

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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AUGUST 21, 2023

The race to save Mosul's last synagogue

With funds for reconstruction frozen due to political stalemate between Iraq and Israel, this historical synagogue, symbolic of Mosul's long-ago state of religious pluralism, remains in a continual state of destruction

By Rebecca Anne Proctor

The graceful pointed arches and brickwork in muted earth tones — azure blue, burnt sienna and yellow ochre — evoke a long-ago Jewish past in the now nearly ruined Sassoon Synagogue in the old Jewish quarter of this northern Iraqi city. It is the only surviving synagogue in Mosul, which, prior to Israel's creation in 1948, was home to a thriving Jewish population of nearly 6,000. Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq

in 2003, the synagogue has been used to dump garbage, its *mikveh* transformed into a barn for horses.

A year after the city was liberated from ISIS in 2017 following the U.S.-led military offensive, remnants of historical religious places of worship, monuments and museums began to emerge from the rubble of war. One was the Sassoon Synagogue. According to UNESCO, 80% percent of the

city's cultural heritage, including the Jewish district, was destroyed.

Now, an effort led by several Iraqi Jews is underway to preserve the synagogue, and with it the Jewish heritage of Mosul that is in peril of being lost forever. The effort comes as numerous international cultural organizations dedicate funds and manpower to rebuilding the city's important historic landmarks, such as the Great Mosque of al-

Nuri and its distinctive “hunchback” leaning minaret, both of which ISIS blew up in 2017, and Our Lady of the Hour Church (Al-Sa’aa in Arabic).

“The Sassoon Synagogue is the only surviving one in Mosul and its preservation is important as a symbol and a reminder of the coexistence that existed in Iraq throughout history,” Edwin Shuker, an Iraqi-born Jew who visited the site in 2019 and continues to champion for its reconstruction, told *Jewish Insider*. “I continue to champion the protection and preservation of what is left of Jewish landmarks in Iraq, particularly the shrines of the prophets.”

But for those like Shuker trying to save the Sassoon Synagogue, a significant roadblock has recently emerged, one that puts the effort squarely in the crosshairs of the complicated politics of the Middle East.

Despite a desire by international organizations, notably the Swiss-based International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas ALIPH, to reconstruct the synagogue, the Iraqi parliament passed a law in May 2022 — “Criminalizing Normalization and Establishment of Relations with the Zionist Entity” — that has made it nearly impossible to move forward. The law forbids any Iraqi inside or outside the country from connecting with any Israeli, or any Zionist. Those who disobey face the prospect of life in prison or even death.

Shuker said ALIPH designated funds to reconstruct the synagogue, but that the project has now been frozen due to the new Iraqi law criminalizing any relations with Israel.

“Iraq is known as the cradle of civilizations and these sites, including the Sassoon Synagogue, are part of our shared heritage,” explained Shuker.

Following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the vast majority of Iraqi Jews were displaced and deported to Israel, and by the early 1950s no more than 8,000 remained from a peak of 150,000.

The systematic destruction of their memory and heritage going back 2,600 years became part of Iraq’s state policy.

In the wake of the Jewish expulsions in the 1950s, shrines of the biblical prophets Ezra, Ezekiel and Jonah were turned into mosques and hundreds of synagogues

disappeared, except for the Meir Toeg synagogue in Baghdad. Miraculously, the Sassoon Synagogue in Mosul survived, but was badly damaged.

Trying to resurrect the Jewish memory of the city and help rebuild the synagogue is also dangerous now, particularly following the kidnapping of Russian-Israeli researcher Elizabeth Tsurkov in Baghdad in June this year.

Still, some Iraqis are championing to preserve the Jewish memory in Mosul and greater Iraq.

One is Omar Mohammed, a senior researcher in the Program on Extremism at The George Washington University. He also runs the blog “Mosul Eye,” a site that has been anonymously reporting on Mosul since ISIS began its occupation in 2014. Mohammed recently concluded a project on the documentation of the oral history of the Jewish community in Iraq. He found that most of the Jews in Mosul who were deported and had their land confiscated during the 1950s under Baghdad’s pro-Nazi regime during World War II, and after Israel’s founding, are still alive. They are, however, no longer living in Iraq.

“We are interested in reviving the Jewish heritage of Iraq, which is something that has been omitted from our history books,” Mohammed told *Jl*. “It is their own right to be remembered that they lived once in this place that they lived, they owned the property, they had their own life. But now it has been completely omitted.”

As for the Sassoon Synagogue, its once-grand structure remains derelict and abandoned, just like the lives of the very few Jews still residing in Iraq, some of whom have kept their faith hidden, their conversations about their history done in secret.

And yet, the synagogue, like the memory of the Jews of Mosul and in Iraq, is crucial to an understanding of religious pluralism and the importance of peace amid diversity.

“When you walk into the synagogue it looks like a carpet filled with bullet holes,” remembers Shuker. Nearby, construction work speeds ahead, cranes pointing skyward, to rebuild the destroyed mosques and churches.

But it is quiet at the site of the Sassoon Synagogue, which, in many ways, serves

a key part of Mosul’s history, memory and identity. The rich religious history of Mosul, and the entire Nineveh province, brings to light again how Muslims, Christians, Jews and Yazidis share a common history. As the Muslim and Christian religious monuments of Mosul rise up from the rubble, parliament’s new law against any contacts with Israel strikes a blow against that common history, and keeps the Sassoon Synagogue as a sacred ruin. ♦

In 2022, AIPAC opposed Shri Thanedar. This month he went to Israel with the group.

The first-term congressman, who once supported legislation calling for the end of aid to Israel, said he sees Israel as a 'vibrant liberal democracy' and an 'important ally'

By Marc Rod

Rep. Shri Thanedar (D-MI) — then a state representative aiming to make the leap to Congress — was a top target for AIPAC's super PAC in 2022, which spent millions opposing him in the Democratic primary. Earlier this month, as a first-term lawmaker, Thanedar traveled to Israel with the AIPAC-affiliated American Israel Education Foundation, and says that he's worked to educate himself about Israel, putting any tensions with Michigan's pro-Israel community in the past.

Last year's opposition to Thanedar was driven in part by his co-sponsorship of a resolution in the Michigan House urging Congress to halt aid to Israel, referring to it as an "apartheid state" and accusing the country of violating human rights. By the time he launched his congressional bid, Thanedar had distanced himself from that resolution and touted a more pro-Israel line.

Thanedar told *Jewish Insider* in an interview last week following his trip to Israel that he has gone through a "big learning experience," as a candidate and since coming to Congress, he said he's spent more time studying the issues, researching legislation involving Israel, meeting with members of the Jewish and pro-Israel communities and now visiting the Jewish state.

"When I worked in the state house, we hardly focused on foreign policy," he explained.

"[Israel] certainly is a vibrant, liberal democracy. No doubt about that," Thanedar continued. "And they are an important ally of the United States. It's a dangerous region. Israel is really the only democracy surrounded by some hostile elements."

Thanedar said he was particularly struck by conversations during his recent trip to

Israel with people who had been impacted by terrorist rocket attacks and by seeing the strategic threats to Israel firsthand, as well as gaining a new understanding of the threat posed by Iran's nuclear program.

"It highlighted why protecting or helping Israel defend herself, by herself, is very essential and critical to our national security and our national interest," the Michigan congressman said. "It's a relationship that is mutually beneficial."

Thanedar said he concluded from the trip that a two-state solution is not imminent, and questioned whether the Palestinian Authority "actually has the authority to deliver a peace, even if a peace agreement is reached." But, he added, the U.S. is the only international power in the position to broker peace and has a "moral authority" to do so.

"We should continue to engage and stay involved and not give up on the possibility of a peaceful Middle East," Thanedar continued. "There is no one else that can provide that leadership. The United States is in a unique position."

Thanedar said he also intends to continue studying the region and the issues it faces.

The Michigan congressman, who was an entrepreneur before getting into politics, said he had taken a particular interest in Israel's economy, asking the trip organizers to set up meetings with innovators and reading *Start-Up Nation: The Story of Israel's Economic Miracle* prior to his trip.

Thanedar, who was born in India and said he sometimes had to collect drinking water from a river for his family, said he saw personal connections to the work being done by the Innovation: Africa nonprofit. The Israeli NGO has provided solar-powered water pumping technology across

the continent.

He said he also spoke to an agricultural entrepreneur during the visit about potential opportunities to work together in Detroit's community gardens and urban farms, which support nutrition needs in his district.

With Israeli entrepreneurs, Thanedar "talked a ton about how the entrepreneurial culture has grown into Israel, and [I] couldn't help myself thinking that in Detroit, with systemic racism that has robbed people of opportunities — I wondered how I can learn from the Israeli experiment in innovation and startup culture and how I can bring more of that," he said.

He said he had invited some entrepreneurs to Detroit to work with his district, which he envisions as a "win-win collaboration."

Thanedar said there's no lingering bad blood between himself and AIPAC, despite its past opposition to him. He noted that he had conversations with AIPAC leadership during the trip, and that they "didn't really focus on the last election. We focused more on the threat that Israel faces on a daily basis."

"I'm not a person that holds grudges. I move on," he added.

Thanedar said he decided to join the AIEF trip after conversations with pro-Israel leaders in his district, including former AIPAC President David Victor. Victor invited Thanedar to a local presentation by Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-MD), the former Democratic leader who led AIEF freshman trips for decades, and Thanedar said that this presentation ultimately shaped his decision. Hoyer also helped lead this past month's trip.

"[Hoyer] talked a lot about what happens

on this [trip]... I was really impressed because he talked about meeting citizens, meeting people, talking to different politicians, opposition leaders, all the things that happen in this trip,” Thanedar explained. “I was fascinated, and I thought, ‘I want

to learn more about Israel.’ It was Steny’s speech and talk that motivated me to go.”

He also brushed off the notion that his posture is an attempt to head off an AIPAC-backed primary challenge in 2024.

“The primary seems so far away,” he said.

“I just got elected, and I’m just finishing the first six months of my work in Congress. My job is to help my constituents... they have put a lot of trust in me, they put this honor for me to represent [them], and I just want to do a good job for my constituents.” ♦

AUGUST 17, 2023

Egypt eyeing rapprochement with Iran amid Tehran’s warming ties with UAE, Saudi Arabia

Warmer relations between Cairo and Tehran after more than four decades of estrangement could serve the interests of both countries, recent think tank reports suggest

By Ruth Marks Eglash

With Middle East observers focused on the chances of normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, another more low-profile process of rapprochement appears to be underway in the region: this one between Egypt, Israel’s oldest regional peace partner, and Iran, Israel’s biggest foe.

The prospect of closer ties between the world’s most populous Shiite nation and the Sunni-majority Egypt after more than four decades of estrangement serves the interests of both countries, recent think tank reports suggest, and follows a trend of powerful Arab nations forging closer ties with Iran, partly in a bid to bring calm to a tumultuous region.

This time last year, the United Arab Emirates, a close ally of Egypt, returned its ambassador to Tehran after a six-year hiatus, and earlier this year Saudi Arabia, which has recently been in talks about warming ties with the United States, used Chinese mediators to reach an agreement with the Islamic republic to restore diplomatic relations after seven years.

Egypt is not quite there yet, say researchers and analysts, but there are some signs that it could soon follow in the footsteps of the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

A research paper published in June by

the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) at Tel Aviv University noted reports in recent months suggesting that the two countries are in the process of drafting a preliminary agreement that would establish, among other things, a joint committee to discuss restoring diplomatic relations and deepening coordination on security issues.

Iran’s supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, as well as senior Iranian officials, according to the INSS, have publicly expressed hope for the renewal of bilateral diplomatic ties, although Egypt remains relatively silent on the matter.

“The renewal of diplomatic relations accompanied by the exchange of ambassadors between Egypt and Iran still remains uncertain,” Ofir Winter, a senior researcher at the INSS and the co-author of the report, told *Jewish Insider*.

“Egypt’s approach towards normalizing ties with Iran continues to be marked by caution and skepticism, as Cairo aims to ascertain whether the recent rapprochement between Tehran and Arab states truly signifies a significant shift in Iran’s behavior within the region,” he explained.

Winter said that normalization between Egypt and Iran hinged on two key factors: the success of the Saudi-Iranian efforts toward normalization, and the position of

the U.S., a key ally for Egypt.

“The Saudi-Iranian normalization agreement is perceived as a litmus test for evaluating the authenticity and dependability of Iran’s altered regional policies, particularly concerning its detrimental involvement in Lebanon, Yemen and Syria,” added Winter. “The outcome of this trial will dictate the feasibility of a broader and more profound rapprochement between Egypt and Iran.”

In addition, he continued: “Egypt is likely to proceed with the process of normalizing its relations with Iran only after ensuring that such a move would not jeopardize its relationship with the United States.”

Winter said that this consideration was especially pertinent given the economic crisis in Egypt, which relies heavily on financial aid from the United States, as well as Washington’s backing of international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund.

Professor Moshe Ma’oz, a senior research fellow at the Truman Institute at Hebrew University, said that the apparent change in diplomatic strategy in Egypt, which is the most populous Arab state, is likely just “maneuvering between the powers.”

“We still don’t know how it’s going to end, but by and large, Egypt is more in the

U.S. camp than the Iranian camp,” he said. “Egypt is still very much connected to the United States but is trying to squeeze more concessions from them.”

Ma’oz added that while Egypt has certainly been influenced by “the very significant step taken by Saudi Arabia in signing an agreement with Iran, it is more neutral than Saudi Arabia and the other states.”

“Egypt is far away from the countries in the Gulf like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and others that have grown closer to Iran,” he explained. “In all of these countries, you also have sizable Shia communities, and they are loyal to Iran.”

A research paper published last month by the Middle East Institute lays out why Egypt might be interested in improving, or at least stabilizing, its ties with Iran, as well as with Qatar and Turkey – two other countries with which it has had strained relations in the past.

First and centrally are Egypt’s internal economic woes. “For years, the country has faced a financial crisis aggravated by inflation, substantial foreign debt, and a foreign currency shortage,” noted the report’s author, Amr Salah Mohamed. “Domestically, this has led to soaring prices for goods and services, putting the Egyptian government under pressure from social discontent.”

Mohamed also outlined Egypt’s goal of becoming a regional natural gas hub – in 2022 Israel signed an agreement with Egypt to provide Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) to Europe – as well as the ongoing conflicts right on its doorstep: Libya, Sudan and Somalia, where increasingly Iran has influence. Egypt is also looking to reap the economic benefits of helping to rebuild post-conflict countries such as Iraq and Syria, which also fall into Iran’s sphere of influence, the report highlighted.

Another area that makes Iran an attractive ally for Egypt is in the realm of security, particularly in areas such as the Red Sea and the Sinai Peninsula, which have struggled with insurgency and terrorism, and also mediating a resolution to its ongoing dispute with Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.

According to the Middle East Institute, “Egypt’s traditional partners, such as the

UAE, the U.S., and Russia, have not shown enough muscle to pressure Ethiopia to reach a deal.” In his report, Mohamed pointed out: “The potential assistance of influential actors in the Horn of Africa, including Turkey and Iran, could help. Both countries have strong ties with the Ethiopian government.”

“Egypt is following the lead of its patrons, Saudi Arabia and the UAE,” observed Jonathan Schanzer, senior vice president for research at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, a Washington-based think tank. “Both countries have recently made overtures toward Iran and both countries also feel spurned by Biden administration foreign policy.”

“The Biden White House has done little to curb Iran’s regional aspirations for hegemony. So the region is hedging,” he told JI. “To compound the problem, Democrats in Congress have put a target on the regime of [Egyptian President Abdel Fattah] El-Sisi. Some of this is warranted, of course – the deficit of democracy and human rights in Egypt is a real problem – but with no end in sight to the blistering criticism and no promise of American support in the medium or long term, Egypt has little choice but to hedge.”

Schanzer added that Egypt has effectively been given little choice but to look toward Russia and Iran for assistance.

“There is a saying, ‘As Egypt goes, so goes the Middle East,’” he said. “Of course, Egypt has lost much of its influence in recent years and is no longer the political capital of the Arab world, but its rupture with the U.S. could still impact the political climate across the region.”

In Israel, which signed a peace agreement with Egypt in 1979 and cooperates closely with its neighbor in the areas of security and energy, the prospect of it having warmer ties with Iran is not yet cause for concern, those interviewed by JI said.

“From the perspective of Israel, the normalization process between Egypt and Iran isn’t a strictly [a] zero-sum equation,” INSS’ Winter explained. “The improved rapport between these nations need not necessarily come at the detriment of Israel-Egypt relations or jeopardize essential Israeli interests.”

However, he suggested, “Jerusalem

ought to start conducting an objective assessment of the unfolding scenario, considering its distinct parameters.”

“Israel shares common objectives with Egypt, such as fostering collaboration within the Eastern Mediterranean’s gas sector, diminishing the sway of Islamic Jihad and Hamas in the Gaza Strip and mitigating the menace of terrorism stemming from Iran and its regional proxies,” Winter explained.

“The reinforcement of Arab-Iranian ties, including those involving Egypt and Iran, brings forth specific challenges for Israel,” he said. “Such developments could potentially help Iran alleviate its regional isolation, amplify its influence within the region and conceivably undermine the collective regional stance against Iran.”

The Truman Institute’s Ma’oz also said he believed Israel was not overly concerned about the possible Egyptian-Iranian diplomatic realignment and highlighted that under the current Israeli government, relations with Egypt were unlikely to change for the better.

“Israel is satisfied with keeping its relations with Egypt the way they are,” he said. “That means having a security and energy cooperation but not full reconciliation because of the Palestinian issue.”

Ma’oz noted that despite the governmental and security ties between the two countries, it was still a cool peace and, he highlighted, that Egypt has purposely held back from joining the momentum of the Abraham Accords due to the pro-Palestinian sentiment in the country.

“Israel under this government is not interested in addressing the Palestinian issue,” he said, explaining that Egypt, as well as Jordan, which also has a peace treaty with Israel, “are still interested in adopting the Saudi Peace Initiative, which speaks about the creation of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital and other issues.”

“The current [Israeli] government is not going to do this,” reasoned Ma’oz. “They are quite satisfied with the current relationship of peace without full reconciliation.” ♦

Plunge in venture capital funding threatens prospects for Gulf startups

Economic uncertainty has many looking to high-wattage events like the Future Investment Initiative in Riyadh and the Cop28 climate conference to stoke investor interest

By Kelsey Warner

The article first appeared in The Circuit.

Philip Bahoshy has spent more time than usual in the last few weeks trying to calm Gulf investors, startup founders and government ministers who are alarmed by the slowdown in venture capital funding.

As investment plunged globally in the first half of 2023, the chief executive of Magnitt, a Dubai-based tracker of VC data, finds himself now in a classic example of “don’t shoot the messenger.”

Venture activity in the Middle East and North Africa faced a significant decline year-on-year, posting a total of \$1.1 billion in funds raised across 193 deals: a 41% drop in funding and a 64% decline in the number of transactions.

“This is the first time I actually did a road show to meet ministers and our key clients because I wanted to make sure that people understood the data, which is not reflecting positively,” Bahoshy told *The Circuit*.

While the drop mirrors global trends – higher interest rates and fluctuating capital markets are muting investor appetite worldwide – the calendar didn’t help.

The second quarter exhibited a more pronounced slowdown, exacerbated by the holy month of Ramadan and two Muslim Eid holidays that then transitioned to the dog days of summer, both typically less active times for the region, Bahoshy noted.

Three large deals have accounted for more than half of the funds raised so far this year. Saudi Arabia’s gifting company Floward and grocery delivery service Nana raised \$156 million and \$133 million, respectively, in Series C rounds. Egypt-based e-commerce platform Halan raised \$260

million in equity financing.

Late-stage rounds, which were once dominated by international funds, are now being led by regional investors as outside players retrench.

The number of investors participating in the MENA region’s VC ecosystem fell by 55% – from 353 investors in the first half of 2022 to 159 in the same period this year – according to Magnitt. Only a third came from outside the region.

In Israel, which has the world’s highest number of startups per capita, companies raised \$3.7 billion in the first six months of 2023, a 68% drop from the same period last year and the lowest amount of technology investment at the midyear point since 2018.

Several years ago, big names like Sequoia Capital, SoftBank, Naspers and Tiger Global were making plays in the region.

“We [now] see an alarming gap in capital,” Luca Barbi, chief operating officer of STV, an active growth stage VC fund with Saudi founders, told *The Circuit*.

“Those [international] players are not active anymore in the Middle East because the context now is more challenging... and they’re now focusing more on their core markets,” he said, leaving a gap in growth-stage funding.

While there is a healthy pipeline of growth-stage companies, a number of which are reporting \$100 million or more in revenues and some approaching break-even, Barbi said there is a shortage of “credible investors supporting them to go further.”

For much of 2023, a prevailing narrative has been that the greatest fundraising opportunities are in the Gulf.

Entrepreneurs and investors from the West, including Adam Neumann, Marc

Andreessen and Nelson Peltz, have been vocal in their support for the economic transformations underway in Saudi Arabia and the UAE in particular, underpinned by the countries’ sovereign wealth funds.

But to raise funds in the Gulf now means a certain percentage needs to be reinvested back into those local markets, Bahoshy said, a reality that may be slowing activity.

“I think that the sovereigns are right at the beginning to say, if you want to come and take our dry powder, the requirements will be that a certain percentage of that needs to be deployed back into our local markets,” Bahoshy said.

“That is a mandate that many of these people that are coming here aren’t necessarily comfortable with doing yet.”

As the summer wanes, attention will eventually turn to the high-wattage international events being hosted in the region.

Gitex, Dubai’s major technology conference, Riyadh’s Future Investment Initiative and the United Nations COP28 climate conference, hosted by the UAE, are all coming up in the fourth quarter.

Each offers a chance to revive the narrative that the region is on the move, and stimulate investor appetites.

“[If] people start deploying later in the year, the picture might change quite rapidly,” Bahoshy said. For now, that appears unlikely.

Arjun Vir Singh, a financial services consultant who specializes in fintechs with a focus on the Gulf, expected the drop-off in investment to be much worse, with farther reaching impacts.

“I was expecting greater blood in the street,” he told *The Circuit*. “At the same time, I don’t know how businesses are

staying afloat.”

He predicted an influx in mergers and acquisitions in the months ahead.

Barbi, of STV, expects more MENA startups to sell shares on the Saudi Exchange. Those that survive this downturn, “will be

strong enough to stand alone,” he said. ♦

AUGUST 24, 2023

Hawaii Gov. Josh Green faces his biggest test

The state's second Jewish governor, who shepherded the state through the pandemic, finds himself in the national spotlight after the devastating Maui wildfires, which killed at least 115

By Gabby Deutch

When a wildfire ignited on the Hawaiian island of Maui earlier this month, the state's governor was thousands of miles away, at a family reunion in Massachusetts.

Two days later, after the flames were extinguished and the devastation in the town of Lahaina became painfully clear, Gov. Josh Green was back in the Aloha State and standing in front of an object that was by then familiar to all Hawaiians: a whiteboard.

Green, an emergency room physician who first moved to Hawaii after medical school to work in rural hospitals, stood next to that whiteboard nearly everyday of the COVID-19 pandemic, when — as lieutenant governor — he oversaw the state's response to the public health crisis.

Now, instead of reciting numbers about the virus case count and mortality rate, he was sharing the growing numbers of fatalities and buildings destroyed by the fires, and telling Maui residents how to access much-needed relief. The official death toll on Tuesday hit 115, but more than 1,000 people remain missing more than two weeks after the fires.

“This is the first time for me as an executive that I've been tasked with something outside my absolute comfort zone,” Green, a Democrat, told *The New York Times* recently. “Covid was not difficult for me to deal with because I was a health care

provider practicing public health.”

He earned the trust of many Hawaiians during the pandemic by taking action early to shut down nonessential travel to the state from the mainland and implementing restrictions that gave Hawaii the second-lowest COVID-19 mortality rate in the nation. Now, the state's response to the devastating fires in Maui presents an urgent leadership test for Green. Can Green — an outsider from the mainland who is now the fact of the state's politics, and one of the most popular governors in the nation — meet the moment?

At first glance, there's no obvious throughline in Green's journey from his hometown of Kingston, N.Y., to Washington Place, the governor's residence in Honolulu. His family moved to Pittsburgh when he was young, and Green, who is Jewish, attended college at Swarthmore and medical school at Pennsylvania State University. He came to Hawaii's Big Island in 2000 as a member of the National Health Service Corps and never left.

That's a common story for people from the mainland who make Hawaii their home, including many of the more than 7,000 Jews who live in the state. Russell Ruderman, a former state senator who served with Green in the legislature, visited Hawaii for a business convention decades ago and fell in love.

He and Green “bonded a little bit because we were both Jews from Pennsylvania,” Ruderman told *Jewish Insider*. “Most people in politics here are born and raised, and if you come from somewhere else you kind of have to overcome it.”

Green is not Hawaii's first Jewish governor. That was Linda Lingle, a Republican, who served as governor from 2002 to 2010. One of the state's two U.S. senators, Brian Schatz, is also Jewish.

“I think everyone's proud to have our second Jewish governor in a state [where] a lot of people have never met a Jew,” said Mimi Lind, executive director of Jewish Community Services of Hawaii.

Green has not made his faith a major part of his political identity. Still, in April he hosted a Passover Seder at the governor's residence alongside a Chabad rabbi. In the summer of 2021, when anti-vaccine mandate protesters set up shop outside Green's Honolulu condo, fliers featuring Green's face and the word “FRAUD” under a banner with Stars of David and the word “JEW” were distributed in the area. (A spokesperson for the governor declined to make him available for an interview.)

For Hawaiian voters, the more relevant aspect of Green's identity might be that he isn't from the state — and that he's white, as opposed to Native Hawaiian.

“I'm always sort of curious how many

people in the electorate even know that Josh Green is Jewish. He is talked about as a white governor,” said Colin Moore, a political science professor at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Green’s wife is Native Hawaiian, and the couple have two children.

“Being white and not being from Hawaii does come up in elections all the time,” Moore continued. Only a quarter of Hawaiians are white.

Green’s turn to politics came just a few years after he moved to Hawaii. He was elected to the Statehouse in 2004 and the state Senate four years later, eventually rising in the ranks to become majority leader.

“He was always a great communicator. He was always a great fundraiser,” said Moore. “I always thought he has great instincts.”

Ruderman said he and Green were part of a group of friends in the legislature known as the “Chess Club,” which is not — as it might seem — a reference to their ability to successfully play political 4D-chess.

“I think that’s a nod to us being kind of nerdy,” Ruderman explained.

Green was not always seen as a rising political star, but his bid for lieutenant governor in 2018 made his ambitions clear. He narrowly won the primary.

“The only reason to have that job is to run for governor or something else,” said Moore. “It wasn’t really until COVID, and his I think pretty tremendous performance communicating the crisis on his famous whiteboard, that really created his reputation and made him an almost unbeatable candidate for governor.”

Besides his use of the ever-present whiteboard, during the pandemic Green also moonlighted in rural emergency rooms. By the time he ran for governor in 2022, Green was easy to spot at political events: He was the guy wearing medical scrubs. Even now, when he no longer works in hospitals due to ethics laws barring Hawaii governors from other employment opportunities, he still sometimes posts videos from his home where his casual weekend attire appears to be scrubs. It might be a shtick, but whatever he’s doing seems to be working: In July, his approval rating was 64%.

Now, in the aftermath of the Maui fires, Green’s challenges range from the

immediate — coordinating local, state and federal resources to oversee an increasingly desperate and unlikely search for survivors — to the immense, like how to rebuild and who should be part of that process, or who bears responsibility for the fires.

But Green’s COVID-19 playbook does not map perfectly onto this new crisis. David Shapiro, a longtime Hawaii political journalist, criticized Green in a recent column in the *Honolulu Star-Advertiser*.

“During the COVID-19 pandemic, then-Lt. Gov. Josh Green’s whiteboard briefings on Facebook were popular because he often imparted key factual information,” Shapiro wrote. “His daily briefings in the Lahaina wildfire tragedy get more mixed reviews because he too frequently moves beyond facts and launches into speculation, promises he lacks the power to keep and self-aggrandizement.”

Before the fire, Green’s biggest concern had been homelessness, a problem that is now exponentially compounded in Lahaina. Earlier this summer, he had vowed to cut some regulations on home development to ramp up construction, a plan that is now on pause. But some Hawaiians fear that he will be too quick to support developers and wealthy out-of-towners who might want to buy up charred lots in Maui. He said last week that he was considering ways to pause or slow down sales of damaged and destroyed properties.

Then there are the questions of whether state and local officials were too slow to alert Lahaina residents to the fast-spreading fires, and who might be at fault for the blaze. Green has ordered a comprehensive review of the state’s warning systems and its largest utility company, as questions have emerged about the role power lines played in starting the fire.

“The real challenge is going to be three to six months from now, as the frustration grows, as he tries to navigate how to lead the effort, and then also just how to hold parts of the state that clearly failed in their response to the fire accountable,” Moore said.

Amid the state’s vaccination campaign in 2021, Green offered himself a note of praise: “I’ve become like a part of the family for most of the state,” he told the *Washington Post*. “I hear that every five minutes out there, when I’m walking around at the

grocery store. It appears that I’ve formed a bond with people. Not just the Democratic Party electorate, or the primary electorate, but everybody.”

Will the governor’s tight bond with the people of Hawaii weather the traumatic wildfires? In the 2002 Disney film “Lilo and Stitch,” which takes place in Hawaii, one of the most memorable lines describes Green’s burden: “*Ohana* means family, and family means nobody is left behind or forgotten.” It will take months to know whether the people of Lahaina will be left behind. ♦

In Ohio, Frank LaRose looks for his lane

The Ohio secretary of state is facing a three-way primary ahead of next November's general election against Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-OH)

By Matthew Kassel

Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose entered the race for Senate last month with an enviable profile as a pragmatic conservative with a record of winning statewide races and boasting an early polling lead over his GOP primary rivals. LaRose's military service also distinguishes him in a field that includes two wealthy businessmen vying to take on Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-OH), seen as a vulnerable incumbent, in the November 2024 election.

But as he has attempted to stake out some middle ground while facing opponents representing both the pro-Trump and Trump-critical sides of the GOP, he increasingly finds himself without a clear political identity.

His recent high-profile efforts to raise the threshold for amending the Ohio constitution — in a bid to maintain strict abortion regulations — failed overwhelmingly in a state that has become reliably Republican.

And as LaRose tries to curry favor with Trump — and his party's Trump-friendly MAGA base — he's found himself changing his views on key issues.

In a recent interview with *Jewish Insider*, LaRose, 44, maintained that he is "likely" to receive Trump's blessing, noting that the former president endorsed his reelection campaign last cycle. "He wants to be with somebody who can win the race and also be a good ally of his in the Senate, which I would be," said LaRose. "I'm the only candidate in this race who's ever been endorsed by President Trump."

While LaRose has privately raised doubts that Trump's endorsement still "matters" to most Republican voters, according to leaked audio obtained by *Politico*, he stressed to *JI* that he "would love to have" the former president's backing, which could be decisive in a state Trump won by eight points in

2020. His hope for the nod "doesn't mean we agree on everything," LaRose said, clarifying that their differences are "mostly stylistic."

"He's got a style all his own. Some people like it, others find it not ideal," LaRose said diplomatically of Trump, whose third presidential campaign he himself endorsed last month. "I tend to have a more Midwestern approach to things in the way that I interact with people — maybe a little bit less abrasive. But he's also been very successful in life by being tough."

Last week, in a move that some critics interpreted as a cynical play to appease the former president, LaRose hastily fired a top communications aide facing backlash over past tweets hostile to Trump.

Days earlier, LaRose himself had reportedly drawn scrutiny from Trump when, in an interview with NBC News' Chuck Todd, he tentatively affirmed former Vice President Mike Pence's decision to defy his boss and certify the 2020 election results. A campaign strategist later walked back the comments, claiming that LaRose "wasn't expressing agreement with or praise for" Pence's "actions."

In recent years, LaRose has also been critical of the former president. In 2019, for instance, he denounced some of Trump's tweets as "racist" while asserting that the former president had made statements he viewed as "false." Shortly after the 2020 election, LaRose, a former state senator who oversees Ohio's elections as secretary of state, rebuked Trump's efforts to cast doubt on the outcome, claiming it was "irresponsible to fearmonger about elections administration."

The whiplash has fueled skepticism that LaRose will be capable of winning Trump's endorsement over a top primary rival, Bernie Moreno, a Cleveland entrepreneur who has a warm relationship with the

former president. While Moreno, for his part, once bashed Trump as a "lunatic invading the party," he has since refashioned himself as a MAGA hardliner who refuses to acknowledge that Trump lost the election and downplays the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol. A third candidate, Matt Dolan, a Republican state senator whose family owns the Cleveland Guardians baseball team, has said he is uninterested in Trump's endorsement.

LaRose is also facing questions about his efforts to preserve abortion regulations in the state. This month, Ohio voters decisively rejected a proposed measure to raise the threshold for amending the state constitution, seen as a subtext for thwarting an abortion-rights initiative on the November ballot. LaRose made himself the public face of the ballot measure, a decision he has continued to defend.

"I started working on this because it's something I care about, and I don't really give a darn how it impacts my Senate campaign because I do what's best for Ohio, not what is in my own best interest," he told *JI* days after the vote. "In fact, if I was just looking to do what's in my own best interest, then maybe I would just sit quietly and raise money for my Senate campaign."

While he characterized himself as "the Goliath in polling," LaRose suggested that he is "the David when it comes to personal wealth," a reference to his primary rivals, who can self-fund their campaigns. The bigger challenge for LaRose is whether he can deftly straddle the position he occupies between his opponents' differing approaches to Trump.

Unlike Dolan, who has long been openly critical of Trump, LaRose has largely tempered his past doubts about the former president. But in contrast with Moreno, who has actively worked to ingratiate himself

with Trump and his allies, the secretary of state has only recently worked to curry favor with the former president in order to win his endorsement — or keep him neutral in the primary.

Speaking with JI earlier this month, LaRose expressed opposition to the mounting number of criminal indictments filed against Trump, which he criticized as “misguided” and politically motivated. “I think that not just to me, but to many Americans, it appears pretty evident that the Justice Department, which works for the president, is targeting the person who is the president’s most likely political rival next year,” LaRose argued, invoking an oft-repeated Republican attack line. “That’s pretty deeply concerning.”

But LaRose found himself backed into a kind of semantic trap as he continued to explain his view. “Nobody’s above the law, but I look at others that have done what seemed to be pretty similar things that never faced this kind of scrutiny,” he elaborated, before hastening to correct his wording. “I should restate that — who were *accused* of doing similar things but never were investigated and targeted in this way.”

One area where LaRose disagrees with Trump is over Ukraine. LaRose, a former Green Beret who led a NATO peacekeeping mission in Kosovo in the early 2000s, is a staunch supporter of supporting Ukraine in its war against Russia’s invasion. Trump has opposed U.S. funding to Ukraine and claimed that the war is not a vital U.S. interest — a position echoed by Moreno, who has voiced skepticism of U.S. involvement in the conflict.

“I think it’s vital that the Ukrainians win this,” LaRose countered, emphasizing that he is “definitely on the side of the Ukrainian freedom fighters” and wants “to see them be successful.”

But while LaRose is supportive of Ukraine, whose presidential election he observed firsthand as part of an American delegation in 2019, he does not believe it is the U.S. government’s “responsibility to bear more than” its “share of the burden,” he said, claiming that “there is a limit” to how much the U.S. should invest in the conflict. There are other strategic avenues to explore, he argued, including aggressively countering Russian misinformation and training

Ukrainian soldiers in allied NATO countries before sending them back to the front lines.

Meanwhile, LaRose suggested that the Biden administration can more meaningfully “leverage” its continued investment in Ukraine to exert pressure on European allies to step up. “The way that the Biden administration has been doing this has been incredibly haphazard,” LaRose said. “We need to do what’s in the strategic, best interest of the United States of America, and sometimes that means helping to equip our allies,” he added. “But more often, what it means doing is working to make sure that the rest of the world is doing their part as well.”

Despite such reasoning, LaRose, who remains an Army reservist, made sure to clarify that he leans towards the hawkish wing of his party on foreign policy and does not agree with the growing number of isolationists emerging within the GOP including Sen. J.D. Vance (R-OH), an outspoken Trump ally who has endorsed Moreno’s campaign.

“I think there are too many within my party right now who are dabbling in isolationism, and it’s beyond just Ukraine,” LaRose told JI. “I think it is a fundamentally true statement that America is safer and more prosperous when we play a leading role in the world.”

“If we’re not engaging with the rest of the planet, we’re doing America a disservice — and we’ve seen this in the last century to tragic effect, specifically for the Jewish community,” LaRose continued. “When you appease and ignore a threat, it gets worse — it doesn’t get better.”

Embracing a global leadership role “is essential for America’s safety and also for stability around the world,” LaRose averred. “I’m one who believes that you make an analysis of, ‘Is this in the best interest of the people of the United States?’ And if it is, then you engage in a smart and aggressive way to advance that interest. That means in Ukraine, that means as it relates to making sure that the Iranians do not acquire nuclear weapons — and in supporting one of our best allies in the world, the State of Israel.”

The Akron native, who described himself as a “proud Zionist,” said he would be a stalwart supporter of Israel in the Senate. “I would be not just a casual vote in

favor of things like funding Iron Dome” and “opposing BDS,” he explained, referring to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement targeting the Jewish state. “I would be a champion on those and many other things to advance and strengthen the relationship between the United States and the State of Israel.”

“The United States was Israel’s first ally,” he said. “We were the first nation to recognize the modern State of Israel, and we are still Israel’s most crucial ally.”

In February, LaRose made his fifth trip to Israel, touring the country on a Republican leadership seminar sponsored by the AIPAC-affiliated American Israel Education Foundation. His visit coincided with the beginning of mass protests against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s proposed judicial overhaul. “In Tel Aviv, I saw the demonstrations as they were first happening,” he recalled.

The nature of the emerging Israeli “debate,” in his view, carried some “echoes” of the heated conversation around Ohio’s failed referendum this month to raise the voting threshold for adding amendments to the state constitution.

“There’s always this careful balance between executive, legislative and judicial, and of course, in Israel, the executive and legislative kind of run together with the Knesset and the prime minister,” LaRose said, without directly endorsing the overhaul. “But having these balances between the executive and legislative branch and the judicial branch is important, and it’s important one side not become more powerful than it should be. I trust the Israeli people to work out that balance in their own way.”

In the meantime, LaRose is facing his own challenges at home as he seeks to win favor with Trump while tenuously balancing his traditionally conservative principles. Taking a not-so-veiled jab at Moreno, LaRose insisted that he “can be a great Trump supporter” without trying “to be a cheap knockoff” of the former president. “I think there are too many candidates who have tried to just actually play a role where they’re going to try to act the way he acts, and that’s silly.”

“I’m gonna be myself, and part of who I am is that I endorsed President Trump. I

believe in his leadership,” he said. “But I’m gonna be me.” ♦

AUGUST 24, 2023

Sandlers, simchas and sisterhood

Sammi Cohen, director of ‘You Are So Not Invited To My Bat Mitzvah,’ discusses the making of the Jewish-centric film and the universality of growing up

By **Tori Bergel**

Growing up can be an exciting, awkward and often incredibly trying time no matter who you are: puberty, first crushes and a lack of self-understanding all add to the journey that is adolescence. For Jewish children, that milestone comes with Torah portions and Bible study, deejay-prompted slow dances, Coke and Pepsi and plenty of drama — an experience director Sammi Cohen looked to capture with their new movie, “You Are So Not Invited To My Bat Mitzvah,” which premieres Friday on Netflix.

“When I first read the script, I was just like, ‘A bat mitzvah movie, finally!’ like, ‘Finally, why has this taken so long?’” Cohen told *Jewish Insider* last week. “What was fun is it felt so personal to being a Jewish kid and this very specific moment in life, but it also felt so universal.”

The film centers around Stacy Friedman (played by Adam Sandler’s daughter, Sunny, in her first major starring role) and best friend Lydia Rodriguez Katz as they prepare for their upcoming bat mitzvahs; when jealousy and the affection of the middle school soccer star come between the two girls, their plans to have the best bat mitzvah parties of their class start to fall apart.

“We put a lot of weight on romantic relationships, even in coming-of-age stories, and I think I was excited outside of the Judaism too that this is about two best friends. It’s a platonic love story between these two best friends, and I think the idea of friendship and forgiveness and learning about who you are is also so relevant to

these relationships,” Cohen said. “Friends teach us who we are.”

Also central to the story is Stacy’s family, played by Idina Menzel, Adam Sandler and Sandler’s eldest daughter Sadie. Jackie Sandler, who has been married to her comedian husband since 2003, plays Lydia’s mom, Gabi, who’s going through a tough divorce.

“You Are So Not Invited” is the latest in a series of movies to come out this summer featuring or inspired by Jewish individuals. Late April saw “Are You There, God? It’s Me, Margaret,” a film based on the beloved novel of the same name by Jewish author Judy Blume, followed in July by two blockbusters — “Oppenheimer,” about the Jewish physicist behind the atomic bomb, and Greta Gerwig’s “Barbie,” a film based on the wildly popular doll created by Jewish businesswoman Ruth Handler. On Friday, the same day “You Are So Not Invited” starts streaming on Netflix, director Guy Nattiv’s Golda Meir biopic hits theaters.

“It’s kind of time,” Cohen said. “A lot of the movies about being Jewish I think, necessarily so, are about a really dark time in our history, and I think what’s really fun is I’m excited to make a movie that makes Jewish people feel seen and celebrated.”

To Cohen, “You Are So Not Invited” is a way for audiences to get a real look into Judaism; the fun, goofy and cool aspects of living as a Jewish person that aren’t typically displayed on screen.

“There’s a lot of care and dedication that goes into the prepping for the bat

mitzvah, and there’s this serious side to us, but being Jewish is, you know, it’s family, it’s community, it’s coming together and like eating food and dancing, and it’s so beautifully, wonderfully Jewish,” Cohen said. “It’s exciting for the world to get to see us like, we can throw a party, we can have fun. You know, we also take things seriously but like, we’re fun and we’re cool.”

Most of the cast and a large number of the film’s crew are Jewish — comedian Sarah Sherman plays the family’s rabbi, and Stacy’s Hebrew school teacher, Rabbi Rebecca, while musician Este Haim, one third of the pop-rock trio Haim, scored the film — a choice Cohen said was intentional.

“There’s a level of authenticity that is hopefully coming across in watching the film, and I think that’s really a testament to the people involved,” Cohen said. “At the end of the day, it’s always who’s best for the job, but even with Este, like, it really made sense.”

“Everyone got to bring themselves to their roles,” Cohen added.

Despite centering on a specifically Jewish ritual, Cohen stressed the film’s universality. Growing up, making mistakes and learning about oneself are all fundamental Jewish experiences, Cohen said, but they also resonate with everyone.

“My hope is really that people start to embrace our differences by celebrating those similarities,” Cohen added. “I want people to learn about being Jewish and be like, ‘Oh, hey, we have someone like that,’ ‘Oh, that’s cool, being Jewish sounds fun.’”

“For the Jewish kids, the specificity of the world makes us feel seen and feels authentic, but there’s so much to relate to,” they added.

Outside of the two friends, Cohen sees the Friedman family as “the heart of this movie,” a family whose portrayal will likely ring true with many Jews. For Cohen, who grew up Reform in the suburban Los Angeles neighborhood of Woodland Hills, there are moments of nostalgia throughout the film.

“I grew up celebrating the High Holidays, going to temple, when I was old enough I went on Birthright, like, tonight I’m going to Shabbat with my community here in L.A.,” Cohen said. “I think there’s some aspects of the bat mitzvah that have not changed at all, which is really fun.”

In the same vein, however, as a progressive, queer, nonbinary person who wasn’t out at the time, there were also moments of Cohen’s childhood where they didn’t always feel like they “necessarily fit into every facet of [Judaism].” For that reason, they were excited to add some of those missing pieces into “You Are So Not Invited.”

“The first party [Stacy and Lydia] go to is actually a b’nai mitzvah for a nonbinary kid,” Cohen said. “It’s not anything we harp on, you probably won’t even notice it, but I was kind of excited to go, ‘Ooh, if I was making this for me as a kid, what are the little details I’d add?’ and that was one of them.”

Diversity and inclusivity are continuous themes throughout the film, a change from the eponymous 2001 novel by Fiona Rosenbloom that the film is based on. Otherwise, Cohen says, “the heart of the book lends itself to the heart of the film.”

“The movie is a more progressive and modern telling of the 2001 source material it’s based on,” Cohen said. “I think the movie is a little more inclusive, queer, body positive, progressive when it comes to social issues and family dynamics and gender, but the heart of the movie, and Stacey, is [true to the original].”

Working with the Sandler family was a “dream come true” for Cohen, who quickly felt like “part of the family.”

“That’s what they do, in general. They’re just warm, very hard-working, very dedicated, passionate, but also just really

take a lot of care in taking care of people.” Cohen said. “I learned from [Adam] Sandler — it’s not about making movies, it’s about making movies with people you love and trust.”

The Sandler family were always set to star together — in addition to his leading role, Adam Sandler produced the film, alongside his production company, Happy Madison Productions — which created a natural chemistry on set. But the film mirrored life in more ways than one. Right before production began, Sunny celebrated her actual bat mitzvah, a personal detail of which actually made it into the film.

“When [Sunny’s] done reading her Torah portion in the movie, she goes, ‘I did it!’ Like she just, to herself without thinking she goes, ‘I did it!’” Cohen recalled. “She did that, it was so charming, at the actual service, like she did that in real life, and it almost made me cry, because I don’t even know if she remembered saying it, but she just said it, and it was this thing that I think we all relate to. Like when you’ve worked so hard to do something and you get through it and you’re done, it was this vocalized, internal feeling that I’ve had in the past, so I went that is so sweet and real, and so we did that in the movie too.”

None of the Sandler family, nor the rest of the film’s cast, have been able to promote the project due to the ongoing SAG-AFTRA strike, but Cohen is still excited to be able to share the film with audiences.

“I’m a director, and I absolutely love what I do more than anything else, but I’m nothing without my writers, without the actors, without the hundreds of people working on this movie,” Cohen said. “I am just one small part of this very big puzzle, and so I really hope that the strike ends and that the actors and the writers get what they deserve so we can get back to work, because I love work.”

“But the movie itself, you know, I wish we could all be out talking about the movie, but we luckily still get to see this thing come out in a week,” they added.

The entire movie is a lesson on forgiveness and learning to grow into one’s true self, struggles that any audience can understand.

“I love that there’s this idea of like, we all make mistakes. It’s about the choices you

make to correct those mistakes that really matter,” Cohen said. “This idea of a mitzvah being so specifically Jewish, but also good deeds, that’s just like a human thing.” ♦

Sam Berger running to fill Dan Rosenthal's shoes in Queens

Rosenthal vacated the seat to take a position at UJA-Federation of New York

By Haley Cohen

As voters in central Queens gear up for a Sept. 12 special election to fill a vacant state Assembly seat, Democratic candidate Sam Berger has emerged as the frontrunner to succeed state Assemblyman Dan Rosenthal, one of the leading Jewish advocates in the state legislature.

Rosenthal has endorsed Berger, and the former assemblyman has reportedly also been calling labor unions and advocacy groups to ensure his seat remains in Democratic control.

Berger, like Rosenthal, is an Orthodox Jew. He's also the grandson of two Holocaust survivors.

"When this opportunity came up, I met with Dan and we spoke about what the job could be, and there's a lot of good that can be done. So I said, 'OK, put me in,'" Berger told JI.

"I find any type of baseless hatred to be abhorrent," he added. "Whether it's anti-Jewish, anti-Asian, anti-elderly, baseless hate has no home in our community. The Assembly has made great strides when it comes to addressing hate crimes," he said, pointing to the Hate Crime Reporting on College Campuses bill, legislation sponsored by Rosenthal that requires colleges that receive state funding to disclose hate crimes that occur on campus.

Berger said that like Rosenthal, he would champion legislation that would "hold people accountable when they commit acts of baseless hatred. We are making them think twice and we have to maintain a laser focus in Albany to ensure there are severe repercussions when hate rears its ugly head."

Berger also touted his deep ties to the local community as a central argument for his candidacy. "I grew up [in Kew Gardens Hills], I went to law school here, and now I

have two little girls and I'm raising a family here," Berger, who graduated from St. John's Law School in the spring, said.

"I only went to law school to help people," said Berger, 25, whose mother is Paula Berger, a local Democratic district leader.

Rosenthal resigned in June to become vice president of government relations at UJA-Federation of New York. In a statement, Rosenthal said he was "confident in [Berger's] ability to advocate for the best interests of our constituents."

"His passion, dedication, and knowledge will undoubtedly serve our community well," Rosenthal said. "Sam is a devoted father, an advocate, and a proud product of the very community he aspires to serve. His personal and professional experiences equip him with the knowledge and passion needed to be an outstanding representative for our district."

District 27 covers Pomonok, Electchester, College Point, Whitestone and Kew Gardens Hills, the latter consisting of a heavily Orthodox Jewish electorate.

Berger, a father of two, said his top three priorities, if elected, would be making "strides in public safety, education and affordable living."

A product of yeshiva education, Berger said Orthodox education in New York has been "targeted and put under baseless scrutiny."

A *New York Times* investigation, published in September 2022, found that many Haredi yeshivas were not meeting state standards for secular education. A subsequent report by the city's Department of Education revealed that 18 yeshivas failed to provide adequate secular education.

"I'm proud of the education I received," Berger said. "It's disturbing to me when there's misinformed information on yeshiva schools. I stand firm in my conviction

that any genuine concerns about yeshiva schools should be addressed in an unbiased investigation. There does not seem to be a genuine intent to uplift these institutions, and there needs to be. Rather, we paint them with a broad brush based on select narratives. I will be opposing that as much as I can."

Berger will square off against Republican David Hirsch, 34, an Orthodox rabbi who works in education policy. Orthodox Jewish voters in the district have in recent years been increasingly casting ballots for GOP candidates. In 2022, Republican Lee Zeldin, a former congressman from Long Island who ran for governor against Gov. Kathy Hochul, won the district with 56% of the vote to Hochul's 44%.

At 25, Berger would be the youngest current Assembly member if elected. Rosenthal held that title when he was elected in 2017 at age 26. Rosenthal first won office in a special election to replace Michael Simanowitz, who died of cancer at 46.

Politico reported that a source in the Democratic Party said "there has been some pushback on Berger on his age and inexperience."

But Berger countered that his age and newness to politics are positives.

"I'm in a unique position at my age to bring a clear head and fresh set of eyes to Albany," he told JI.

"I'm not really here to play politics," the Democrat continued. "I haven't come into this with an eye for politics, I have an eye for helping people and I have a legal background." ♦