding, “It was the best acting school ever; I got to work with experienced actors who I really admired and they taught me that being an actress is so much more

than just acting – it’s about how to behave on set, how to prepare yourself between the scenes – it was an incredible lesson to me, and I am so grateful to them for being so open and sharing their own experiences with me.”

Or has already put those lessons to good use. Next month, she will appear in an episode of the Brazilian series “How to be a Carioca,” which airs on Disney + and she has also just wrapped up production on her first feature film, “Kissufim,” which follows a group of volunteers on the kibbutz of the same name. Once again, Or has the leading role.

As for her next venture, Or says she has her sights set on Hollywood.

“I want to bring an Oscar to Israel and I can’t do that through Israeli films,” said the young actress, who has already secured a U.S. work visa and will head to La La Land next month. “My only chance to do that is in L.A.” ♦

# After five years, new spokesperson set to take the helm at Israeli Embassy in Washington

*Elad Strohmayer is set to rotate back to Israel later this month, and will be replaced by Tal Naim, a diplomat and policy advisor to the past two Israeli foreign ministers*

By Marc Rod

Elad Strohmayer has been a constant at the Israeli Embassy in Washington since 2018, through three ambassadors, three prime ministers, five Israeli elections, two American administrations, four Congresses and the historic normalization of relations between Israel and some of its Arab neighbors.

But later this month, Strohmayer, the embassy's spokesperson, is set to wrap up his time in the U.S. and will move back to Israel and into a new role leading the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Congressional Affairs department.

Strohmayer described the transition as "bittersweet."

"I really liked it here, I liked my job, I liked what I did, I liked working with journalists a lot," he told *Jewish Insider*. "But the good part is that I'm going to go home after not [living] there for five years... That's something that's always difficult [as] a diplomat, being away from your friends and family back home."

Strohmayer is set to be replaced in Washington by Tal Naim, a career diplomat who has served in Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs for 10 years. Naim has served as the policy advisor to Foreign Minister Eli Cohen and former Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, and filled the roles of deputy ambassador in Costa Rica and spokesperson of the Israeli Embassy in Mexico. She will formally take over the spokesperson role on Aug. 21, arriving in Washington around a week earlier.

Strohmayer described his role over the last five years as a "roller coaster," naming the Abraham Accords and their signing ceremony at the White House as a particular highlight. He recounted feeling like he was "part of history" seeing ties building among

Emirati, Israeli and Bahraini journalists at the event, and seeing the growing connections among the three embassies following the signing of the normalization deal.

He also voiced his gratitude to the three Israeli ambassadors to the U.S., Ron Dermer, Gilad Erdan and Michael Herzog, under whom he has served, as well as his colleagues, particularly the members of his press team, over the years.

Strohmayer served as a face of the Israeli Embassy during a time of escalating criticism of Israel within the U.S. political system, and emphasized the need to keep support for Israel depoliticized and bipartisan — a task he said he will continue into his new role.

"There are voices on the fringe, that we should really make sure... stay in the fringe and [d]on't become the mainstream," he said. "There are people from both sides that want to drag Israel into the partisan debate here in America. America became very partisan and very polarized. I think that's something of a challenge for us — that we should really try and prevent Israel from becoming a partisan issue and keep Israel a bipartisan issue."

Strohmayer said that his new role will involve reaching out to and meeting with members from both parties for "honest and frank conversations," including those who have criticisms of Israel.

He emphasized the importance of a "broader tent" for dialogue — albeit with limits. "The limit should be recognizing Israel is Jewish and democratic, and the Jewish people's right [to] self-determination," he said.

Naim told *JI* she's excited to come to

Washington, as the center of global politics and Israel's "most important strategic ally." Joining her are her husband and two young children.

"I think that if you want to better understand world politics, media and international relations — Washington is the place to go. After working closely with two ministers that come from different sides of the political map in Israel and taking part in shaping Israel's foreign policy, diving into Israel-USA relations is a natural next step for me," she said. "The relationship between Israel and the USA has been and always will be strong and important. I'm proud to serve as a bridge between our two great nations and work to help strengthen our alliance."

Naim told *JI* there has been "not a dull moment" in her recent years working with Lapid and Cohen, which encompassed Lapid's participation in the Negev Forum and visit to the U.S., as well as Cohen's visits to Ukraine, Israel's new embassy in Turkmenistan and various other locales.

Asked about his recommendations for his successor, Strohmayer counseled, "love what you do," and also emphasized that "the media is not our enemy."

"Remember that even in moments of grave disagreements with journalists, we're all looking for the greater good," he said. "The media has a very important role in defending and protecting our democracy and our democratic institutions."

Outside of his core responsibilities as spokesperson, Strohmayer, who served at the embassy alongside his husband — Oren Ben-Yosef, the vice consul — has taken an active role as an advocate for the LGBTQ+ community. He led the embassy's Pride Month reception the past two years

and participated in events with U.S.-based LGBTQ+ advocacy groups.

“It’s very important as an openly gay man that we’re going to be visible. That’s something that I lacked growing up, to see more visible, openly gay people in high-rank positions,” Strohmayr said. “Especially now we’re in an era that we see that there

are voices rising against the LGBTQ+ community, and we should keep our head[s] held up high against those voices.”

In a similar capacity, Naim said she hopes to leverage her experience working in Latin America and Spanish fluency to help the embassy better connect with Spanish-language media in the U.S.

“There’s a big Latin American community in the United States and I think that if the embassy will be able to address them about our issues — not only the big political issues, but also what’s beyond the conflict — that can be something interesting and refreshing that the embassy almost never do[es] with Latin crowds,” Naim said. ♦

AUGUST 2, 2023

## Following trips to Israel, lawmakers question future of U.S. security coordination with Palestinians

*Lawmakers came away divided over how, or if, the U.S. can help stabilize the security situation in the West Bank*

By Marc Rod

Following recent trips to Israel, some lawmakers are expressing skepticism over the future of U.S. security coordination with the Palestinian Authority’s Security Forces, and are divided over how the U.S. can help stabilize the increasingly volatile security situation in the West Bank.

The U.S. has for the past two decades played a key role in coordinating security efforts between Israeli and Palestinian security forces, and has also trained Palestinian security forces. The program has historically enjoyed bipartisan support. Multiple congressional groups visited Israel last month around the time of the Israeli counterterrorism operation in the West Bank city of Jenin, which has seen a significant rise in terrorist activity in recent years as PA security forces are believed to have dwindling control of the area.

Asked whether he sees a future for U.S. cooperation with Palestinian forces, Sen. Rick Scott (R-FL), who was in Israel during Israel’s military operation in Jenin, said that he’s “always hopeful, but [Palestinian

security forces have] to do their job.”

“If [the PA] want[s] to have control over the West Bank, they’ve got to be policing, they can’t let these terrorists [operate] in there that are killing Israeli civilians,” he said. “If they’re not, Israel has no choice but to defend their security and defend their citizens.”

Rep. Doug Lamborn (R-CO), who a year ago signed onto a bipartisan letter emphasizing the importance of a U.S. security coordinator position for preserving security and stability between the Israel and the Palestinian security forces, told JI that he does not see the PA or its security forces as a real solution to terrorism in the West Bank at this point.

“Their turning a blind eye to the effects of their policies is what’s led to a lot of the radicalization,” Lamborn said of the Palestinian Authority. “They’re basically not doing anything to stop radicalization.

Rep. Jimmy Panetta (D-CA) — who traveled with Lamborn on a national security-focused trip sponsored by the American Israel Education Foundation

— said that questions over the future of security coordination came up during the delegation’s high-level meetings in Israel.

Panetta said that Israeli officials emphasized that terrorist groups have been gaining traction in the West Bank because the PA is losing “legitimacy from Palestinians” who are also frustrated both with Israel and their own economy in the West Bank.

“The message was basically, ‘We need to bolster the economy at the local level, in the West Bank, in Gaza, in order to ensure that they have their own security — their own economic and social security — so that they don’t feel this disillusionment with their own government,’ Panetta said. “That was a message that resonated with me — that there needs to continue the effort of providing the necessary resources [to the Palestinians].”

Scott, on the other hand, said that the most important step the U.S. can take to address the growing destabilization in the West Bank is to offer rhetorical support for Israel and highlight the impacts of terrorism

on Israelis.

"We can't make anybody do anything," Scott said. "All we can do is support people that are doing the right things."

Lamborn echoed that view, explaining that his current goal is to "make sure the Biden administration doesn't make mistakes when it's dealing with Israel" — giving as one example the lack of an invitation to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the White House. Last week, President Joe Biden invited Netanyahu for a meeting in the U.S., weeks after the delegation visited Israel.

The Colorado congressman, who was the lead House sponsor of the Taylor Force Act, also said that top PA officials with whom the delegation met blamed Israel for security issues in the West Bank.

"We did ask [a top PA official] about controlling terrorism. And he blames Israel for the poor condition of things," Lamborn said. "And I also asked him about the Taylor Force Act, by the way, [and] he blames Israel on that. Whatever the issue was, he blamed Israel."

During his meeting with the House delegation, Netanyahu announced that he would be visiting China and meeting with President Xi Jinping. But the lawmakers dismissed the notion that Netanyahu could be seeking to rebalance Israel's relations with the U.S. and China or otherwise hedge his bets as China seeks to make inroads into the Middle East.

"He knows that America is his ally," Scott said, arguing that the administration's posture toward Netanyahu "creates an opening for China" which "wants to upset our relationships all over the world, including with Israel."

Lamborn, who was part of the group to whom Netanyahu announced the China trip, said the group "urged them not to put too much stock in China."

"The indication to us is they don't want to rely on China. They can't afford to ignore major powers in the world. And they realized and stressed again, multiple times, that the U.S. is the closest and strongest ally, by far, of anyone out there," the Colorado congressman said. "But they presented it to us as they're just trying to be prudent in trying to work with powerful forces in the world and not slight them."

Panetta said that Netanyahu had emphasized during their meeting that any relationship with China would not supplant Israel's relationship with the U.S.

Netanyahu "stressed that he has relationships with a number of countries and... nothing beats the relationship with the United States," Panetta told JI. "Obviously, Israel has relationships with other countries. We firmly believe — the message was clear — that the United States is its number one partner."

Panetta added that President Isaac Herzog's visit to the U.S. last week underscored the dynamic between Jerusalem and Washington.

Despite tensions within the Democratic caucus over Israel that flared in the run-up to Herzog's visit, Panetta emphasized that critics of Israel comprise a "really a small faction" of Congress. He added that the visit showed both his colleagues and the world that "an overwhelming bipartisan majority... supports a strong Israel-U.S. relationship, especially when it comes to the security of Israel."

Rep. Jim Baird (R-IN), who also joined the House delegation, said he believes that Netanyahu sees China as an adversary, and said he doesn't see Netanyahu's announcement as a sign of any weakness in the U.S.-Israel relationship.

"He's an extremely savvy and intelligent individual. And so my take on that is that they say, 'Hold your friends close and hold your adversaries closer,'" Baird explained. "I would guess that he would have the ability to obtain insight and information about China's intentions... I didn't interpret that as trying to establish a relationship."

Lamborn said he did not see Israel as hedging its bets, but, "I do see the Saudis going in that direction," a potential point of concern.

Lamborn said that discussions, including with then-U.S. Ambassador to Israel Tom Nides, touched on the possibility of adding Saudi Arabia to the Abraham Accords. "They think that that's going to take a lot more pushing by the Biden administration to get them off the dime," Lamborn said.

He said, however, that Saudi Arabia's desire for domestic nuclear enrichment as part of a normalization deal is "very concerning" and "has to be treated carefully"

in light of nuclear proliferation concerns, but that other Saudi demands on security guarantees and weapons sales are worth close consideration.

Panetta described Saudi Arabia as "difficult" given the kingdom's human rights record, including the killing of Jumaal Khashoggi, and said that human rights issues will have to be addressed in normalization negotiations, in addition to Saudi Arabia's demands.

"But the fact is that you can't ignore Saudi Arabia as well being a hopeful partner when it comes to the regional security of the Middle East," Panetta continued. "There are a number of areas that need to be discussed going forward when it comes to Saudi Arabia, when it comes to the normalization of relations."

Panetta said that he also expects any agreement with Saudi Arabia to help move forward the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

"Based on what I've heard, that's something that would be important to everybody involved in this type of negotiation," he said.

Scott's trip included stops in the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. He emphasized the importance of increasing U.S. trade with the UAE and Bahrain as a way of deepening the Abraham Accords, including assessing existing trade agreements and tariffs. He also called on the administration to "talk about these relationships, how important it is, because Americans listen."

During Scott's visit, the U.S. Navy thwarted an attempt by Iranian forces to seize an oil tanker in the Strait of Hormuz. Scott emphasized that the U.S. needs to analyze how it can optimize its efforts to ward off such action and prevent Iranian oil smuggling, as well as look into whether regional allies and European allies are doing their part.

Pressed on whether he felt the U.S.' allies are not contributing enough to such efforts, Scott said, "It's something we have to look at."

"We've got China, Russia and North Korea, Iran, in particular, they want to upset the applecart. So how do we, how do we make sure we have a relationship with our allies where we all do this together?" he continued. "If we all care about these things,

then Germany, France, U.K., Japan, we all have to start stepping up — Australia — to make sure we're doing our part."

However, Scott said that the UAE's announcement that it was suspending its cooperation with U.S. and allied naval forces in the Gulf did not come up during his

meetings in the UAE.

Panetta said that Israeli officials emphasized that they would not support any potential nuclear agreement with Iran that they believe threatens Israel's security. He emphasized the need for Congressional oversight over any negotiations.

"We in Congress... have to continue to force to be at the table. If there is any sort of agreement, we should at least demand that it be brought to Congress," he said. "There needs to be more transparency, but also more oversight in our role in Congress." ♦

AUGUST 2, 2023

## Welcome to Washington's new 'school' of contemporary art

*Powerhouse art collectors Mera and Don Rubell, who revolutionized the art scene in Miami, have opened their second art museum, in Southwest Washington*

By Gabby Deutch

Growing up in the shadow of the Holocaust, Mera Rubell learned one lesson from her childhood in a Displaced Persons camp in Eastern Europe: "If you want to survive, don't get attached to objects."

So it's ironic that Rubell, now 80 years old, has come to be known for the objects she collects. To be precise: more than 7,000 works of art, objects she cherishes and displays in museums built by her and her husband, Don Rubell.

Their latest museum opened in Washington, D.C., last fall, a calming art oasis in a neighborhood better known for its proximity to political deal-making and shoulder-rubbing. In a city chock full of museums, the Rubell Museum DC brought a contemporary and fast-paced flavor to sit alongside the history and authority of the venerable institutions of the Smithsonian.

"At some point right before opening, we said, 'Wow, coming into a city with all the greatest museums on earth is extremely intimidating,'" said Mera Rubell, who comprises one-half of a famed art-collecting couple with a unique gift for identifying and nurturing young talent.

The museum, located less than a mile

south of the U.S. Capitol, includes works solely from the private collection of Mera, 80, and Don, 83. Their collection contains artwork that the couple first started acquiring more than half a century ago, when Mera was a teacher and Don was in medical school.

But before even their modest start as twentysomethings, both Don and Mera came from backgrounds that were very far from the art world they would later enter.

Don grew up in New York City, the son of a Latin teacher and a postal worker. Mera was born in Tashkent, then part of the Soviet Union, to Polish Jews fleeing the Holocaust. Her family moved to Israel before coming to America. (She and Don will be going to Israel this year to celebrate their 60th wedding anniversary — her first visit since they played tennis in the Maccabiah Games more than 30 years ago.)

Her earliest memory, she told *Jewish Insider*, is a scene that played out multiple times in her childhood: hiding under the kitchen table in a crowded home at an American Displaced Persons' camp in Europe, when people stopped by to ask if anyone had seen their missing family member. Usually, the answer was no.

"For some kids, fairy tales can be very impressionable," Rubell said. "You can only imagine hiding under the table and hearing the brutality and the loss and the pain that these people were sharing with each other over tea [in the] communal kitchen."

Don and Mera met and married when they were both in their twenties, with career paths that had nothing to do with art.

"We lived in a five-story walk-up [in New York City]," Rubell told *JI* last month. "We actually made a decision that to paint the apartment was going to be more expensive than to simply cover the holes." Within years, there was more art covering the walls than visible wall space.

That the Rubells are now two of the best-known contemporary art collectors in the world is still something of a surprise to them both.

"It was many, many years before the concept of collector fell into our head, because you have to understand that when we first bought the first piece we bought, I was earning \$100 a week — I had a \$5,300-a-year teacher's salary — and we bought the first piece for \$25," she recalled.

In the decades that followed, they supported some of the biggest names in

contemporary art, including Keith Haring, Cindy Sherman, Jeff Koons and Jean-Michel Basquiat. With an inheritance from Don's brother in 1989, the Rubells entered the commercial real estate business and began to collect even more aggressively.

"The basic truth is that you never have enough money to collect art," Rubell said. "All the artists that we have in our collection now, we could never buy them today. No way, no how."

"We never saw ourselves," she continued, "as 'big collectors.' What gave us a leg up always was our ability to connect with young gallerists and young artists." She quickly and excitedly launched into a discussion of the work of Doron Langberg, a young Israeli artist to whom she is currently drawn — just one result of her nonstop hunt for the best new art.

The Rubells opened their first museum in a converted DEA facility in Miami's Wynwood neighborhood in 1993, setting off a process that utterly transformed Wynwood into one of Miami's most popular areas and a hub of modern art. They attracted the famed Swiss art festival Art Basel to Miami Beach, its first and only outpost in the United States.

So what convinced two avant-garde art luminaries to bring their contemporary art

collection to Washington, with its reputation as a buttoned-up, status-conscious city?

In large part, it was a real estate decision. The Rubells owned a hotel across the street, and they watched the building that now houses the art museum deteriorate. It had housed the Randall School, a segregated junior high school; after it closed, the building fell apart, eventually becoming totally dilapidated. It took almost two decades from when the Rubells first conceived of the museum until they finally figured out how to acquire the building, renovate it and, eventually, create the museum. Admission is free to D.C. residents and otherwise costs \$15.

The original schoolhouse structure still stands. The main room of the 32,000-square-foot gallery is an airy, bright space, with large arched windows and brick walls and only four pieces of art — two large paintings and two massive textile works, by artists including the American painter Kehinde Wiley (who painted the flower-filled portrait of former President Barack Obama that hangs in the National Portrait Gallery) and the Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui.

These works are the centerpieces of a Marvin Gaye-inspired exhibition titled "What's Going On." (Gaye, who wrote the anthemic 1971 song of the same name,

attended the Randall School.) It is a space meant to be savored in stillness. Still, it invites conversation: Why these works? What do they have to say alone, and alongside each other?

"There's a lot of engagement because it's a very, very articulate, educated population," Rubell noted. "Washington is a highly informed population. The people that come in are just so impressive. They read, and they're politically involved."

A slow walk through the rest of the exhibits, set over three floors and a basement, reveals the bones of the old schoolhouse, with doors removed to create a seamless experience for visitors. Each old classroom is now devoted to a single artist. The artworks make use of a range of mediums — painting, textile, audio, found objects, ceramics. All of it is contemporary, that elusive term that can mean a million different things to each person.

"Whether you're a collector, or someone who goes to a museum, if you bring your consciousness to an artwork, it's amazing what you can get out of it," said Rubell. "If you're looking at contemporary art, as I said, it's like looking, like talking to a person your age, and dealing with the issues that you're confronted with either in your life or around you or people you know. It's so relevant." ♦

JULY 31, 2023

## Alsobrooks touts progressive pro-Israel credentials in her bid to succeed Sen. Cardin

*The Prince George's County executive is running against a longtime ally of Maryland's Jewish community in the Senate primary*

By Gabby Deutch

In Maryland politics, Rep. David Trone (D-MD) — a longtime donor to AIPAC whose wife and children are Jewish — is a known quantity when it comes to the state's Jewish community.

His chief competitor in the state's closely watched 2024 Senate primary, Prince George's County Executive Angela Alsobrooks, is more of a newcomer to Jewish communal issues, coming from a county

with only a small Jewish community.

In an interview with *Jewish Insider* last week, Alsobrooks, who is Black, praised the historic alliance between the Black and Jewish communities during the civil

rights movement and pledged to stand alongside the Jewish community in fighting antisemitism.

"It was communicated to me very clearly [in life] the relationship between the Black community and the Jewish community and the sort of mutual obligation we had to continue to work as allies and friends," Alsobrooks, 52, said of growing up in the 1970s.

Those shared values extend to "the friendship between the United States and Israel," Alsobrooks added. "Those are values around democracy and freedom and peace and the rule of law." She presented herself as a progressive who is also a steadfast backer of American support for Israel, echoing standard talking points from the mainstream pro-Israel community.

Alsobrooks was born and raised in Maryland, where her parents moved after her great-grandfather was murdered by a sheriff's deputy in South Carolina. The single mother stressed to JI that the issues about which she cares — "safety, economic opportunity and jobs, access to health care" — are "not only issues of concern" to the "everyday hard-working people" in Prince George's County, "but quite frankly [they] are issues that are at my own kitchen table."

The line is an oblique swipe at Trone, the co-founder of the national chain Total Wine & More and one of the wealthiest members of Congress. Trone, who was first elected to Congress in 2018, raised only \$108,000 in the second quarter of the year, opting instead to fund his own campaign with a \$10 million personal loan. Alsobrooks raised \$1.7 million in the two-month period after Sen. Ben Cardin (D-MD) announced his retirement in May. Will Jawando, a progressive Montgomery County councilmember running to the left of both Trone and Alsobrooks, brought in \$519,000 in that period. The Democratic primary will take place on May 14, 2024.

"We need senators who understand the concerns and share the concerns of the people that they represent," said Alsobrooks. She described her accomplishments as a two-term county executive and, previously, a two-term state's attorney, as a "progressive record," citing her focus on education, mental health care, affordable housing and economic justice.

"These are all issues that I believe resonate with the vast majority of families across Maryland," said Alsobrooks.

She described a relationship with the local Jewish community that began when she was a prosecutor, and then as county executive, working with rabbis "who came out to assist us and to partner with our police department as we've been doing work in and around our community around safety and working against crime," she explained.

Antisemitism in Maryland has risen dramatically, particularly in heavily Jewish Montgomery County, where several high-profile incidents at local schools, as well as a debate over a county-wide antisemitism measure, have set the Jewish community on high alert.

"It's an affront, I think, to all of us to see it happening. I can tell you that I would be a really staunch — not only advocate, but be speaking out very loudly against antisemitism, and to be honest with you, all hate," said Alsobrooks, who also pledged to "continue to work to build bridges and to provide support and to demand that people are held accountable."

In recent years, Alsobrooks has built relationships with local synagogues and turned to the leadership of Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington for guidance on Jewish issues. She traveled to Israel in 2019 on a delegation organized by the American Israel Education Foundation, a nonprofit associated with AIPAC.

"I was able to really experience firsthand and to see and to hear from so many there on the ground about the security challenges that Israel faces from day to day," she recounted. "I have been reaffirmed in the really strong and steadfast belief that I have that Israel deserves to be able to defend itself, and I would be an ally and would be a friend in maintaining the U.S.-Israel relationship."

For Alsobrooks, this means "to be in support of the funding that has been provided, to provide military assistance to Israel."

"We know that there is a very real security threat that exists in Israel," Alsobrooks said. "We know that Israel plays a very important role in ... maintaining peace for that region."

At its core, she said, America's relationship with Israel is about shared

values that she would work to strengthen.

"I'll be open to continuing to work in partnership with leaders in the Jewish community, as well as others in the Senate," she said, "to make sure that we remain an ally, and that we do our part in ensuring that democracy reigns, that freedom reigns and that human rights are protected, along with Israel." ♦

# Workers Circle resigns from Conference of Presidents; others not expected to follow

*Group criticizes conference for insufficiently condemning Israeli government and 'attacks on democracy' in the U.S.; Daroff says Workers Circle never raised its concerns*

By Judah Ari Gross

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

The Workers Circle announced it was resigning from the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations on Wednesday, citing differences of opinion over Israeli, American and Jewish communal politics.

The group's departure brings the number of member organizations in the conference to an even 50, with three more adjunct members.

"We have disagreed with the COP's reluctance to critique Israel, its equation of such critique as antisemitism, its adoption and promotion of the IHRA definition of antisemitism, and its failure to condemn the Israeli parliament's recent steps to erode democracy in Israel," wrote Workers Circle President Zeev Dagan and CEO Ann Toback in a letter addressed to Conference of Presidents CEO William Daroff and Chair Harriet Schleifer.

"We are further dismayed at the silence of COP in the face of the many attacks on democracy here in the United States," Dagan and Toback wrote. "We cannot be part of an organization that stands idly by in the face of these existential crises."

The Workers Circle's resignation did not appear to be the start of a wider exodus of progressive groups from the conference.

Other organizations that have similarly been critical of the Israeli government and of political developments in the U.S. have said that they plan on remaining in the umbrella group. This includes Americans for Peace Now, the only other member of the conference besides Workers Circle that voted against the adoption of the IHRA

definition of antisemitism.

"We feel it is valuable for us to be there and to be part of the conference, even though it's not perfect," Hadar Susskind, president and CEO of APN, told JTA.

Daroff told *eJewishPhilanthropy* that the Workers Circle had not voiced any such concerns with the Conference of Presidents prior to the resignation and have generally not been involved in the organization for several years. "It's peculiar," he said.

Toback confirmed to *eJP* that the organization had not brought up these issues with the conference or pushed for the conference to work toward its goals. She said the decision to leave was made in light of statements and activities by the conference that didn't match the Workers Circle's values. "We've seen that they're not speaking for us in a way that allows us to be active participants in their work," she said. "There's no alignment [with our positions] so it made sense for us to step away."

Daroff noted that, at the time of its resignation, the Workers Circle was \$15,000 behind on its dues to the conference. Toback told JTA that the organization would pay what it owed.

Daroff said he had "no reason to doubt" that Dagan and Toback were being genuine with their explanation for why they were leaving.

"They felt out of sync with the Conference of Presidents because they are out of sync with the mainstream community," he said. "And, if they don't feel comfortable on Main Street, I absolutely respect their desire to be elsewhere."

Toback pushed back against Daroff's claim that the Workers Circle was out of step with mainstream American Jewry. She

noted that in the latest poll by the Jewish Electorate Institute, the top ranked issue for American Jews in deciding who to vote for in the upcoming presidential election was "the future of democracy," which Toback said was one of Workers Circle's core focuses.

"They're saying that the future of democracy is critical to them," Toback said. "It's critical to us, and we want to continue to work with the national Jewish community to do just that, to strengthen and protect our democracy."

Initially started as a mutual aid society, providing supports and services such as health care, life insurance and burial assistance to its members, the Workers Circle (formerly Workmen's Circle), which today has an annual budget of more than \$3.5 million, has shifted its focus in recent years to promoting Jewish — and particularly Yiddish — culture and supporting social justice activism.

The Conference of Presidents, which advocates for the Jewish community in the U.S., Israel and elsewhere, has often found itself in the position of having to navigate and negotiate its way to common ground among the politically varied organizations that make up its membership. While the conference includes a broad swath of American Jewish life, its membership is not exhaustive. There are no explicitly Haredi organizations in the group, such as the Agudath Israel of America, nor are there any Jewish groups that identify as anti-Zionist. J Street, which identifies as pro-Israel, was rejected from the conference because of its views.

Responding to Workers Circle's resignation, Daroff stressed that the conference remains a voice for the majority

of American Jews.

“Notwithstanding divisive times, the Conference of Presidents maintains the consensus position of the American Jewish community with the support and engagement of 50 national organizations

that span the ideological, political and religious spectrum,” he said. “I commend our community for seeing the importance of convening, coordinating activities and speaking with one voice, where the consensus exists to do so.”

**Editor’s note:** This article was updated to include comments from Workers Circle CEO Ann Toback. ♦

JULY 28, 2023

## Critic of Netanyahu’s judicial overhaul makes case for Israeli constitution

*There’s only one way out of the judicial reform fight, argues Eliad Shraga, who chairs the Movement for Quality Government: a written constitution*

By Ruth Marks Eglash

As tensions peaked this week, with tens of thousands of angry citizens taking to the streets to protest the passing into law of a government bill that will effectively reduce the oversight of the Supreme Court over the government, there was one man who remained oddly optimistic: Eliad Shraga, chairman of the Movement for Quality Government in Israel.

As the head of an independent, nonpartisan movement, Shraga believes that now – in the midst of a deep constitutional crisis over Israel’s system of government – is the perfect time to reevaluate the relationship between the branches of government and push forward a core plan for a written, or at least a formal, constitution.

“There is no chance that things will be worked out unless we have this,” Shraga told *Jewish Insider*. “The demography here is very problematic and so are the external threats. If the pilots and 65% of the army reservists refuse to serve [as they are threatening to do now that this legislation was passed], it will be a catastrophe.”

Within the framework of the Movement for Quality Government in Israel, Shraga has already established the Forum for a

National Constitution, headed by former Supreme Court judges, lawyers, academics, health and military officials. He also hopes to create an assembly with between 70-120 representatives of Israeli society from all sectors, as well as several committees whose role will be to further solidify, clarify and adapt an existing constitutional draft into a document that will enjoy a broad consensus, he told *JL*.

At 64, Shraga has been at the forefront of the fight against political corruption and an advocate of better governance for some three decades. A lawyer by training, he is already well-known in the Supreme Court, submitting dozens of legal petitions a year against governmental actions he sees as bad practice or undemocratic.

On Monday, minutes after the government passed its law removing the ability of the Supreme Court to void government decisions and official appointments it deems as “unreasonable,” Shraga — along with several other civil rights groups — petitioned the same court to have that very law canceled. On Wednesday, the court responded, saying it would not hear the various petitions until September; it did not issue an injunction blocking the

law from going immediately into effect.

“We are ready. We will appear in the Supreme Court to defend Israeli democracy, and we will do everything we can to stop the coup!” said Shraga in a statement following the Supreme Court announcement.

He added: “We will continue to demonstrate and fight everywhere and on every stage until the threat is removed!”

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose coalition is pushing for further judicial reforms, said this week that over the next few months, while the Knesset is in summer recess, he would work together with members of the political opposition to find a broader consensus for any future changes.

Over the past six months, Shraga has gained national recognition as one of about a dozen of the most vocal leaders of the mass protest movement pushing back against the Netanyahu government’s plan to overhaul the judiciary. They believe such changes will weaken Israel’s democracy by stripping away a vital check on the power of the executive and legislative branches, undermining human rights and leaving minority groups vulnerable.

“People always ask me, ‘Eliad, how do

you remain so optimistic?" But I'm always optimistic because I believe that you can always make something good out of something bad, like making lemonade out of sour lemons," Shraga told JI.

"From every breakdown, something new grows, and there is a crazy breakdown happening here right now that might even end in a civil war, but there is also a crazy opportunity," added Shraga, who has spent countless Saturday nights over the past seven months addressing the tens of thousands of civilians who have taken to protesting the government.

"This is a historical opportunity, it is a historical moment," he continued. "It is a type of golden hour where after everything explodes, there is then an opportunity to make a big change."

"When there is a breakdown there is also an opportunity, so even as I am fighting to stop this change, I also see this as an opportunity," Shraga emphasized.

Shraga believes the current crisis will eventually lead to another round of national elections in Israel, which already held some five elections over a four-year period from 2019-22. The next round of voting, he said, will be focused on this very issue: the rule of law, human rights and the rules of the game.

"There needs to be rules here that can't be changed every morning, as we have seen Netanyahu do," explained Shraga. "He just wakes up every morning and changes the rules of the game. One day he wakes up and decides it's OK to have a rotational government, the next he decides it's OK to appoint a minister convicted of crimes, another day he decides the country can operate without a judicial appointments committee, and then he decides it's OK to not have a 'reasonable standards' law."

Unlike many other countries, Israel does not have a written constitution, nor does it have a long history of constitutional traditions and precedents; rather its entire legal system is based on a series of Basic Laws aimed at protecting human rights and other freedoms, especially those pertaining to minorities, but which can be easily changed with a clear majority, Shraga explained.

"It is a very complicated business in Israel," he continued. "Israeli society, like all societies, is not monolithic, it is made up

of different tribes. I think the genius of our founders was to create a melting pot taking people who came from some 70 different cultures and from all the corners of the globe and putting them in a mixer in order to design a new Israeli."

"The process has worked," Shraga said. "It succeeded in that it created a society or a conglomeration of people."

However, the lawyer said, there has been a process in recent decades that is working to destroy that so-called "melting pot." Movements such as those spurred by the ultra-Orthodox party, Shas, which champions North African or Sephardi Jewish identity, as well as the campaign for Russian immigrants to Israel waged by former Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman, head of the Yisrael Beiteinu party, in the 1990s, were all an attempt to achieve political gain, said Shraga.

Netanyahu has understood this concept of cultural identity politics since first rising to power in 1992 as the chairman of the Likud party, Shraga explained. It was around that time that Netanyahu began working with American political consultant Arthur Finkelstein. Together, the two carved out a successful political strategy, Shraga said.

"There is a method and if you look back over the last 30 years you will see it very clearly," said Shraga, listing various tactics such as generating fear among supporters, appointing outspoken advocates to keep those supporters whipped up into a frenzy, and eventually exerting control over the media. (In 2007, casino magnate Sheldon Adelson launched *Israel Hayom*, a free newspaper that Israelis called the "Bibiton," that for many years reflected and supported the policies of Netanyahu, whose nickname is Bibi.)

The events happening today, said Shraga, "are not sudden. Netanyahu has expertly taken advantage of the fact that Israel has this "weak system" of pliable laws and no written or formal constitution, he added

"[A constitution] is the only solution," explained Shraga. "Nothing temporary, no Band-Aid or protest will help make these changes, those are just temporary. What we need is a basic solution – a series of laws that will make up a formal constitution. That is the only way."

"This is our country," he concluded. "It

might be damaged, but it is all we have, so we have to keep on fighting for it." ♦

# Jewish-led initiative helps 450 Afghan girls, women get to Canada after U.S. withdrawal

*When Justin Hefter learned of the plight of Afghanistan's Hazara community, he sprang to action with his organization 30 Birds, driven by his own family's experiences in the Holocaust, he says*

By Haley Cohen

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

Soomaya Javadi's aspiration of becoming a dentist was stolen overnight when the Taliban swept back into power in August 2021 following the rapid withdrawal of American armed forces from Afghanistan. Women were swiftly prohibited from attending school, holding jobs or even going to a restaurant without a male chaperone.

Javadi, along with her parents and two younger siblings, were evacuated in October 2021 to Saskatoon, a small Canadian city where they have begun to rebuild their lives. Javadi is among more than 450 schoolgirls and women rescued by the 30 Birds Foundation, a Jewish-led effort to evacuate activists for girls education and their families, all of whom come from a progressive community in Afghanistan that taught human rights and religious freedom.

"My life turned upside down in one night, a few months before my graduation when Afghanistan fell to the Taliban and we had to leave," Javadi, 26, reflected in a Zoom conversation with *eJewishPhilanthropy*. "I am one of the 30 Birds Girls. In the neighborhood I used to live in Afghanistan, my people do not have access to drinking water and the Taliban who claim to be the government, are turning a blind eye to lines of children waiting for water."

"The Taliban will hit people on the street if they attempt to have their religious ceremonies," Javadi, whose family is Shia Muslim and Hazara, continued. "I felt threatened and I knew there was no place for me there anymore. The worst part was that the whole world was seeing us, and

ignoring us, other than 30 Birds."

The Javadi family's former community, rooted in an impoverished slum of West Kabul, is inhabited by a persecuted ethnic Persian minority: the Hazaras. Seeing comparisons to his own family's experiences, Justin Hefter, the co-founder and executive director of the 30 Birds Foundation, jumped to help.

"The Hazaras have faced genocide and slavery, and share many similarities with my Jewish ancestors," Hefter, 34, told *eJP*. "Some of the girls in this school even studied the Holocaust, and so when they learned that Jews were helping, they didn't bat an eye."

30 Birds has raised more than \$4 million — at least a quarter of which has come from the Jewish community.

Hefter's interest in refugees and the Middle East precedes the 2021 Afghan crisis, but he didn't originally set out to lead rescues. "While an undergraduate student at Stanford, I did a lot of interfaith work with Muslims and saw people with different backgrounds who had every reason to mistrust building incredible relationships," he told *eJP*.

The first company Hefter started was in 2014 while participating in an entrepreneurship fellowship in Israel. "It was a way for Israelis and Palestinians to use video games to connect across conflict zones," he recalled.

A year later, Hefter got involved in helping with the civil war in Yemen. "At first I was like, 'How the hell do you help people in Yemen?' But I had been connected with an interfaith activist [from the video game company], who it turned out had his life in danger in Yemen. So I didn't know what I

was doing but connection to connection we managed to help Mohammed [al-Samawi] escape on a fishing boat in coordination with the Indian navy and U.S. government."

Mohammed ultimately wrote a book about the experience, which is set to be turned into a film directed by Steven Spielberg. "So the story got out and from time to time I would be contacted with people saying, 'You helped Mohammed in Yemen, now this guy in Sudan needs help, now this guy in Iran needs help,'" Hefter continued. "I would help on different cases. So when Afghanistan was falling to the Taliban, I got involved with the effort to help a group of extraordinary schoolgirls who are outspoken and brilliant," he said, noting that more than 50 of the girls rescued by 30 Birds left Afghanistan for Canada without any family members.

"The girls were the ones making decisions on the ground of where to go, where to bring their families, what to say to the Taliban at checkpoints," Hefter told *eJP*. "We did this as a partnership, which makes 30 Birds unique. It's a collaborative relationship with the young women."

"This is not the story of a group who saved Afghan girls," Hefter continued, "it's how an extraordinary group of people collaborated with Afghan girls to establish a miracle. I don't think of it as myself saving them. We helped them escape but they helped themselves to escape, too."

The 30 Birds name comes from a Persian poem that tells the story of 30 birds on a journey to find enlightenment through a phoenix only to learn that there is no phoenix, they are the only ones who can save their community.

Several prominent Jewish leaders,

including Irwin Cotler, Canada's special envoy on antisemitism and former attorney general; David Cohen, the U.S. ambassador to Canada and Bruce Heyman, a former U.S. ambassador to Canada, have contributed to the effort as well.

Heyman told eJP that "there are sometimes circumstances where an individual can literally lend help to a lot of people in real need and on occasion these opportunities come out of the blue and such an opportunity presented itself during the final days of the US presence in Afghanistan."

"The whole world was watching as many people were trying to flee the anticipated repression to come," he added. "I heard specifically about the effort that 30 Birds was doing and Justin Hefter in particular and in a conversation with Justin I asked, 'What can I do?' and Justin very specifically said, 'Here's what you can do: As a former U.S. ambassador to Canada can you contact people who are or formally were in the U.S. government or the Canadian government or in business or otherwise who might be helpful? We are open to anything because we're in a jam, in a tight window with young girls who were being educated and who are fleeing for their life and seeking freedom.'"

Heyman began to reach out to his contacts in Canada, sending texts and emails to individuals he thought might be able to help.

"I am not a lobbyist, I no longer work in government, I have no personal gain here," Heyman said. "The only goal was to have an outcome that gave these girls a new life and opportunity to have freedom. I thought about the many years in my life I sat at Passover Seder and talked about how we also fled tyranny and the many times we remember our history and our story. I am so happy to have played a very small part in helping Justin and 30 Birds achieve such success. It was my small contribution to *tikkun olam*."

Javadi said that 30 Birds gave her family "a second chance at life."

"We were searching for a way out of Afghanistan and it was impossible because of checkpoints," she told eJP, adding that her family felt urgency to leave because her father worked as a journalist, which, coupled with the family's religious beliefs, put them

in extreme danger. With 30 Birds help, the family descended on the 10-hour journey from Kabul to northern Afghanistan, where they stayed in what Javadi described as "bad conditions" for two weeks.

"But the flight never took off. We had to go back. We were in the middle of nowhere, walking among the mountains for hours, surrounded by the Taliban with their guns and I had a huge hijab on me covering my entire body in the hot summer. It was humiliating. It was against my beliefs, I was a free woman, I was a dentistry student with my own life. And then they came and said, 'No, you're not human anymore.'"

Javadi, who had never met a Jew prior to becoming involved with 30 Birds, said it was easy to connect with Jewish people because they have faced persecution and genocide like the Hazaras. "It makes us similar," she told eJP. "30 Birds brought me to a synagogue in London," she reflected. "But even before that I already knew we had a similar history. I actually wondered if Jewish people knew that. Then I met Justin and was amazed that he knew how similar we are, he had read articles about it and it really amazed me."

"Jews were oppressed and now you see many of them having the greatest influences in society," Javadi continued. While she didn't learn about the Holocaust at school, Javadi said she read about it on her own time while growing up in Afghanistan. "What the 30 Birds did, in some ways, reminds me of the *kindertransport*," she said, referring to the rescue effort of Jewish children from Nazi-controlled territory to Great Britain that took place in 1938-39 prior to the outbreak of World War II.

She referenced a well-known verse from the Talmud (Sanhedrin 37a): "Anyone who sustains one soul from the Jewish people, the verse ascribes him credit as if he sustained an entire world." (This is often universalized as: "If you save one life, it is as if you have saved an entire world.")

"30 Birds saved 450 girls, they saved 450 worlds in a world where the international community is ignoring us," she said.

Javadi's dental school credits could not be transferred to Canada, so she started over at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, now in her second year. She lives with her family and holds a part-time job

working with refugee children, noting that she relates to their trauma.

Javadi said Canada feels like home for her family, so much so that her parents welcomed a fourth child eight months ago.

"We are free and safe here. Most of the 30 Bird Girls are in Saskatoon so we have many community gatherings," she said. "I wish my relatives and friends back home, and people I don't know in Afghanistan, can have this as well. We're free now to sing and dance and study and do whatever we choose, instead of what the Taliban wants us to do."

Nila Ibrahim, 16, is another so-called "30 Bird Girl."

The foundation evacuated Ibrahim, along with her mother, three siblings and brother-in-law, to Saskatoon.

Ibrahim was a member of a music group called Sounds of Afghanistan. All of the group's members were brought to Canada immediately after Afghanistan fell to the Taliban. But due to financial problems, Ibrahim and her family were forced to wait in Pakistan for nearly nine months.

The family was among 200 of the 30 Birds group stuck in Pakistan when no country would take them, Hefter recalled. He added that the foundation teamed up with the Jewish Immigrant Aid Services of Toronto to get them to Canada under a special program called private sponsorship, where it raised enough money to support each family for a full year in Canada while they applied for visas (approximately \$18,000 USD per person).

"Before we got out of Afghanistan, my family members were not sure when they left in the morning if they would return in the evening. They've witnessed explosions. It was chaotic and awful. It's hard to explain, my words seem meaningless," Ibrahim told eJP.

She said the opportunities 30 Birds has provided have been life changing, notably the chance to speak at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva. The foundation also gave her exposure to religions she never knew about.

"I started doing research on Judaism because of my relationship with 30 Birds and I liked hearing Justin's background and how it made him want to help people going through the same thing."

"I would say it's a pretty good life in

Saskatoon. We go to school and don't have to worry about our safety," Ibrahim said. A rising high-school junior, Ibrahim has time to join the choir, play sports and worry about what her North American peers also commonly stress about: college acceptance.

Although she received a scholarship to the University of Chicago, Ibrahim said she doesn't want to leave Canada. "We're deciding to move to Vancouver, where I got a scholarship to a private school so hopefully that will be good."

"I really enjoy this freedom," she said. "Afghan girls are fading from the headlines of the news, but real people who care about human rights stick around." ♦