

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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AUGUST 11, 2023

A new era for the Washington Commanders

Josh Harris, Mitchell Rales and Mark Ein inked the \$6.05 billion deal for the team earlier this summer

By Frederic J. Frommer

Cities and their pro sports franchises are braided together in complex, often emotional ways. Think of the Cubs faithful at Wrigley Field in Chicago suffering through more than 100 summers of their discontent before finally celebrating a World Series championship in 2016. Or the Packers cheeseheads braving zero-degree weather at Lambeau Field in Green Bay, Wis.

The special bond between city and team, however, can unravel as a result of questionable management, the love

affair faded, as it has for the Washington Commanders. But the new ownership team — Josh Harris and his fellow Jewish investors Mitchell Rales and venture capitalist Mark Ein — can remember the franchise's glory days of Sonny Jurgensen's long bombs and John Riggins' bruising runs. And the three — diehard fans of the burgundy and gold — are determined to bring back those winning seasons, and thereby transform a D.C. sorely in need of something to rally around.

"Sports teams are a means to unite communities and make an impact," Harris said in a statement to *Jewish Insider*. "That's a value all of us in the Commanders ownership group share. We are excited to build a winning culture, and for the potential of this team to unite and rally fans to help make a positive impact in Washington and throughout the region."

Harris, who grew up in Chevy Chase, Md., is already co-owner of the NBA's Philadelphia 76ers and the NHL's New

Jersey Devils. Last month, his group, which includes fellow Jewish investors Mitchell Rales and venture capitalist Mark Ein, closed on the \$6.05 billion purchase of Washington's troubled football team. That sale price set a record for an American sports franchise.

"NFL teams come up once in a generation," Harris told *Sports Illustrated*. "So it really got real for me when the process was announced. I'm a man of faith, I'm Jewish and I would call this *bashert*" – the Yiddish word for destined. "The fact that I was able to end up owning, being part of and stewarding for this city, my hometown franchise, in the NFL, is something I never could've imagined in my wildest dreams. I'm humbled. It's like I'm on some greater mission that I don't understand."

Harris and Ein, lifelong friends, grew up a few blocks away from each other as kids and were kindergarten classmates. They both attended the University of Pennsylvania and later Harvard Business School.

According to the *Washington Post*, when Harris announced he was stepping down from his private equity firm, Apollo Global Management, he wanted to do more in sports and to expand his family's charitable foundation, Harris Philanthropies. That led to Harris and Ein meeting with Rales, who grew up in Bethesda, Md.

Philanthropic work

One of Harris' philanthropic initiatives is a partnership with the Israeli charity *Sha'ar Shvion* – which translates to "tying goal" but is known in English as The Equalizer. Harris had approached the group's founder, Liran Gerassi, to ask for help in organizing basketball teams for Israeli underprivileged youth. That led to a program that combines STEM education with hoops, called the 48ers – a reference to the founding year of Israel that plays on the 76ers name. It was established as part of a bar mitzvah project for Josh Harris' son Stuart. Harris and his wife Marjorie Harris are longtime supporters of Israel.

"We believe deeply in the power of sports in transforming lives, and it is rewarding and humbling to see the positive impact that the 48ers has had on youth in Israel, particularly those in underserved communities," Harris

told *The Times of Israel* last year. "From Philadelphia to Israel, we're excited to be part of this campaign that provides children with resources and support to help them thrive."

The 48ers started out with a mission to integrate Ethiopian-Israeli youth in the neighborhood of Talpiot, but has expanded to 25 teams across the country. Following the 2021 ethnic clashes in cities with mixed Arab and Jewish populations, The Equalizer started working to reduce tensions between these communities. Since 2015, Josh and Marjorie Harris have given more than \$1 million to the 48er project, Josh Harris said.

"We decided we wanted to do something to help the Ethiopian community in Jerusalem and the whole country, and we thought using the power of basketball would be a great tool and a great avenue," Marjorie Harris told *eJewishPhilanthropy* before a 48ers girls basketball tournament in Jerusalem this year, which Israeli First Lady Michal Herzog also attended.

"I have no doubt that thanks to this wonderful initiative," Herzog said in a statement at the time, "hundreds, if not thousands, more girls in Israel will get to take part in sports, which are also educational and empowering, and this is wonderful news for the State of Israel, in general, and for its girls and women, in particular."

In the United States, Harris Philanthropies supports medical research and technology integrations aimed at wellness and disease prevention, and helps afterschool sports programs in Philadelphia, New Jersey and New York. Josh and Marjorie Harris have also supported UJA-Federation of New York and AIPAC.

Marjorie Harris told *eJewishPhilanthropy* that when the couple purchased the 76ers, "we realized very quickly that it wasn't just owning a basketball team. It was about making sure that you were giving back to the community, and that people really enjoyed and got behind their team. And so it became, in our minds, a responsibility, because it's a community asset."

Rales, meanwhile, told the *Washington Post* in 2018 that he was in the "capital reallocation business," adding, "What I mean by that is we're not leaving the Earth with any money. When we go, there's not going to be money bestowed on children

and grandchildren in any meaningful way. This is about reallocating the money we had the good fortune of making to other causes."

This year, Rales donated \$1.9 billion in art to the Glenstone Museum, the private art museum in Potomac, Md., that he co-founded with his wife, art historian Emily Wei Rales, where admission is free. Mitchell Rales, who was captain of the football and baseball teams at Bethesda's Walt Whitman High School, is president of the National Gallery of Art's board of trustees. Mitchell and Emily Wei Rales donated the blue rooster, Katharina Fritsch's "Hahn / Cock" sculpture, to the museum in 2021. And in 2013, the Rales family donated \$2.4 million to establish the Center for Families and Children at the Ruth & Norman Rales Jewish Family Services in South Florida, named for Rales' parents.

Both Harris and Rales are on the *Forbes* list of "real-time billionaires."

Ein serves on several charitable boards. He is the chairman of the DC Public Education Fund, which has raised \$200 million of philanthropic support for D.C. Public Schools; and is a member of the DC College Access Program.

Ein, executive chairman of Kastle Systems and founder and owner of the Washington Kastles tennis team, purchased the Washington alternative weekly newspaper *City Paper* in 2018, telling *Axios* at the time, "I truly believe journalism is saving the world."

Local roots

At an introductory news conference after the Commanders sale went through, Harris vowed, "We will work tirelessly to make you proud once again of this franchise like my family was when I grew up here. This is not going to be easy. My job is to deliver an organization that can win. It's on me, and it's on us up here."

Later, he appeared at a rally at FedEx Field and referenced Washington's glory days when he was a kid growing up.

"The Washington Redskins – not the Dallas Cowboys, the Washington Redskins – were the No. 1 franchise," he told some 5,000 fans. "We need to get back to those days!"

On the stage behind him were Rales, Ein, investor Magic Johnson and the team's head

coach, Ron Rivera.

"It might take a little time, but, like, look at who we have up onstage," he *kvelled*.

The day before, following the NFL owners' vote unanimously approving the sale, Harris said he was "humbled" by the challenge of bringing a championship back to the city.

"I've had many sleepless nights, and I will have many sleepless nights," he said. "I'm going to sweat this. I feel an awesome responsibility to the city of Washington. I know what I've got to give."

Harris and Rales reminisced about their childhood experiences as Redskins fans with *The Post*.

"I remember literally going up and gazing up at Jack Kent Cooke [Stadium, now FedEx Field] and being like, 'This is unbelievable,'" Harris said. "So, yeah, I was a legit real fan and lived through all those experiences and all those years ... It's part of my DNA. It's part

of who I am."

"My dad dropped my three brothers and myself off at Friendship Heights bus station in Chevy Chase, and I started going to every game when I was 10 or 11 years old and never missed," said Rales, who started the region's first sports-talk radio station, WTEM, in 1992, with his older brother Steven. "I grew up with Sonny Jurgensen as my hero," he said, referencing the Hall of Fame Redskins quarterback.

The Commanders' former disgraced owner, Dan Snyder, was also a childhood fan of the team, but the franchise failed to thrive during his nearly quarter-century as owner, making the playoffs just six times, and winning only two playoff games. Washington went 166-226-2 during the Snyder era, and attendance has plummeted in recent years. The team was last in NFL attendance in 2022.

"From decades of poor performance on

the field to the long-running controversy over the team's former nickname — not to mention an inability to secure a new stadium — Snyder was largely seen across the league as a man running a once-proud cornerstone franchise into the ground," wrote senior Yahoo Sports NFL reporter Charles Robinson.

As if to drive home the contrast with Snyder, Harris bought free beers for fans at the Bullpen outside Nats Park, where fans were already celebrating the change in ownership.

Frederic J. Frommer, a writer and sports and politics historian, is the author of several books, including You Gotta Have Heart: Washington Baseball from Walter Johnson to the 2019 World Series Champion Nationals. ♦

AUGUST 16, 2023

American immigrants spice up Tel Aviv's food scene with family-run cooking studio

Sisters Aliya Fastman and Shaendl Davis teach Israeli and other cuisines via English-language workshops and courses in their Florentine studio

By Tamara Zieve

Growing up in Berkeley, Calif., sisters Aliya Fastman and Shaendl Davis would set up a makeshift restaurant for their parents, present them with menus, take their orders and serve them meals that they had cooked together.

Now that the duo is all grown up and living in central Israel, they're doing much the same, except this time the two are teaching others how to do it in a cooking studio they run together under the name Citrus and Salt.

While Davis, 32, attended Jerusalem's Culinary Institute and developed her career in the kitchen at various restaurants, including Bucci's in California and Cafe Xoho in Tel Aviv, she describes Fastman —

three years her senior — as the one who is a "natural-born cook."

"I grew up in the Bay Area, which is quite the culinary scene, international really," Fastman told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview. "So I grew up having Pakistani food, or Chinese food or Taiwanese. And it was just normal to me that there were so many flavors available."

Fastman's familiarity in the kitchen began at an early age. "My parents are rabbis and they would teach bar mitzvah students after school. So we would be home and we would need something to eat, so I would cook for my sister and I," Fastman said. Her grandmother would make "classic Ashkenazi dishes," such as matzo ball soup,

kreplach and brisket. Intrigued, Fastman began experimenting with recipes.

"It comes very easily to her, she's very creative — it's just always been her thing," Davis said of her sister. "So she started cooking very young and then kind of got me involved. And then now with the workshops, it was kind of a similar thing. It was something that she had started...and then eventually got me involved as well."

The venture started as a side project for Fastman, who studied political science and up until recently was working in public relations. In 2016, she began teaching Israeli cooking in English during the evenings and weekends, mostly for tourists, out of her kitchen in Givatayim — inspired by her own

love for learning the food of other cultures. “When I travel, I love to learn the cuisine of the locals,” she told JI. “And the more local it is, the better — like the floor of a woman’s house in India, people who do it because they love it, not just because it’s a day job.”

As the business evolved, growing from a couple of classes a month to four or five a week and attracting big companies such as Wix and Monday for employee fun days, as well as diplomats from the British embassy, it expanded to include other cuisines as well.

Fastman decided to “go all in” a year and a half ago — with a push of encouragement from her sister — after seeing that business was thriving, despite almost throwing in the towel due to the COVID pandemic when they turned to online classes. “But people kept writing, so we kept teaching,” Fastman said. The duo expanded their target audience to locals as well, having learned from the pandemic that they couldn’t rely solely on tourism.

The sisters rented a neglected space in Tel Aviv’s funky Florentine neighborhood and put in flooring, water, gas and colorful fresh paint to transform it into a bright and cheerful cooking studio, decorated with plants and wall hangings. They opened their doors a year ago and in the first months ran an average of four classes a month — demand fluctuates according to the season — and last month they reached their peak, holding 10 classes per week.

At a recent workshop one Friday afternoon, the group consisted of a brother and sister visiting from Germany, an *oleh* from Azerbaijan, a group of American *olim* and a native Israeli — including two couples — and another American woman who was on vacation in Israel.

Fastman was running the workshop that day — she and Davis split the duties 50/50 — and created a laid-back, fun and social atmosphere with her lighthearted approach and friendly chit-chat.

A jug of red iced tea awaited participants coming in from the hot and humid streets of Tel Aviv, and Fastman initiated a round of introductions before she led the group in preparing the dishes together, guiding the students in how to cut the perfect carrot matchsticks and advising on where one could buy the best curry paste (though she could also teach them how to make their

own).

The menu that day was meatless, as per a request by a returning student who sought to reduce her husband’s meat consumption. The class cooked up Thai Tom Yum soup, mushroom pesto wraps, *japchae* (a Korean noodle dish) and vegan Buddha bowls.

At the end of the workshop, participants enjoyed the meal they had prepared together over a bottle of wine.

Yannick Schulze, who was visiting Israel from the Stuttgart area in Germany, joined the workshop with his sister, who often seeks out cooking classes while traveling. “We love to learn different cooking styles all over the world,” Schulze told JI. “I loved it because it was a small and friendly group and Aliya explained all the steps in a way that was easy to repeat. So far I have made the caramelized carrots and the tasty red coleslaw at home,” he noted, once back home in Germany.

Kat Lacey, an *olah* from Ohio now living in Jerusalem, remarked that Fastman “took the stress and perfectionism out of cooking and made it really easy and fun.” She took the class, she said, to get more comfortable in the kitchen.

Citrus and Salt offers both individual three-hour workshops and seven-week courses aimed at boosting participants’ confidence in their cooking abilities and teaching them how to make healthier meals.

“I want you to feel like you are capable and that it’s OK to make mistakes and that it can be fun. More so, it’s not just about the food in the classes, it’s really about the community building,” Fastman said.

The school draws people from all over the world. A class Fastman taught lately included students from Sudan, Argentina, Spain, France, the United States and Canada.

“When you go into a class like that, you’re spending a significant amount of time with them,” Fastman continued. “So you know, being able to facilitate conversation, people just share their backgrounds, and oftentimes people will exchange numbers or leave their little group to go talk to the other group that’s come, or invite people over like, ‘Oh, when you come to New York, come to Shabbat.’ And that’s significant because it’s just this point of connection in a very chaotic city. I think it’s special. So that’s something that we really look towards. Obviously, tourists

come and it’s a tourist experience. But we really prefer to think of it as an authentic homey experience.”

Fastman dreams of building bridges further, leaning on her master’s degree in conflict resolution and mediation to run coexistence cooking classes between different populations in Israeli society. “Because when you do an activity with somebody that’s supposed to be your enemy, and you realize they also like to fry onions, it makes you a little bit warmer and softer,” she said. “And I think we’re a perfect place to do that. And I have the education for it. So that’s kind of on our future road map.” ♦

For Ilhan Omar, not all foreign influence spending is bad

New financial disclosure reveals Qatar paid for the outspoken Minnesota congresswoman's trip to watch the World Cup

By Matthew Kassel

During her time in Congress, Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN) has frequently voiced concern over the influence of foreign interests on American politics — most controversially with regard to the pro-Israel community in the U.S.

But when she visited Qatar last November to watch the World Cup, it was unclear who had paid for the trip, which the progressive lawmaker neglected to clarify. Her office did not answer questions from *The New York Times* in December about the funding source after she had returned.

It turns out that the trip was funded by the Qatari government, according to an annual House financial disclosure filed in May. The new statement, which has not previously been reported, shows Qatar paid for the four-day visit to Doha that overlapped with the U.S. men's team's opening match against Wales. Both "food" and "lodging" were covered by the Gulf nation, the disclosure indicates.

The Qatari Embassy in Washington, D.C., confirmed it had paid for Omar's visit to the Gulf kingdom last year. The congresswoman "accepted an invitation from the Embassy of Qatar to attend events in Doha in November 2022," a spokesperson told *Jewish Insider* last week, "as part of a program authorized under the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act," or MECEA, which allows House members to take trips funded by foreign governments provided that the travel is later disclosed in their annual financial statements.

The embassy did not share an exact figure for the cost of the trip, which was not listed in Omar's financial report.

Omar was not alone among congressional lawmakers who quietly accepted funding from Qatar to attend the

World Cup last year, recent disclosures show. That shouldn't come as a surprise, according to Jonathan Schanzer, senior vice president for research at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, which has been critical of Qatar. "We see a huge amount of Qatari influence in the halls of Congress on a regular basis," he said in an interview with *JI*. "I don't think that Ilhan Omar is unique in that sense."

Still, Schanzer suggested that Omar's visit stands out in particular because of her outspoken criticism of the pro-Israel lobby and its involvement in American politics — underscoring what he characterized as a kind of "selective outrage."

"Perhaps her most famous quip is that support for Israel is 'all about the Benjamins,'" Schanzer said, referring to comments Omar made as a freshman that were condemned as antisemitic and for which she later apologized. "If there is a lobby right now that is truly 'all about the Benjamins,' it is the lobby that is spending tens of millions of dollars per year in order to acquire influence in the capital of the United States," he said of Qatar, which has drawn condemnation for its treatment of migrant workers and ban on homosexuality, among other matters. "She does not seem to be bothered by that."

In a statement to *JI*, Jeremy Slevin, a spokesperson for Omar, defended the congresswoman's decision to accept the junket to Doha. "Rep. Omar attended the World Cup on a delegation with several elected officials, including Democrats and Republicans," Slevin said. "As a lifelong soccer fan, she was proud to support Team USA. She remains committed to upholding human rights and the rule of law around the world, including FIFA's mistreatment

of migrant workers, and she shared these concerns during her trip."

Two months before the visit, Omar was among a group of House Democrats who signed on to a letter expressing "dismay regarding FIFA's inaction and heel-dragging on human rights abuses in Qatar" — and requesting a "written response" concerning FIFA's "commitment to concrete steps for migrant worker compensation and empowerment."

But the Minneapolis lawmaker has been comparatively muted when it comes to raising concerns about Qatar itself, which has been criticized for boosting the Muslim Brotherhood and funding Hamas. On the other hand, she has frequently condemned human rights abuses not only in Israel but in other Gulf nations including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which were among a group of Arab countries that imposed a three-year blockade of Qatar beginning in 2017.

Omar does not appear to have spoken publicly about the Qatar trip until after it had ended. "It was such a delight to root for #TeamUSA at the World Cup in Qatar and today we are excited to root for them here at home," she wrote on Twitter in late November, posting a photo with David Beckham. "It was fun watching a World Cup game with him."

"You can call for accountability, you can ask for justice, but you can also just enjoy the beauty of the game," Omar explained to *Business Insider* shortly after she returned from Qatar, emphasizing that "there are no perfect countries that have a perfect record."

In addition to Omar, the Qatari government also paid for Reps. Eric Swalwell (D-CA), André Carson (D-IN), Claudia Tenney (R-NY), Darin LaHood (R-IL) and

Bryan Steil (R-WI) to visit Doha during the World Cup, according to financial statements reviewed by JI. With the exception of Carson — who as a congressman has traveled to Doha on multiple trips sponsored by the Gulf monarchy — the lawmakers' offices did not respond to requests for comment from JI.

"Congressman Carson has traveled as a member of Congress to strategic locations, including those of our allies and security partners, with some trips sponsored by the United States or other governments," Caroline Ellert, a spokesperson for Carson, said in a statement to JI on Tuesday. "As a champion of human rights, he has consistently addressed violations of human and civil rights and will continue to do so. As a member of the House Intelligence Committee, Rep. Carson typically does not publicize details of such trips or discussions during overseas trips."

At least two other House members — Reps. David Valadao (R-CA) and Lou Correa (D-CA) — accepted invitations to attend the World Cup in Doha but failed to disclose the travel on their financial statements, their offices confirmed to JI on Tuesday.

"Rep. Valadao was in Doha on this trip," said a spokesperson for the congressman. "There was a mistake in his financial disclosures, which we are now working to amend."

A spokesperson for Correa attributed the omission to an "inadvertent oversight" and said the "trip was mistakenly not added" to his annual financial statement. "As such, the congressman has amended his financial disclosure to include this trip."

The Qatari Embassy did not respond to requests for comment on its outreach to other House members, nor would it share a full list of lawmakers who accepted funding to attend the World Cup last year.

Sens. Todd Young (R-IN) and Chris Murphy (D-CT) were in Doha during the tournament, but their trips were funded by the U.S. government.

"The lack of super robust disclosure pre- and post-trip makes it harder to know the purpose of the trip and all the things you would get from privately sponsored travel," Delaney Marsco, senior counsel for ethics at the Campaign Legal Center, a nonprofit government watchdog, said in an interview with JI last week. "That's not ideal from a transparency perspective."

Months before the World Cup, Omar, for her part, also traveled to Pakistan, where she made a controversial visit to a disputed part of Kashmir that drew criticism from India. The six-day trip, which took place in April 2022, was funded by Pakistan's government, according to her financial disclosure. ♦

AUGUST 15, 2023

Jason Blazakis joins crowded N.J. congressional primary to take on Tom Kean Jr.

JI talks to Blazakis about why he's running to represent the 7th District

By Haley Cohen

Former State Department official Jason Blazakis is entering the Democratic primary for the House seat representing New Jersey's 7th Congressional District, held by Rep. Tom Kean Jr. (R-NJ).

Blazakis, 48, was director of counterterrorism finance at the State Department for a decade, and previously worked on the Hill for Rep. Jim Saxton (R-NJ) and for the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service.

The New Jersey native, a Middlebury College professor, geopolitical consultant and security adviser, follows progressive activist Sue Altman and Roselle Mayor Joe Signorello III in entering the race.

In May 2022, Blazakis wrote a co-bylined

Washington Post op-ed in favor of reentering the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, dismissing the Trump administration's designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organization as "a stupendously unserious move... a sanction that brought no discernible pressure on the group or Iran more broadly." He said the Biden administration should be open to removing the designation as part of nuclear talks.

Democrats view the seat as one of the party's top political targets in the effort to win back control of the House. President Joe Biden carried the suburban northern New Jersey district. Kean won the seat by three points in 2022, after falling short against Rep. Tom Malinowski in 2020. The *Cook Political Report* lists the district as a "Toss

Up."

Hours ahead of his campaign launch, Blazakis talked to *Jewish Insider* about why he's running to represent the 7th District.

Haley Cohen: *Why did you decide to run for this seat?*

Jason Blazakis: I grew up right here in Harmony Township, went to public school my whole life, and had my first job picking peaches on an orchard, which helped pay for my college education. Public service is in the roots of my family. My father served in the military, my grandfather fought in the Second World War, and I have spent my career as a national security official, fighting for democracy and counterterrorism around

the world. I worked on keeping us safe from terrorism, fighting corruption and the illegal drug trade overseas. Working both at home and abroad, I've made some enemies, like Vladimir Putin in Russia, resulting in me being sanctioned by the Russian regime. I've seen the threats anti-democratic regimes pose to fragile democracies around the world, and I worry about similar anti-Democratic MAGA extremists here at home, and those in Congress who enable them.

HC: Some House Democrats have distanced themselves from Israel. Which wing of the Democratic party do you more identify with when it comes to your position on Israel?

JB: I've dedicated my career to fighting the global spread of antisemitism and other forms of extremism and mis- and disinformation. I am proud to call myself a steadfast ally of the State of Israel and in Congress, I will remain a strong and unwavering ally of Israel.

While serving as director of the Office of Counterterrorism and Terrorism Finance at the U.S. Department of State, I was responsible for sanctioning anti-Israel, anti-Jewish terror groups and am proud to have led this fight.

HC: Should President Biden invite

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to visit the White House?

JB: I'm glad the Biden administration has made an invitation [to meet with Netanyahu in the U.S.], and this important meeting should happen this year. This meeting will be in keeping with the strong bilateral relationship that the United States has with the government of Israel.

HC: Based on your career history at the State Department and in counterterrorism, what legislation would you pursue on Capitol Hill?

JB: Working in a bipartisan manner across all branches of government is critical to mitigating the threats posed by terrorist groups, both to the United States and Israel. These threats continue to persist and in Congress I'll work on legislation that will utilize our existing tools like sanctioning these terrorist groups. In addition, I'll work on enhancing information-sharing at a bilateral level between the U.S. and Israel, which works to counter current terrorism threats.

HC: New Jersey used to be referred to as "America's medicine chest" with most of the large pharmaceutical companies headquartered in this state. If elected

would you support efforts to impose more price controls on new drugs in the face of strong opposition from the major drug companies?

JB: Here in Jersey, insurance and prescription drugs are way too expensive for a lot of people.

We must do more to keep costs down and expand access to affordable care. I don't support hyper-expensive proposals that would take away employer-sponsored health insurance and hurt Jersey. People deserve affordable, high-quality choices in the health insurance market, and that's what I'd work to deliver in Congress.

HC: What legislation would you champion to improve the state's economy?

JB: We must reinstate SALT [state and local tax] immediately, so we can build amore affordable community where working families can thrive. Trump is the reason we lost SALT deductions here in Jersey. Trump and his enablers in Congress like Tom Kean have only hurt Jersey families and Jersey's economy.

Marc Rod contributed reporting. ♦

AUGUST 15, 2023

Israel's innovative diplomatic policy in Africa bears fruit

'If you look back 2,000 years ago to the Bible, when we had a famine in Israel we came down to Egypt and Africa to be fed,' Israeli Ambassador to Nigeria Michael Freeman told Jewish Insider. 'Now, 2,000 years later, we are in a position to feed Africa and we are paying back our debt.'

By Ruth Marks Eglash

When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu took his first-ever trip to Africa in 2016, he

famously declared, "Israel is coming back to Africa, and Africa is coming back to Israel."

During that weeklong visit, the first

by an Israeli leader to sub-Saharan Africa in more than 30 years, Netanyahu visited Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda and Ethiopia, and

held a historic summit with leaders from some seven countries. At the time, he said his plan was to share Israeli security and technological expertise in exchange for new friends who might be less critical of Israel and offer support in international forums that are usually biased against the Jewish state.

Seven years later, some of Netanyahu's African dream seems to have come to fruition.

Bilateral ties with several African countries are stronger than ever, prompting a tiny but visible shift in bodies such as the United Nations and the African Union. In addition, Israeli innovation from both the nonprofit and for-profit sectors is increasingly finding its way to the African subcontinent, providing life-saving solutions for some of the world's poorest countries and helping some of the world's most impoverished communities overcome the challenges of dry, desolate or underdeveloped land.

Two years after Netanyahu's inaugural visit, Nermine Khousam Rubin heard the prime ministerspeak at an AIPAC conference about his country's technological progress. The Florida native already knew about the myriad challenges in Africa and, spurred by Netanyahu's comments, envisioned a way to connect the two.

The result was Water 4 Mercy, an organization that utilizes Israeli technology to locate underground aquifers that can build sustainable feeding and farming options in some of the driest parts of Africa. In just five years, Khousam Rubin's nonprofit, working with Israeli NGOs and innovation companies, has positively impacted the lives of some 50,000 people in 12 communities in Tanzania, she said. And next month, along with a consortium of international donors, nonprofits, and for-profit Israeli companies, the organization will oversee the launch of its first sustainable farming center in Kenya.

"I saw what was happening in Africa, that there was a desolation, a drought and people had lost hope because they thought there was no solution," Khousam Rubin told *Jewish Insider*. "When I delved in, I saw that Israel had the solution to transform these places; that's when I founded Water 4 Mercy with basically the intent of bringing Israel's world-renowned technologies to transform

Africa."

Working under the umbrella of Innovation: Africa, a well-known Israeli NGO that helps find solutions for remote communities in Africa, Khousam Rubin explained, "The first thing we do is bring in water because water is life, and we are really seeing these remote areas being transformed."

But, she continued, "What's most interesting is that [the people there] know we're from Israel and they're in awe that you are bringing this technology from the country of God."

For Terry Newman, the Israel-based founder and CEO of the MCC Group, a medical construction company that specializes in planning, designing and building state-of-the-art medical facilities in some of the furthest corners of the world, the experience was similar.

Israel's work in Africa "is definitely a great story," concurred Newman, whose company has been bringing field, mobile and tailor-made hospitals to countries such as Sudan, Nigeria and Rwanda "in times when it was still difficult to be Israeli in Africa."

Now, he said, "The question in Africa is not, 'What's your company?' It's, 'What's your country?' And Israel is seen as part of an elite group of countries with high sophistication and knowledge."

Specifically in the health-care field, Newman added, "Israel is seen as a global brand."

It's true that both Israel's diplomatic presence and its life-saving activities in Africa are not new. Even before Netanyahu's 2016 trip to the continent, the Jewish state had carved out bilateral ties with some 40 African countries, and nonprofit aid organizations regularly provided relief in disaster zones.

However, on a broader, multilateral level, Israel still faced hard barriers. In the UN, the African bloc of countries regularly supported anti-Israel resolutions and the 54-member A.U. often condemned Israel for its treatment of the Palestinians. While Israel once held observer-member status in the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the previous incarnation of the A.U., when that was disbanded in 2002, the Jewish state was refused the same recognition, despite its close geographical proximity to Africa

and its close ties with a handful of African states.

Five years after Netanyahu's Africa trip, Israel was finally granted A.U. observer status, although that privilege was suddenly suspended earlier this year due to ongoing disagreements among member states. In addition, a year after his inaugural trip, Netanyahu returned to the continent to address the Economic Community of West African States' (ECOWAS) Heads of State and Government Summit in Liberia, becoming the first leader from outside of Africa to do so. Speaking to some 10 African presidents, the Israeli leader reiterated his message that Israel was coming back to Africa and Africa back to Israel, adding that relations with Africa were among Israel's top priorities.

"I think we are really seeing the fruits of this return to Africa," Yonatan Freeman, an expert on international relations at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, told JI. With Israel's suspension from the A.U. likely only temporary, Freeman highlighted instead a recent visit to Israel by Zambian President Hakainde Hichilema, noted that there have been changes in voting patterns in the UN among some African states and underscored that Israel has even been involved in mediating some of the conflicts in Africa.

"Logistically, this closeness between that continent and Israel is making it easier for all kinds of initiatives to move forward," observed Freeman. "The fact we have African countries opening embassies here and Israel opening up new embassies and missions in Africa is making it more possible for nongovernmental organizations and others to get on the ground there."

"The African strategy is not just what the government can do in terms of security and intelligence, but it is also setting the stage for the private sector," he continued. "A continent with over a billion people means a lot of potential clients and the way Israel sees it, the more we help them, the more it can impact how they vote in different international bodies, and we've seen it happening with African states voting with us, abstaining or not showing up to vote."

Freeman also pointed out that the presence of many Israeli companies on the continent is serving to "improve the

ability of people there to become aware of what Israel is, become aware of our society, become aware of our people and it's also a way to trust us."

Data compiled for JI by Start-Up Nation Central shows that roughly 180 Israeli high-tech companies operate either directly in Africa or see Africa as one of their target markets. And the fields in which Israeli firms are most active are industrial technologies, with a focus on materials and electronic manufacturing, health-tech, agri-food tech, water and security technologies, including cyber security and data infrastructure.

Israel's ambassador to Nigeria, Michael Freeman said that this influx of Israeli business and technology is good for both Israel and Africa.

"Countries with better trade relations have better diplomatic relations," he noted, pointing to India, where relations with Israel began on a business level but have now deepened into a very warm, genuine, and supportive friendship between the two countries.

"Africa is an incredibly important continent, you cannot ignore the fact that 1.2 billion people live here," Freeman, who took up his posting in Nigeria nearly two years ago, told JI in a Zoom interview from the capital, Abuja.

He said that Israeli technology and advanced innovation could make a huge difference in Nigeria, which has one of the largest economies in Africa, yet suffers from dire and abject poverty.

"The reality is we have technology that can make a real difference," observed Freeman. "When you walk along the street here and see people living off \$1.5 a day and you know that we have the ability to genuinely change people's lives, then why not?"

He also pointed out that Israel is the only developed country that shares a land border with Africa and Israel's responsibility to help these neighboring countries is logical.

"If you look back 2,000 years ago to the Bible, when we had a famine in Israel we came down to Egypt and Africa to be fed," said Freeman. "Now, 2,000 years later, we are in a position to feed Africa and we are paying back our debt."

He also highlighted that the country's new leader, President Bola Ahmed Tinubu,

who came to power last May, believes Israel is one of several countries that can address his country's most dire needs, particularly in developing telecommunications, sustainable farming programs and water solutions.

Israel is now hopeful that Nigeria, which serves on a six-country ad-hoc committee to discuss Israel's status in the A.U., will join other allies of Israel in Africa – Rwanda and Senegal, who also sit on the committee – to allow the Jewish state back in.

While the diplomatic benefits are clear, Iddo Moed, head of the African Affairs Bureau in Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said the country's increasing presence, particularly its innovative edge, is an obvious extension of its international diplomatic outreach.

"Our activities in Africa are not tied to anything, it is just what we should be doing in Africa," he emphasized.

However, Moed added, "We are seeing that by doing this kind of cooperation with these kinds of projects, Israel is being perceived as important and contributing to the development of these countries."

And in that way, it is "easier to translate these excellent bilateral relations to multilateral support for Israel," he continued. "We sense that it is more difficult for countries to translate from the bilateral to the multilateral, so we don't condition our cooperation on anything, we just feel that we have to do this and we're doing far too little, we wish that [we] could have a bigger budget to do more."

Yaron Tchwell, CEO of Mitrelli, a Swiss-based company that works to bring all manner of Israeli innovation to Africa, agreed that the Israeli government could be doing more to pave the way for Israeli innovation to reach Africa.

"I would love it if there was more collaboration between the government of Israel and the private sector," said Tchwell, whose company partners with public and private entities in Angola, Ivory Coast, Senegal and Mozambique building large-scale infrastructure projects and developing customized solutions to benefit local communities, particularly in the areas of food security, health care educational and vocational training. "Israeli innovation can bring change that is so needed in Africa."

He noted that Israel is already a "very strong brand in Africa" but more could be done to enable the technological solutions that have earned Israel the label of a "startup nation," making the desert bloom and creating economic prowess out of brainpower, to reach places where it is very much needed.

"[Mitrelli's] goal is to be a bridge between the market needs of Africa and Israeli innovation," Tchwell added, highlighting that there are thousands of Israeli companies "developing superior products and superior solutions" that can accommodate the African market.

"I believe that would be a win-win," he continued, adding, "It's not only that Africa needs Israel, but Israel needs Africa too... We all live in a global village and there are [environmental] things that are happening in Africa that will eventually affect us all." ♦

'Tip of the spear': Kustoff, Miller carry Jewish GOP torch in Congress

With Israel becoming an increasingly partisan issue in Washington, the unique role held by Kustoff and Miller has only grown more visible in recent weeks

By Gabe Fleisher

When Rep. Pramila Jayapal (D-WA) referred to Israel as a “racist state” at an event last month, Rep. August Pfluger (R-TX) quickly went to work drawing up a resolution declaring congressional support for the Jewish state.

Two of his first calls were to Reps. David Kustoff (R-TN) and Max Miller (R-OH), who soon agreed to sign on as the measure’s leading co-sponsors. It may not seem like Kustoff and Miller — a 56-year-old former Bush appointee and a 34-year-old former Trump aide, respectively — have much in common, but Pfluger sought them out because they share membership in one of Capitol Hill’s smallest clubs: They are the only two Jewish Republicans currently serving in either chamber of Congress.

“Any time that you can bring a personal story, a personal touch to legislation, it puts a face and a name and history and a legacy to that legislation,” Pfluger told *Jewish Insider* in an interview. “That’s exactly what Mr. Kustoff and Mr. Miller were able to bring to this resolution.”

With Israel becoming an increasingly partisan issue in Washington, the unique role held by Kustoff and Miller has only grown more visible in recent weeks. In addition to co-sponsoring Pfluger’s resolution, which passed easily, they also both served on the escort committee when Israeli President Isaac Herzog addressed a joint session of Congress in July. Later that day, when Herzog and House Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) unveiled a first-of-its-kind task force to increase relations between Congress and the Knesset, Israel’s parliament, Kustoff was appointed chairman and Miller was named a member.

“I believe that David and I have been the

two loudest Jewish voices [in Congress],” Miller said. “Not just because we are Jewish and there’s only two of us who are Republicans in the whole Congress. Because we know it’s the right thing to do.”

Bolstering Israel and combating antisemitism have been top priorities for both congressmen since their arrivals in Washington. After Miller was sworn in earlier this year, the first piece of legislation he sponsored was the resolution that removed Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN) from the House Foreign Affairs Committee for controversial comments she made about Jews and Israel. Kustoff’s first bill after joining Congress in 2017 was the Combating Anti-Semitism Act, which would have increased the federal penalty for threats against synagogues, churches and other religious institutions.

Kustoff and Miller are the “tip of the spear on issues of concern to the Jewish community,” Sam Markstein, the national political director of the Republican Jewish Coalition, said. “They’re always trusted and important voices in the room when these sorts of issues come to the fore.”

In interviews, each lawmaker showered praise on the other. “Max is a really good colleague who has a bright future ahead of him,” Kustoff said. “David’s a great guy,” Miller echoed.

“We’ve been a good team thus far,” added Kustoff, the more senior of the pair.

Miller said that he anticipates working more with Kustoff as possible clashes over Israel arise during the appropriations process. “I want to see us take it to a new level,” the Ohioan said. “There’s only two of us, so we need to continue to be loud and we need to continue to stand up for the state of Israel with some Democrats and the two-

state solution and combat the ones referring to it as an apartheid state. David and I feel as if we need to be on the frontlines every single day.”

Although the Jewish GOP caucus has shrunk to just two members, it wasn’t always such a small contingent. From 1915 to 1923, Jewish Republican members of Congress outnumbered Jewish Democrats, according to data shared by Herb Weisberg, a scholar of Jewish American politics.

But after the 1922 cycle, the Jewish balance on Capitol Hill shifted to the Democratic side of the aisle, where it has remained ever since. (1920 is also the last time a Republican presidential candidate won the Jewish vote.) In recent years, the high point for Jewish Republican representation came after the 1984 elections, when nine Jewish GOP lawmakers served in Congress, one short of a minyan. At several points in the 21st century, the number of Jewish Republican lawmakers has dipped down to one.

The partisan Jewish divide is particularly acute on the Senate side: Of the 10 sitting Jewish senators, none are Republicans. The last Jewish GOP senator was Pennsylvanian Arlen Specter, who switched parties and became a Democrat in 2009.

“It is useful for any community to have representatives in both parties,” said Weisberg, an emeritus professor of political science at The Ohio State University. “Most Jewish voters are Democrats, but at the same time, it is important to have Jewish Republicans among our national leaders. That really does help represent Jews’ interests.”

Other scholars noted that some of the most prominent previous Jewish lawmakers

have been Republicans, including Florence Prag Kahn, the first Jewish woman in Congress and the so-called “mother of the FBI”; Fiorella La Guardia, the future airport namesake and New York City mayor; and Jacob Javits, the longtime New York senator.

Eric Cantor was another notable inheritor of the Jewish GOP mantle; the Virginia lawmaker served as House majority leader and was poised to become the first Jewish speaker of the House before being defeated by a primary challenge in 2014. (Some speculated at the time that antisemitism played a role. Kustoff similarly faced a primary challenger in 2018 who emphasized his Christianity.)

During his time as the lone Jewish Republican lawmaker, Cantor told *JJ*, the Jewish Democratic members would regularly meet without him as a Jewish caucus. “I was not allowed in,” Cantor said. “The interest was not in being Jewish and then Democrat, it was interest in being Democrat and then Jewish.”

Jewish Democrats have reportedly continued such meetings today; Miller and Kustoff say they have yet to be invited, a situation Miller likened to the Congressional Black Caucus, which has also refused to add GOP members. The two lawmakers both said they have still worked productively with Jewish Democratic colleagues — they each named Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL) as a willing partner — although they diverged slightly when characterizing the rival party.

“I believe that the majority of Democrats feel the same way that I do, where they absolutely condemn antisemitism, and I’d like to think that most Democrats do support Israel and her right to exist,” Kustoff said.

But Miller, whose Washington career began as former President Donald Trump’s “music man,” more closely echoed the tune of his ex-boss. “The Democrats and their rhetoric and their ideology when it comes to the State of Israel and a two-state solution, and how they harbor individuals that call Israel a racist and apartheid state and never condemn it, it’s absolutely something to behold,” he said. “It’s disturbing, quite honestly.”

Although Miller and Kustoff are the only sitting non-Christian GOP lawmakers, both

said their minority status in the party had never caused discomfort. “I will tell you that the most antisemitism I’ve experienced has actually been from our own people,” Miller said, referring to Jewish “Democrat friends” who have called him a “self-hating Jew” and a “kapo.”

Cantor, Kustoff and Miller all cited congressional delegations to Israel, particularly the annual bipartisan AIPAC trip for freshmen, as a cherished opportunity to share their faith with colleagues. “I was the only Jewish member [on my trip],” Kustoff said. “To be able to not only talk about Israel with the non-Jewish members, but to... see things through their eyes, and how much they appreciate and realize the significance of our relationship with Israel, is really special.”

“They would come back from those trips more Zionist than the Israelis,” Cantor joked of his non-Jewish Republican colleagues.

Kustoff and Miller both expressed hope that shifting Democratic views on Israel could prompt more Jews to gravitate to the GOP going forward, a desire shared across the party. The GOP is a “natural home for American Jews,” Cantor said. “It’s pretty clear that Republican values are most closely aligned with the Jewish culture,” Pfluger, who is Christian, added.

But Weisberg, the Jewish political scholar, said that history suggests that whenever Jewish Republicans have harbored that hope in the past, their predicted surge in Jewish support has rarely materialized. “Occasionally, it looked like the Jewish Democratic vote was going to slip away, and then each time, things happened that brought it back,” Weisberg said, pointing to the presidential candidacies of Pat Robertson in 1988 and Pat Buchanan in 1992 — and Donald Trump in 2016 — as events that blunted previous near-migrations.

In a statement to *JJ*, Jewish Democratic Council of America CEO Halie Soifer said that the modern GOP has taken stances “antithetical to the values and views held by the vast majority of American Jews.” She added: “It’s not surprising that there are 36 Jewish Democrats in Congress and only two Jewish Republicans. What’s surprising is that there are any Jewish Republicans.”

Currently, more than 70% of American

Jews identify as Democrats, a political reality that can be palpable even at synagogues. Park Synagogue, a Cleveland-area Conservative synagogue where Miller is a member, states at the bottom of its website that “we actively welcome gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, queer and straight individuals.” Kustoff’s synagogue in Memphis, Temple Israel, hosted a “Repro Shabbat” earlier this year, which it promoted by proclaiming, “Reproductive freedom is a Jewish value.”

When asked if Kustoff’s pro-life voting record conflicted with that statement, Temple Israel Senior Rabbi Micah Greenstein had a few more issues to add: “What about the avalanche of guns?” he asked. “What about the way [Tennessee state Rep.] Justin Pearson was treated?”

Still, Greenstein emphasized that people of all political views were welcome at the synagogue and praised Kustoff as “honest” and “honorable.” The rabbi also said he and Kustoff keep in touch when the congressman works on legislation related to Israel or antisemitism, although he interacts more frequently with his other congressional congregant, Rep. Steve Cohen (D-TN).

Kustoff, who was confirmed at Temple Israel in the 1970s, is a third-generation member of the Reform synagogue. “His roots run deeper in Temple Israel than mine do,” Greenstein said.

Miller has a similarly storied lineage, hailing from one of Cleveland’s most prominent Jewish families. “He’s been bred, literally bred, on the importance of being a good Jew and a good American,” said Joshua Skoff, the senior rabbi at Park Synagogue. Miller’s grandparents were the real estate titans and philanthropists Sam and Ruth Miller; his grandmother also waged a run for Congress, while his uncle Aaron David Miller has served under six secretaries of state. (Aaron David Miller’s son, attorney Daniel Miller, wrote an op-ed last year accusing his cousin of belonging to a political movement “that’s endangering America and endangering Jews.”)

Skoff has known Miller his entire life and officiated the congressman’s bar mitzvah. “That responsibility, of being a Jew and an American, he took it very seriously then, and I’m not surprised that he takes it very seriously now,” the rabbi said.

“Even in their chaotic lives, they try to

keep Shabbat as part of their focus,” Rabbi Rosie Haim said of Miller and his wife Emily, whose wedding Haim officiated last year. “Max is a really good cook. He learned how to cook Shabbat dinner, so he’s really the main cook.”

Another way that Miller keeps in touch with his Judaism on Capitol Hill: the placement of a mezuzah outside his Cannon Building office. “I understand what it means for our people, but for me, in the halls of Congress, it’s an identifier,” Miller said. “It’s saying, ‘hey, I’m Jewish. I’m not afraid to say I’m Jewish. Here’s my mezuzah.’”

“With the rise in antisemitism, some homes do not put the mezuzah on the outside,” Haim noted. “The fact that he has a mezuzah outside his office: when his door is closed, that’s what you know about him. You know his name and you know the mezuzah.”

Last month, when the House was debating the pro-Israel resolution he and Kustoff co-sponsored, Miller was in the speaker’s chair presiding, which he called an “incredible honor.” While Miller was doing so, he may have noticed another familiar symbol in the Capitol, one that Kustoff looks to frequently as a reminder of his own

Jewish heritage.

The House chamber features 23 marble relief portraits of various historic “lawgivers,” from Hammurabi to Thomas Jefferson. “They are all profiles,” the Tennessean explained, “except for the one that looks directly at the speaker’s podium. And that is Moses, looking directly at the speaker. He’s the only one that’s front-facing, everybody else is a profile view.”

“When I get to preside and I look directly on at Moses,” Kustoff said, “that’s all the inspiration anybody needs — whether you’re Jewish or not.” ♦

AUGUST 11, 2023

Maui’s Jewish community ‘overwhelmed’ as island burns, but ‘inspired’ by outpouring of support

Local synagogues fielding calls as people try to make contact with friends, relatives on the island, helping coordinate donation drives

By Haley Cohen

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

With deadly wildfires still blazing across the Hawaiian island of Maui on Thursday, the two rabbis on the island stepped up relief efforts for the 11,000 residents — including some of their own congregants — who have been evacuated from their homes.

“We’re looking for supplies for all residents of Maui, not just Jewish ones because the Jewish value of helping all during time of emergency,” Rabbi Raanan Mallek, who leads The Jewish Congregation of Maui, told *eJewishPhilanthropy* in a phone conversation Thursday afternoon from Maui.

Several members of Mallek’s congregation have lost their homes to the inferno, brought on by strong winds from Hurricane Dora. A congregation board member’s restaurant, The Kula Lodge, has been severely scorched, Mallek told eJP.

Maui officials urged visitors to leave Lahaina, a historic port town that has been nearly entirely flattened by the fires. The island organized a “mass bus evacuation” Wednesday afternoon to take people directly to the airport, according to county officials. At least 55 people have been killed in the fires as of Thursday night, with officials saying that 80% of the fires have been contained.

Essential items including non-perishable foods, clothing, first-aid kits and diapers dropped off at The Jewish Congregation will be donated to the Maui War Memorial Center for those in need. “Pretty much anything that a family that is now without a home would need during this challenging time,” Mallek said.

The synagogue is in the Kihei area, on the opposite side of a north-south highway from the fire, and therefore not subject to evacuation orders.

There are an estimated 2,500 to 3,000 Jewish residents on Maui.

The Jewish Congregation of Maui, which is non-denominational, has about 100 members, according to Mallek, many of whom are part-year residents, known as “snow birds.”

Also on Hawaii’s second-largest island is Chabad of Maui, led by Rabbi Mendy Krasnjansky. The Chabad center was in the evacuation zone, about two miles from the fire line. Volunteers have been told to be ready to rescue the building’s Torahs if necessary.

“Obviously, it’s a very trying time for the community,” Krasnjansky wrote in an email to eJP on Thursday afternoon. “We have been fielding calls nonstop since the crisis started, attempting to locate residents and visitors, people reaching out concerned about their loved ones. Assisting with finding places for people to shelter. There is tremendous devastation, loss of homes and businesses, people have lost everything. Trying our utmost to support and strengthen.”

The Jewish Federations of North America launched a Hawaii Wildfire Fund on Thursday night to support affected communities in Maui by providing resources for response and recovery, such as “toiletries, first-aid kits, non-perishable foods, baby supplies and more,” the organization said. The fund will also help people fleeing to Honolulu where Jewish communal organizations there will be

working to support those in need. A JFNA spokesperson said most of the fundraising will be done “on a local level by the individual federations.”

The Israel-based disaster relief organization SmartAid said it has dispatched a team to the island to “provide immediate assistance to affected communities and first responders.”

The group said this included

distributing aid, providing solar-power generators to emergency shelters to ensure electricity supply and deploying mobile communication hotspots.

Krasnjansky called the outpouring of people reaching out from across the globe to contribute “overwhelming and inspiring.”

Judah Ari Gross contributed reporting. ♦

AUGUST 14, 2023

Saudi-Israeli joint venture aims to boost solar power use in Gulf

SolarEdge and Ajlan & Bros fill in new details of the unusual alliance they formed last year on the sidelines of Biden’s summer visit to Saudi Arabia

By Jonathan H. Ferziger

The article first appeared in The Circuit.

SolarEdge Technologies, one of Israel’s largest companies trading on the Nasdaq, is forming a joint renewable energy venture with a business group in Saudi Arabia amid White House efforts to broker a normalization pact between the two countries.

The new company created by SolarEdge and Ajlan & Bros Holding will be based in the Saudi capital of Riyadh and work to accelerate the adoption of solar power in the kingdom, the two partners said in a July 31 statement. SolarEdge, an S&P 500 company that maintains headquarters in both Herzliya, Israel, and Milpitas, Calif., produces solar inverters, which manage photovoltaic cells to make renewable energy more efficient. Ajlan is the majority shareholder.

The announcement came more than a year after the Saudi and Israeli companies signed a cooperation agreement that provided little detail of what the alliance would entail. It was one of 13 deals between Saudi and U.S. companies that were announced while U.S. President Joseph Biden visited Saudi Arabia in July 2022.

Zvi Lando, SolarEdge’s Israeli CEO, said in the statement that his company was “honored to partner with Ajlan & Bros. Holding and to support Saudi Arabia’s journey towards Vision 2030” – referring to a document outlining the kingdom’s efforts to wean the economy off oil and develop industries ranging from finance and tourism to sports and entertainment.

“SolarEdge is committed to driving the clean energy transition on a global scale, exemplified by this JV which will provide local enterprises in Saudi Arabia with the support they need to rapidly transition away from fossil fuels to clean solar energy and meet their aggressive renewable energy goals,” Lando said. The statement was released from the company’s California office and did not refer to its Israeli roots.

Israel and Saudi Arabia do not have diplomatic relations and their citizens are generally barred from each other’s territory unless they have second passports issued by other countries. The conditions are similar to those in the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain before the two Gulf states signed the U.S.-brokered Abraham Accords in 2020, establishing formal ties with Israel. Several Israeli companies have managed to operate

in Saudi Arabia through subsidiaries registered in other countries.

Biden, who has repeatedly said he would like to facilitate an agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia that would normalize relations between the two countries, sent senior aides to Riyadh last month to discuss a possible deal. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said a Saudi normalization agreement is one of his greatest diplomatic priorities. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the kingdom’s prime minister, has said he would like to establish closer relations, but Israel would have to make significant gestures to the Palestinians before an agreement is reached.

SolarEdge is one of the largest of the close to 90 Israeli companies that trade on Wall Street. Its shares have fallen 38% this year and were last trading at \$176.35, giving the company a market value of about \$10 billion. ♦

Pew Charitable Trusts awards Hillel International \$500K to combat antisemitism

Grant to Hillel's Campus Climate Initiative comes amid a rise in antisemitism on college campuses

By Haley Cohen

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

The Pew Charitable Trusts on Monday awarded Hillel International a \$500,000 grant in support of its Campus Climate Initiative (CCI), which partners with university administrators to address antisemitism on college campuses.

Adam Lehman, president and CEO of Hillel International, the largest Jewish student organization in the world, told *eJewishPhilanthropy* the grant is a “critical step forward for CCI.”

He noted that it is unique that Pew Charitable Trust recognized CCI as positioned to address the “particular form of intolerance represented by antisemitism on campus.”

“As most people know, Pew is not a Jewish organization and I’m not sure of

other contexts they’ve invested in Jewish specific communal initiatives. However, Hillel International and Pew share a focus on trying to address and eliminate intolerance when it comes to minority groups,” Lehman told eJP.

The grant comes amid a significant surge of antisemitism on college campuses in the United States. The Anti-Defamation League found in its annual antisemitism report that antisemitic incidents on college campuses in 2022 increased by 41% to 219 incidents.

Elinor Haider, a senior director with The Pew Charitable Trusts, said in a statement that the grant is a “timely and important effort to help address antisemitism on college campuses,” adding that Pew has “long supported organizations aimed at furthering understanding of religion in the U.S., yet growing religious intolerance is a major challenge. The Campus Climate

Initiative is a model of the type of program that is making a difference by countering bias and strengthening religious tolerance.”

Lehman told eJP that CCI, which ran its first cohort in 2020, “educates and activates senior university administrators in support of Jewish student communities. It not only empowers all of our university partners in education, but partners with universities to implement actual policy change related to rapid response when antisemitism arises and fostering support for Jewish students we would hope all students have access to.”

He said that the grant, which will run through June 2025, will allow Hillel to recruit more than 25 additional colleges and universities over the next two years to join the effort and offer continued support for campuses from previous cohorts. Fifty colleges and universities nationwide have participated in CCI since its inception. ♦