

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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SEPTEMBER 7, 2023

Israel on track to join U.S. Visa Waiver program as deadline looms

Israel has been eyeing entry into the visa-free travel program for 30 years, but this is the closest it has ever come to meeting all the requirements

By Ruth Marks Eglash

Israel is on track to become the next country to join the U.S.' coveted Visa Waiver Program, with an official announcement expected from the Department of Homeland Security before the end of this month, officials with knowledge of the process told *Jewish Insider*.

While some of the fine details of the arrangement still need to be resolved before Israel formally qualifies for the program, those appear to be minor matters and should be settled within the next week, according to the sources. A signing ceremony could even take place ahead of the Sept. 30 deadline set by the U.S.

If accepted, Israel will become the 41st country to join the program, which will enable most Israelis to travel visa-free to the U.S. for cultural exchanges, tourism and business purposes for visits up to three months, and the first country from the

Middle East.

Sources said it would likely take a further six weeks for the U.S. to update its Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) in order to allow Israeli nationals to register. If all goes according to plan, Israeli passport holders could be eligible to travel visa-free to the U.S. sometime in mid-November.

"Israel has met all of its commitments, and all that is left is for the U.S. to say the word," a source in Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs told *JL*.

A U.S. State Department spokesperson was more cautious, saying that Israel's application still needed to be fully processed and that Israel would face the same scrutiny as "any candidate for the VWP."

"We will carefully evaluate the government of Israel's efforts to meet the program's requirements, including extending reciprocal privileges to all U.S.

citizens – just as the United States does with citizens of all VWP countries," the spokesperson said.

"The Visa Waiver Program has many requirements beyond reciprocity, and the U.S. government continues to work with the Israeli government towards fulfilling the full range of law enforcement, national security, and immigration-related requirements," said the spokesperson.

"All these bits and pieces add up to Israel being invited to join the program by September 30, unless there is some major incident between now and then, that's my prediction," said Scott Lasensky, who worked closely on the issue in the Obama administration as a senior advisor to former U.S. Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro.

Israel has been eyeing entry into the VWP since its inception 30 years ago, and has made several attempts to meet the

strict requirements in the past, but this is the closest it has ever come to taking all the steps needed to be included.

Former U.S. Ambassador to Israel Tom Nides worked tirelessly on the VWP issue with both the current and previous Israeli governments, saying he believed that enabling citizens of the Jewish State to travel visa-free to the U.S. would be hugely beneficial for the Israeli people. He told JI in a previous interview that he did not believe this would be a gift from the Biden administration to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu – who, after eight months in office, has yet to be invited to meet with the president at the White House – but to the ordinary citizens of Israel.

Among the reasons cited in Israel as to why joining the program is so important is the emotional connection those in the Jewish state feel toward the United States. Most Israelis see the U.S. as their strongest, closest and most reliable ally. In addition, there are multiple business and travel programs connecting the two countries and, with more than 100,000 expat Israelis living in the U.S., there are also strong familial ties.

In its previous efforts to get accepted into the program, Israel was unable to meet the program's criteria, which includes issuing biometric passports and machines at airports or border crossings that can read them, as well as giving U.S. officials access to criminal databases, security information and airline passenger lists.

One of the most difficult requirements for Israel to meet has been reducing the nonimmigrant visa refusal rate to less than 3%, a factor it struggled with until very recently, and ensuring reciprocal visa entry privileges to all U.S. citizens, including those of Palestinian heritage or those who hold dual nationalities with countries deemed enemy states by Israel.

Since the early 1990s, based on past peace agreements, Israel has required Palestinians with foreign citizenship along with all Palestinians listed on its civilian population registry to enter the country via its land crossing with Jordan, and not through Ben Gurion International Airport. This has led to many Palestinian Americans arriving at the country's main airport only to be denied entry, drawing rebuke from some in the U.S. for the unequal treatment of some

of its citizens.

Recently, however, the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding regarding reciprocal privileges, which included ensuring that Israel allows entry to all U.S. citizens and nationals, regardless of whether they appear on the Palestinian population registry.

The new travel policies were immediately implemented, including for Palestinian holders of U.S. passports living in the West Bank. Due to the complicated security situation in Gaza, however, Israel requested more time to create procedures that will allow them to enter Israel via the Erez Border Crossing. The start of those procedures is expected to commence next week.

"All U.S. citizens traveling to Israel with a valid U.S. passport are to be recognized by Israel as U.S. citizens and receive equal treatment without regard to race, religion, or national origin," a statement issued by the U.S. Embassy in Israel last month read.

"All U.S. citizens who request entry into Israel for short-term visits are expected to be approved, barring legitimate security, criminal, health, or immigration concerns – which could justify a different result based on a uniform application of Israeli legal standards," clarified the statement.

In order to facilitate a system whereby the estimated 50,000 Palestinians living in the West Bank may enter Israel, Israel's military authority that coordinates government activities in the Palestinian territories, COGAT, created an online application form easing their crossing through land checkpoints into Israel.

According to statistics obtained by JI, more than 12,000 Palestinians with U.S. passports residing in the West Bank have already made use of the new visa-free arrangement and entered Israel, with an estimated 5,000 dual U.S. citizens listed on Israel's Palestinian population registry landing in the country from abroad.

In May 2024, Israel is expected to launch Marom, a new travel authorization system for all foreign visitors to Israel, including U.S. citizens. That service will also be available to Palestinians with U.S. citizenship who reside in the West Bank or Gaza and who wish to travel to and through Israel.

In its statement, the U.S. Embassy in

Jerusalem said that Israel is currently working to train its border personnel on how to implement this new and sensitive travel policy. It urged U.S. citizens who believe they have been denied entry or faced discriminatory treatment are able to report it to the American Citizens Services Unit at the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem or at the Embassy Branch Office in Tel Aviv, using the online reporting form.

In Israel, the security establishment has expressed some concerns about the new entry arrangements, particularly in the context of the so-called "family reunification" law, which prohibits Palestinians from residing permanently in Israel even if they marry Israeli citizens. Palestinians with American citizenship will be able to circumvent that law under the new system, some believe.

Last week, Israeli Tourism Minister Haim Katz, one of the more moderate figures in Netanyahu's hardline government, also reportedly expressed his concerns about allowing thousands of Palestinians into Israel.

Israel is in a "crazy chase after the visa to the U.S. that will require us to let unwanted Palestinian factors into Israel," he reportedly said in a recent cabinet meeting, according to Israeli media.

A spokesperson for the minister would not confirm or deny the report, telling JI, "This is a complex topic, with clear positive aspects, along with security concessions."

In the U.S., some progressive legislators have also expressed concerns about Israel joining the program.

Sen. Chris Van Hollen (D-MD), who previously argued that Israel is not ready to enter the program this year, told JI this week that he hadn't received any recent updates from the administration but that the changes to Israeli policy had not ameliorated his concerns.

"I think there are still some fundamental problems," Van Hollen said.

Senior political correspondent Lahav Harkov, Washington correspondent Gabby Deutch and Capitol Hill reporter Marc Rod contributed to this report. ♦

Top Republican donors like Nikki Haley, but wary of financial commitment

Haley's debate performance won rave reviews from GOP heavy hitters, but she's not yet winning many new endorsements

By Matthew Kassel

Two weeks after her standout performance in the first Republican presidential debate, Nikki Haley is seeking to ride a wave of momentum as she gains traction in early primary states, sees a boost in national polling and pads her campaign war chest with a recent influx of donations.

The former U.N. ambassador, who had been struggling to catch on until she took the debate stage in Milwaukee last month, is now tied for second place in New Hampshire and has nearly quadrupled her support at the national level, according to several new public polls. She raised more than \$1 million in less than 72 hours after the debate, according to her campaign. And political commentators are increasingly buzzing about her prospects as she prepares for the next debate later this month.

Still, some establishment GOP donors and traditional conservative activists who have long admired Haley remain wary that her recent surge will ultimately translate into a winning primary campaign, as former President Donald Trump, who skipped the debate, continues to hold a daunting, double-digit lead over every candidate in the Republican field.

"I like Nikki Haley a lot and I think she did well at the debate," one Republican donor said in an interview with *Jewish Insider* on Tuesday, praising her comments on government spending as well as her positions on abortion and approach to foreign policy.

But in spite of her showing at the debate, where she came out swinging against Vivek Ramaswamy over his statements on Israel and other matters, the donor said he wasn't ready to back Haley's campaign just yet — notwithstanding his belief that the Republican ticket will be "stronger" if

Trump isn't the nominee. "It's hard to make the large investment without a clear path," the donor, who asked to remain anonymous to protect his privacy, explained.

In national polls, Haley has drawn support, on average, in the mid-single digits, while recent polling in early primary states including New Hampshire and Iowa has put her in the low double digits — either tied with or trailing behind Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida.

The donor expressed cautious optimism that Haley, 51, will find new "opportunities" to break out, even while acknowledging that his "personal preference" also leans in favor of Sen. Tim Scott (R-SC), whose debate performance failed to result in a national uptick in voter support.

Eric Levine, a prominent GOP fundraiser and anti-Trump conservative who sits on the board of the Republican Jewish Coalition, went even further when he circulated a detailed memo on Monday announcing his endorsement of Scott over Haley, despite having contributed around \$10,000 to her campaign.

"Tim Scott and Nikki Haley are both magnificent candidates," Levine wrote in an email, praising the two South Carolina Republicans as Ronald Reagan acolytes with strong foreign policy records, including on Ukraine and Israel.

He said he was choosing Scott instead of Haley, a pro-Israel stalwart who has frequently spoken at RJC events, because the 57-year-old senator is, according to his assessment, "the only truly viable Trump alternative" in the race.

"Tim's likability is a critically important factor," Levine, who did not respond to a request for comment from *JI*, elaborated in his memo. "He is the single most likely candidate who Republican primary voters

can rally around. Even among voters who currently support other candidates as their first choice, the overwhelming majority view Tim favorably and pick him as their next choice."

Jon Tucker, a GOP donor and pro-Israel activist in Pittsburgh, said he had donated minimal amounts to help some candidates he likes qualify for the debate stage — including Haley and Scott, who are among his favorites in the primary. In contrast with Levine, however, he voiced skepticism that any candidate will be capable of catching up with Trump, who has continued to enjoy strong support even after a slew of recent indictments.

"Personally, I've always liked Nikki Haley, and I think that she would be able to win in November," Tucker said in an interview with *JI* on Tuesday. "But any Republican that could win a general election can't win a Republican primary, so it's a real catch-22 for these candidates. I still get the feeling that they're all fighting over table scraps and playing second fiddle to Trump."

Haley's post-debate bump, he suggested, wasn't substantial enough to convince him that he should make a more sizable donation to her campaign. "Right now, it's hard to get on anybody's bandwagon," Tucker said. "There's no good in jumping behind a candidate before they have a seemingly clear path to a primary win." "Watching this now, it's not worth a lot of mental effort, and it's probably not worth a lot of financial effort either," he concluded. "Amongst my social group there's not a lot of interest in making large donations to presidential primary candidates."

A top Republican donor in Chicago, who requested anonymity to protect his privacy, echoed that sentiment, even as he acknowledged that Haley's debate

performance had impressed him more than any candidate. “I thought she was awesome in that debate,” said the donor, who appreciated that Haley was the lone Republican onstage to go on the attack against Ramaswamy for suggesting that he would cut U.S. aid to Israel. “I’m more psyched than ever about her,” he told JI

recently. “Of all of them, she’s my fave.”

Still, the donor said he wasn’t letting his own personal excitement skew his understanding of the polls. “It doesn’t mean it’s realistic that anyone can beat Trump, given his lead,” the donor, who suspects that Trump is on track to win the nomination, cautioned.

With that in mind, the donor said he would only be likely to open his checkbook for Haley if the primary becomes significantly closer in the coming months. At this point, he reasoned, “it just seems like you’re throwing money down the drain.” ♦

SEPTEMBER 5, 2023

‘Look What You Made Me Do’ — Change my bat mitzvah date

Taylor Swift’s Eras Tour is set to be the biggest tour in music history

By Gabby Deutch

Eleven-year-old Orlie Solzman was at Jewish overnight camp when Taylor Swift made a decision that would change her life.

The pop star announced in August that she plans to add four additional North American stops to her already massive Eras Tour, including three shows in Orlie’s hometown of Indianapolis. This would be welcome news for most middle school girls to receive in a letter from home. Except Swift’s Indianapolis shows — Nov. 1-3, 2024 — fell on Orlie’s bat mitzvah weekend.

“As soon as we heard the dates, my husband’s first reaction was, ‘We’re going to have to change her bat mitzvah,’” Orlie’s mother, Andrea Solzman, recalled. Their extended family lives out of town, and the Solzmans knew hotels would be impossible to book. (Every hotel in Indianapolis is currently sold out for that weekend, still more than 14 months away, according to Hotels.com.) The Solzmans’ preferred party venue, located near Lucas Oil Stadium in downtown Indianapolis, would now be out of the question.

Within an hour, Andrea and her husband, Marc, had emailed their synagogue, Congregation Beth-El Zedek.

“We are a large enough shul that we give out these dates back when the children are in fourth grade, so this date has been on

the family’s calendar now for several years,” the synagogue’s cantor, Melissa Cohen, told *Jewish Insider*. Just one or two dates remained open, and the family settled on Labor Day weekend 2024.

“Had this happened last year, when we were still catching up with rescheduled dates [following the pandemic], I don’t know that this family would have been so lucky,” Cohen explained.

The whole matter was resolved before Orlie even knew anything was happening. She agreed with the move when she heard about it in a letter. Like her friends, she also wanted concert tickets — which her parents were not able to secure, even after waiting in Ticketmaster’s infamously long queue.

“If Taylor Swift reads this and wants to send us tickets, I mean, shoot, we will be ecstatic,” said Andrea.

Taylor Swift’s Eras Tour is projected to be the largest tour in music history, predicted to gross upwards of \$2.2 billion in the U.S. alone. The superstar recently finished the first American leg of the tour, which involved the startling feat of playing three-and-a-half hour sets three times a week over five months. She just began the tour’s global leg, which will take her to four continents over the next year, before returning to America. Within that period, she will have released at least two albums.

“People are comparing it to Grateful Dead concerts, where you’ll have 70,000 people in the stands, and then another 20,000 or 30,000 people who are just around the stadium,” said Rabbi Brett Krichiver of Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation. (Krichiver, a self-proclaimed Swiftie, managed to snag tickets for himself and his daughter.)

Swift’s effect on the local economy — and psyche — of each city she visits is indisputable. Her show brought Philadelphia its strongest weekend of hotel revenue since before the COVID-19 pandemic, according to Philadelphia Federal Reserve officials. Illinois’ governor has said Swift helped the state break tourism revenue records. Glendale, Ariz., the Phoenix suburb where Swift kicked off her tour in March, temporarily changed its name to Swift City.

The downstream impacts of Swift’s tour on the Jewish community and Jewish events are similarly stark. Now that the Eras Tour’s massive scale is known, families living in the cities she will visit next fall — Indianapolis, New Orleans, Miami and Toronto — must decide whether to move lifecycle events including bar mitzvahs and weddings. Rabbis are considering how to incorporate Swift into their teachings, and many are cheekily planning to invite her to synagogue events such as Shabbat dinners

or Sukkot gatherings (the fall harvest holiday takes place during Swift's Miami tour dates).

"Taylor Swift weekend is now part of our programming calendar. We're not going to counterprogram it," said Rabbi David Gerber of Congregation Gates of Prayer in New Orleans, where Swift is slated to perform over Simchat Torah. But in New Orleans, a city known for its eclectic cultural events and a thriving music scene, ignoring Swift would be out of the question. "Our [Shabbat] theme next week is ShaBarbenheimer ['Barbie' and 'Oppenheimer']. So it's entirely possible that we'll have, like, Swift-hat Torah or something."

The first leg of the Eras Tour was announced last November, so anyone with an event already planned for this summer didn't have enough time to make a change. Matt Goldberg got married in Minneapolis the weekend Swift played in the Twin Cities in June, and he and his wife could not get downtown hotels to give them more than five rooms for a room block.

"We just moved here last year, and all of our friends and family — we had 200 people at the wedding and 180 of them were coming from out of town. So we needed more than five hotel rooms," Goldberg said. They ended up booking a room block at a hotel in the suburbs, which worked, although their observant guests had nowhere to walk around during Shabbat.

"Was it the biggest deal? We obviously figured it out, and it was fine. But it certainly threw a wrench in our plans," Goldberg said.

Stories of Swift's tour are shared reverently, with a mix of bewilderment and awe. They take on a mythical quality, as if the unlucky masses who could not secure a seat, or could not afford to pay more than \$1,000 for a resale ticket, are lucky to simply be in the presence of those who attended the Eras Tour. (In the week after she performs in a particular city, look around: Eras Tour sweatshirts will be everywhere.)

Gayle Kertzman, director of programs, events and community relations at Toronto's Beth Tikvah Synagogue, said that the synagogue's bat mitzvah scheduled for the weekend of Swift's Toronto shows has not been changed. But she shared a story — veracity unconfirmed — that could become the stuff of legend: A girl at her daughter's

sleepaway camp, two hours north of Toronto, left one weekend for what she claimed was a mysterious "doctor's appointment." A week after getting back, she told her friends that she had actually flown to Seattle to see Swift.

In Jacksonville, a rabbi reported that her Torah study class emptied out the weekend Swift performed in Tampa, the only Florida location. One woman confided that she nearly skipped her best friend's wedding, where she signed the *ketubah*, to see Swift. At California's Camp Newman, a URJ overnight camp, several counselors made special requests during their job interviews — which took place in January — to get a night off to see Swift in San Jose in July.

Dalilah Bernier, a Jewish professional in Milwaukee, joined the frenzied masses trying to buy tickets for Swift's Chicago shows but struck out. So she agreed to staff Hillel Milwaukee's Birthright Israel trip in June; it would be her last assignment before starting a new job. But then, through a stroke of luck, she was able to land two face-value tickets to see Swift in Chicago. Bye-bye, Birthright.

She justified the move to herself by pointing out that she had already traveled to Israel, and now her staff position might go to someone who had not yet experienced a free trip to Israel: "I feel like it's very coveted to have the opportunity to staff Birthright. I don't take that for granted," she said. "I was happy to give the opportunity to someone else." She found out she got the tickets while attending the Hillel International Global Assembly in December in Dallas. (At the Hillel conference, Bernier taught a class — developed with Lily Jasper-Zaccardo, another Hillel professional — on the Torah of Taylor Swift.)

Taylor Swift-focused sermons and classes have proliferated in synagogues, religious schools and Jewish summer camps this year. Rabbi Samantha Kahn, the senior associate rabbi at Congregation B'nai Israel in Boca Raton, Fla., developed a class called "Eras Tour-ah" that she taught to dozens of teens at URJ Camp Coleman in Georgia this summer.

"It's taking something that is language that they are familiar with, and that means something to them, and helping connect it to Jewish values and Jewish lessons," said Kahn, who worked with Bernier on the

curriculum. She's since shared it with more than a dozen other rabbis.

The start of a new year of religious school will bring with it many teens who are devastated they didn't get tickets to see Swift in Miami next year. Judaism has something to say to them, according to Kahn, who pointed to a line in *Pirkei Avot*: "Your friend's dignity should be as precious to you as your own."

"I'd say to anyone who didn't get tickets, to really just remember that Taylor's lyrics, along with Jewish texts, would say, 'Don't mope, don't be sad,'" said Kahn, and "just figure out how to celebrate your love for her music in another way, and be happy for those who did get tickets."

Easier said than done: Kahn already saw Swift this year. ♦

Israeli FM Eli Cohen faces heat for diplomatic blunders

Eli Cohen is facing Netanyahu's public wrath after publicizing sensitive talks with Libya

By Lahav Harkov

Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen made the biggest international waves of his career last week, when he issued a public statement about his meeting with his Libyan counterpart Najla Mangoush, a highly unusual move when it comes to secret contacts between Israel and Arab states.

The reaction in Tripoli came almost instantly: rioting, a denial from Libyan Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh that he knew about the meeting and Mangoush's sacking. The Libyan foreign minister then fled her country in the face of death threats, first to Turkey and then to London.

Cohen has faced criticism for being dangerously indiscreet and jeopardizing Israel's fragile relations with the Arab world.

Following the publicization of the meeting, Israeli Opposition Leader Yair Lapid suggested that the incident raised questions among Arab leaders, who are looking at the state of affairs in Libya and "asking themselves: is this a country with which we can conduct foreign relations? Is this a country you can trust?... The incident with the Libyan foreign minister is amateurish, irresponsible, and a serious failure of judgment. This is a morning of national disgrace and risking human life for a headline."

One Arab diplomat — who agreed with Lapid's assessment — told *Jewish Insider* this week that Mangoush's life had been ruined and speculated that the incident could hurt the prospects of more countries establishing diplomatic ties with Israel — though he did not think it would impact Saudi normalization talks.

Cohen, 50, was a Likud activist from Holon, a suburb south of Tel Aviv, with a background in accounting and finance. He had a good relationship with then-

Communications Minister Moshe Kahlon, who ended up breaking off from Likud, forming his own Kulanu party focused on the economy, and plucking Cohen from obscurity into the Knesset in 2015.

Cohen returned to Likud when much of Kulanu was absorbed back into the party, and he is viewed as a Likud stalwart and authentic representative of its base of Mizrahi voters from humble backgrounds. He manages to toe the line of lashing out at "political rivals who never had any significant achievements" — like he did in response to the Libya backlash — while keeping clear of some of the uglier ad hominem attacks coming from his party in recent years.

In less than a decade in national politics, Cohen led the Economy and Industry Ministry and then the Intelligence Ministry, where he was instrumental in deepening Israel-Sudan relations, before becoming foreign minister.

Perhaps his biggest political achievement, however, is being the third most popular man in Likud, after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Justice Minister Yariv Levin, in last year's party primary. His popularity was what got him the Foreign Ministry post, but it wasn't enough for him to not have to share it with powerful Likud player Yisrael Katz. At the end of 2023, Katz will return to the Foreign Ministry after having served in the position for a little over a year in 2019-2020, and Cohen will replace Katz at the Energy and Infrastructure Ministry. If this government is still around in 2026, then they will trade back for a year.

Cohen's actions irked Netanyahu, even though he reportedly knew about the meeting as it came after Italian premier

Giorgia Meloni suggested that Dbeibeh's government start talking with Israel as a way to curry favor with the West. But Netanyahu still tried to distance himself from the debacle in public. The premier reiterated to Cyprus' ANT1 TV before his visit to the European island state this week that he sent a directive to all government ministries that his office must approve all meetings with countries with which Israel does not have relations. Israel has always been "very careful not to reveal" such meetings with Arab and Muslim leaders in the past, he said.

"It is very important to maintain these discreet channels which eventually can blossom and flower into open relations... They shouldn't be publicized in an uncontrolled way. This was an exception. We'll make sure it's one of a kind," Netanyahu said.

However, an Israeli source with knowledge of the Cohen-Mangoush meeting insisted that both sides agreed to make it public, and said the Libyans did not anticipate the level of violent, antisemitic blowback. The plan, the source said, was for Jerusalem to make a statement and for Tripoli to neither confirm nor deny. This way, they would get credit in the West but have plausible deniability at home. When Israeli reporters from *ynet* published the story before the official statement was released, the Israeli Foreign Ministry decided to make the announcement a day or two earlier than planned, after getting the OK from Libya, the source said.

A statement from Cohen's office emphasized that he knows how to keep a secret. The foreign minister "works regularly in open and hidden channels and many secret ways. The many achievements that he led in recent months would not have come

to fruition without discreet preparation,” his spokeswoman said, pointing to his meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in Kyiv, an agreement with Oman to allow Israeli flyovers, resolving diplomatic tensions with Poland, opening an embassy in Turkmenistan and other examples.

This is not the first time Cohen has been indiscreet, even if the results were far worse last week. He was filmed at a synagogue in Budapest this year saying that Hungary would transfer its embassy to Jerusalem. While Hungarian diplomatic sources have said that the break with EU policy is more a matter of “when” than “if,” they were caught

off-guard by the public remark and, several months later, have yet to announce the move.

Meanwhile, Cohen’s visit this week to Bahrain to dedicate the Israeli embassy in Manama could not have come at a better time for him. He met with Bahrain’s prime minister and foreign minister, and the trip went smoothly, such that his office could point to it and say that the Libya incident had not hurt Israel’s relations with Arab states.

It did, however, make for some awkward conversations with Washington, the diplomatic source admitted.

In spite of the international incident and continuing fallout, and even in spite of Netanyahu’s obvious dismay, Cohen’s domestic political position looks safe, and he is perched firmly in Likud’s top tier these days.

As one Likud insider in the Knesset put it, “no one is talking about it. The party doesn’t care about diplomatic issues unless they are trying to embarrass the other side. The Likudnik in Machaneh Yehuda [market in Jerusalem] is wooed by the successes but the politicians are always more interested in domestic politics.” ♦

SEPTEMBER 5, 2023

The long road ahead for Jack Lew

Republican senators on the Foreign Relations Committee are already signaling plans to delay Lew’s swift confirmation as ambassador to Israel

By Marc Rod

President Joe Biden’s announcement on Tuesday morning that he would nominate Jack Lew, a former Treasury secretary and White House chief of staff and an observant Orthodox Jew, as the next U.S. ambassador to Israel was met with skeptical responses from key Republican senators. That, alongside growing tensions between the administration and GOP senators over Middle East policy, could spell a difficult confirmation process for Lew.

Given that Democrats hold a majority in the Senate, they will likely have the votes to confirm Lew, barring Democratic defections, but Republicans could drag the process out for months and pressure the administration over its Israel policy.

Multiple lawmakers, including members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that will process Lew’s nomination, have already signaled that they’re considering throwing up obstacles to Lew’s swift confirmation.

Tensions between the administration

and Senate Republicans prompted a July letter, led by Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) and signed by 13 other lawmakers, including seven of the 10 Republicans on the committee. The letter accused administration officials of promulgating “policies designed to undermine” the U.S.-Israel relationship.

The senators warned that, without changes to the administration’s Israel policy “the expeditious vetting of nominees would become intractable” — a threat to block the swift confirmation of administration nominees.

“Sen. Cruz has enormous concerns with the Biden administration’s campaign against our Israeli allies,” a Cruz spokesperson said in a statement to *Jewish Insider* on Tuesday. “He has also stated repeatedly that dishonesty on the part of Biden administration Middle East nominees, in which they commit to boosting the U.S.-Israel relationship in public but then undermine it the second they’re behind closed doors, has made it difficult to expeditiously confirm them. He

will evaluate the nomination on that basis.”

Sen. Pete Ricketts (R-NE), another signatory to the Cruz letter, told JI that he hadn’t reviewed Lew’s record fully yet, but said that he remains opposed to swiftly processing nominees without “some changes with regard to policy with regard to Israel.”

Sen. Jim Risch (R-ID), the ranking member on the Foreign Relations Committee, also signed the Cruz letter. Sen. Bob Menendez (D-NJ) has maintained a policy of not moving forward with confirmation hearings on nominees without Risch’s consent as ranking member, which has, in some cases, led to monthslong delays before nominees come before the committee.

Risch did not respond to a request for comment on Lew’s nomination.

Biden’s last nominee as ambassador to Israel, Tom Nides, sailed through the committee with strong bipartisan support. Just three Republicans — Cruz and Sens.

Bill Hagerty (R-TN) and Marco Rubio (R-FL) — voted against advancing his nomination.

Lew's confirmation hearing will also likely provide an opportunity for Republican critics to litigate and voice grievances with the U.S.' Israel policy during both the Biden and Obama administrations.

"While former Treasury Under Secretary Jack Lew did not initially support President [Donald] Trump's relocation of the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem back in 2017, I hope that he today supports the full and faithful implementation of the Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995 and, in turn, opposes the re-opening of the U.S. consulate for the Palestinians in Israel's eternal and indivisible capital," Hagerty said in a statement to JI. "I look forward to Mr. Lew's confirmation hearing in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee."

Before Lew's nomination was made official, a group of House Republican lawmakers urged Biden not to nominate him, citing his involvement with the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, criticisms of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and defense of the Obama administration's decision not to veto a United Nations Security Council resolution condemning Israeli settlements.

While the House members have no formal role in Lew's confirmation, those criticisms are likely to find purchase among Senate Republicans as well.

These likely difficulties facing any Biden nominee for the ambassadorship had fueled speculation that the administration might leave the role open until after the 2024 elections.

Lew could also face questions about his role as the chairman of the board of directors of the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, a nonprofit group that seeks to promote ties between the U.S. and China.

Critics have described the group as overly China-friendly — a potential liability at a time of escalating tensions between Washington and Beijing. Republicans have previously grilled other Biden State Department nominees over their affiliations with China. Those concerns ultimately did not stop the officials in question from being confirmed.

Payouts Lew received from New York University when he departed as the school's executive vice president in 2006, including a

\$685,000 severance payment and \$440,000 in forgiven mortgage payments, also attracted scrutiny from Senate Republicans when Lew was nominated to be Treasury secretary in 2013.

Even after Lew's confirmation hearing, individual committee members have latitude to delay a committee vote on Lew — which is likely to succeed, given the Democratic majority on the panel.

And after nominees clear committee, every senator has significant ability to unilaterally block nominees from quick confirmation — whether out of concern about the individual nominees or to secure unrelated concessions. The Senate currently faces a backlog of State Department confirmations stalled by such objections.

With numerous high-priority bills, including government funding, still to be processed this year and a long backlog of other nominations, it's unclear whether Senate leadership would be willing to dedicate floor time to Lew's nomination in the near future.

Sen. Ben Cardin (D-MD), a member and former chair of SFRC, told reporters that he'd "absolutely" urge Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) to prioritize Lew's nomination and use floor time to confirm him if Republicans raise objections.

"I'm for all of our ambassadors being confirmed, but this is particularly important," Cardin said.

Among Democrats, including both pro-Israel stalwarts like Cardin and those who have offered criticisms of Israeli policy, Lew's nomination was met with support.

Cardin told reporters that "Jack Lew has the utmost respect on both sides of the aisle, he has incredible experience" and praised Lew's "knowledge of the Middle East."

"It should be, I hope, an easy confirmation process," Cardin said.

Sen. Tim Kaine (D-VA) told JI that he's "impressed with Jack Lew."

"I think the White House was considering a number of good people, but I'm a fan of his, so I was impressed to see [the nomination]," Kaine said.

Some Democratic critics of Israel have also clashed with the administration over issues like its handling of the killing of Palestinian American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, Israel's potential inclusion in the

Visa Waiver Program and Israeli settlements and violence in the West Bank. It's unclear if they'll raise their own objections to Lew's confirmation on those grounds.

Lew's nomination was also met with a warm response from Jerusalem, with Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen tweeting that Lew knows Israel "so well" and that "we look forward to working with you in the spirit of our close cooperation and alliance."

If confirmed, Lew faces a delicate period in the U.S.-Israel relationship, as the administration seeks to dissuade the governing Israeli coalition from continuing its overhaul of the Israeli judiciary and urges Israel to stop expanding settlements in the West Bank. The new ambassador would also be taking over as the administration addresses increasing violence by terrorists in and from the West Bank, the destabilization of the West Bank and vigilante violence by Israeli settlers; pursues a diplomatic agreement regarding Iran's nuclear program; and hopes to broker a normalization agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia. ♦

McBride faces competition in Delaware House race

State Treasurer Colleen Davis and Eugene Young, the director of the state housing authority, are both positioning themselves as pro-Israel candidates in the Democratic primary

By Marc Rod

State Sen. Sarah McBride, a nationally known state lawmaker, made waves as the first entrant in the primary for Delaware's open House seat in 2024. But McBride now faces possible competition, with the entry of two new candidates, State Treasurer Colleen Davis and Eugene Young, the director of the Delaware State Housing Authority, into the Democratic primary.

McBride nevertheless finds herself in a strong position — owing to her national profile as the first openly transgender state senator in the U.S., connections to the Biden family and her strong fundraising coming out of the gate. She's also been endorsed by half of the state Senate's members, as well as Delaware's attorney general and several state House members. Young and Davis, who each entered the race in late July, have yet to file initial fundraising reports.

Paul Brewer, a professor of communication and political science at the University of Delaware, told *Jewish Insider* that McBride "came out very strong with her announcement," which "pretty clearly established her as a serious candidate for the nomination."

Davis highlighted to *JI* that she's the only candidate in the race who's been a statewide elected official — having won two statewide races — and emphasized that she's "raising the funds necessary to run a competitive race" and is "continuing to hit our [fundraising] targets." She also mentioned her own relationship with the Bidens.

"I've developed a real touchpoint in the community and a number of the needs that I've seen" across the state as treasurer, Davis continued, highlighting her work as treasurer on programs aimed at closing the wealth gap and aiding people from a variety of vulnerable and marginalized communities.

Davis explained that her childhood gave

her a firsthand experience with the financial hardships that she's worked to address in her current role.

"As a little girl growing up, my family struggled after my father's business went bankrupt, and we were evicted, lost our home, we sold all of our possessions," Davis said. "And you know, we went from rental home to rental home, school to school. And to be fair, it was a challenge. And through the hard work of my parents, the kindness of neighbors and teachers — that was really how we got by."

She added, "I'll just say that now raising three children here in Delaware, I know that we need more leaders in Congress who come from the working class. We're focused on fighting for families and keeping them safe and secure," naming healthcare affordability, gun control protecting democracy and abortion rights as other priorities.

Brewer noted that the state treasurer position has been a launchpad for other politicians in the past, adding that her "political track record... would at least on paper make her seem like a serious candidate as well."

Young told *JI* he'd raised more than \$100,000 within 24 hours of launching his candidacy — so "we're going to be more than competitive."

He highlighted his work in his current role at the Housing Authority as well as time as a legislative aide and a range of work in the nonprofit sector on issues including children, criminal justice reform and civil rights.

"I think this breadth of experiences — and more — provide me with a unique perspective in dealing with a lot of the issues that everyday Delawareans are facing day in and day out," he said. "I don't believe there's any candidate that has the same level of experience as I do in so many different

areas and serving our state... Being able to use my background, my understanding, and connecting with people in order to better serve them and take that voice and continue is what makes me unique from any other candidates."

The housing director, citing his background as a college athlete, also pledged to be the "hardest-working campaign" as well as pursue the "most diverse campaign in this race," seeking to build a coalition from across the state and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Young's focuses in office would include housing, health care, economic opportunity, job training, small business and reproductive rights.

Brewer noted that Young had run unsuccessfully against a more moderate Democrat to be the mayor of Wilmington, but that the run had established himself as a favorite of progressive Democrats in the state party. His roots in Wilmington could also help him secure votes in the area, Brewer added.

The campaign could be a long one — Delaware's primary elections won't be held until Sept. 10, 2024 and the filing period will be open for nearly a year to come, until July 9 of next year. In federal elections, Delaware consistently votes strongly Democratic, so the primary winner is likely to be Delaware's next House member.

State Rep. Kerri Evelyn Harris — an Air Force veteran and staunch progressive who challenged Sen. Tom Carper (D-DE) in 2018 from the left with the backing of Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) and an outside group aligned with Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) — is seen as a potential additional entrant into the field.

Brewer told *JI* that he wouldn't expect major differences among the three declared candidates, given that they are all generally

“mainstream progressive Democrats” but said that Harris, if she joined the race, would represent a lane to the left of the currently-declared field.

On foreign policy, both Davis and Young, like McBride, take largely conventional positions on the U.S.-Israel relationship, both emphasizing that they’re supportive of continued U.S. security aid to Israel and oppose adding any conditions or restrictions to it.

Davis called Israel a “vital and strategic partner” and a “stabilizing force” in the region for which the U.S. must provide “unwavering” support.

“We should recognize that Israel will be the best stewards, and will have the best understanding of what the needs are and how to allocate support in the most effective ways to address challenges,” she added, comparing the situation to state and local-level stewardship of COVID-19 relief funding with which she was involved as treasurer.

Young said that his priorities in foreign policy are protecting the United States, promoting peace and protecting and aiding U.S. allies, including strengthening the U.S.-Israel relationship and seeking paths to Israeli-Palestinian peace.

He also emphasized that he sees the existing guardrails that apply to all U.S. foreign aid as adequate, and that, since Israel is an ally, “it’s better to communicate” on issues that may arise without imposing “restrictions on needed resources.”

Young said that his approach to Israel was shaped in part by his past work leading the Metropolitan Wilmington Urban League, which he said highlighted the long-standing ties between the Black and Jewish communities through the civil rights movement — a history of “people coming together to focus on those who were in need and those who needed support.”

Young confirmed to JI that he’d had a conversation “months ago” with individuals affiliated with Justice Democrats — a progressive campaign group that has frequently found itself at loggerheads with pro-Israel candidates and outside groups — and has not had spoken further with them. Young said Israel didn’t come up during that conversation.

Davis and Young each said they would want to visit Israel if elected; Young added

that it was one of two places he’d told his team he’d visit — first, the U.S. southern border, and second, Israel.

Both candidates said they support a two-state solution and each framed the Abraham Accords as potentially part of the foundation for an eventual Israeli-Palestinian settlement. Young said he’d want to be more fully briefed before commenting on Saudi Arabia’s reported demands for normalization with Israel, while Davis indicated that she’d be open to a deal along the lines publicly discussed.

She specifically mentioned that assistance to Saudi’s nuclear program — one of the more thorny issues raised in reported negotiations — could help with global progress toward a renewable and sustainable energy future.

They also both expressed support for the Biden administration’s efforts to arrive at a diplomatic agreement to limit Iran’s nuclear program.

Davis, however, was skeptical of the opportunities for such a deal in the short term, expressing doubt that the current Iranian government is open to negotiations. She floated the possibility of offering Iran humanitarian technologies, such as desalination technology, as an incentive for dismantling its nuclear program in an eventual negotiation.

At home, Davis and Young each committed to speaking out against and fighting antisemitism.

“We absolutely have to identify and speak out any time there is hate speech of any kind, any antisemitic activity,” Davis said.

“Breaking down barriers is a bigger and a more impactful second step,” she continued, highlighting her involvement during the pandemic in work with the “interfaith community” to address community needs and emergencies. “It also helps to keep the focus on service and that humanitarian focus, where we can all start to see each other as not what we’re bringing to the table when it comes to our background, but the likeness [among] all of us.”

Young emphasized the need for “being aggressive and letting people know where one stands on these issues. Antisemitic rhetoric is unacceptable.”

“We as leaders, whether in Congress or

not, everyday citizens, we have to continue to work collaboratively — build bridges, communicate with one another,” he continued. “And also, people, when they do such things, should be held accountable.”

He said that he’s worked with Jewish groups in and out of state in his past positions, including conversations with the Anti-Defamation League following the killing of George Floyd in 2020, as well as close collaboration with faith-based organizations in-state.

“That’s what makes Delaware very much unique — we’re around a million people in our state, which means for the most part, it’s not too hard to get in contact with one another, and be in touch with one another,” Young said. ♦

Abu Dhabi is racing to make homegrown generative AI tools in Arabic

G42's Inception will start meeting with ADNOC, Etihad and First Abu Dhabi Bank this week to build applications for Jais, its new large language model

By Kelsey Warner

The article first appeared in The Circuit.

Some of the UAE's biggest firms will meet this week with artificial intelligence group G42 to explore ways to deploy its new large language model (LLM) that makes the latest advances in computer technology more accessible in Arabic.

Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, Etihad Airways, First Abu Dhabi Bank and telco e& have all partnered with the government-backed G42 subsidiary Inception to build commercial applications for Jais, a bilingual LLM it launched last week after a summer of fine-tuning.

Built on English and Arabic-language data and in collaboration with Mohamed bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence (MBZUAI) and California AI company Cerebras, the makers of Jais say it is the best-performing Arabic-language LLM available, with potential to be a foundational tool to serve the more than 400 million Arabic speakers worldwide.

"The next step now quite literally is to sit down with a number of these different organizations" to determine what's next for Jais, Timothy Baldwin, acting provost and department chair of natural language processing at MBZUAI, told *The Circuit*. Baldwin, who led the academic research team of about 20 post-doc students and professors, said that at the outset, the LLM may be used to build customer service, contract and workflow optimization tools.

LLMs are neural networks trained on vast databases of text, typically from the corpus of the web, including Wikipedia pages and articles, as is the case with market leaders like OpenAI's ChatGPT and Google's Bard. These foundational models are able

to identify patterns and predict what text should come next, allowing them to be prompted by humans and, in turn, converse or compose with people working with these models to churn out all manner of text such as contracts, research papers or computer code. Named after the highest mountain in the UAE, Jais was trained in Abu Dhabi on a subset of Cerebras' Condor Galaxy 1 AI supercomputer by a team from MBZUAI and Inception. The project follows a \$100 million deal for Cerebras to provide up to nine supercomputers to G42, signed in June, an agreement widely seen as a challenge to chips market leader Nvidia.

Arabic is one of the most spoken languages worldwide but its online presence is relatively small, with about 1% of Arabic content available online, according to data presented by the companies.

Despite challenges, Jais outperforms existing Arabic models and is also competitive with English models of similar size despite being trained on significantly less English data, according to the group. The researchers said in a white paper that this shows that the model's English component learned from the Arabic data and vice versa, potentially beginning a new, multilingual focus for LLMs. Jais has also been designed to have a nuanced understanding of the region as opposed to more U.S.-centric models that dominate the market, Baldwin said.

The UAE has set AI high on the national agenda as it seeks to reduce its dependence on the U.S., China and Israel for technology resources and build up local capabilities. In 2017, the country laid out a plan for how the then-nascent technology would be a contributor to the economy, and named a state minister to oversee AI development

and policy. A year later, G42 was formed in Abu Dhabi, chaired by the UAE's national security advisor, Tahnoun bin Zayed Al Nahyan. In 2020, MBZUAI, the world's first dedicated AI research university, also opened its doors in the capital.

The UAE uses another open-source LLM, known as Falcon, at the state-owned Technology Innovation Institute in Masdar City, Abu Dhabi. ♦

Making a Minyan in Tel Aviv

A new initiative seeks to connect secular Israelis with Shabbat traditions

By Melissa Weiss

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

As the sun sets on a Friday evening in Tel Aviv, strangers trickle into a loft in the heart of Jaffa. They leave their bags — and phones — at the door, per the hosts' instructions, and grab a glass of wine and begin to mingle.

When the 20 invitees — mostly secular Israelis — have arrived, they sit in a circle in the loft's foyer. A meditation begins, bringing the group together in silence as they welcome the start of Shabbat. Tonight, a host explains in Hebrew, the night's theme is "ritual," tying the concept to the week's Torah portion.

Over the course of the next four hours, attendees — some of whom grew up religious and have adopted a less observant lifestyle; others who were always secular, and some who are religious — shared the role that ritual plays in their lives. The conversation continued over dinner, which was inspired by the Kurdish dishes that were Shabbat mainstays in the childhood home of Lipaz Ela, one of the hosts of the dinner and a co-founder of Minyan TLV.

Ela, along with co-founder Oz Fishman, conceived of the idea for these small group dinners during Israel's restrictive lockdowns in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. They first met when Fishman was working at Reality, a project of the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies, and Ela was working at Talma, a Schusterman-funded project that brings Americans to Israel to teach English in the country's periphery. With Israelis banned from traveling far from their homes, the two would frequently get together at a coffee shop downstairs from their respective apartments.

"We were sitting there and we were like,

'I really wish I could go to shul right now,'" Fishman, an urban planner and teacher at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, explained. The "closest thing" that felt like going to shul, he said, was "walking downstairs to the coffee shop outside our house in Florentine and sitting there and seeing the same people day after day after day, especially when you're stuck in your home all day."

That realization, Fishman explained, sparked the creation of Minyan TLV. "It consciously dawned on us that the coffee shop in Tel Aviv is people's shul, more or less," he said. "It's not the depth of the spiritual experience that I think a lot of people are feeling. Maybe they get that in yoga, they get that in meditation, they get it in all these New Age-y things that people like, but we were looking for a space that knew how to handle both."

Israel's secular Jews account for a sizable amount of the country's total Jewish population, though a variety of surveys have found different numbers, and also use various definitions to distinguish between groups. With both secular and non-Jewish residents, many restaurants in Tel Aviv are open on Shabbat, and a number of private buses run on free "Shabbat routes" that operate from sundown Friday through the following evening. In a city that feels constantly "on," it can sometimes be challenging to slow down for Shabbat, especially for young people who lack a strong Jewish community.

With that in mind, Lipaz and Fishman invited a group of 10 friends, mostly secular, to a Shabbat dinner in March 2022. And so Minyan TLV was birthed.

The organization's name was chosen because of the central concept of a minyan, or quorum of 10 people, in Judaism. "Minyan is like the base unit of a Jewish

community, of saying, first of all, you can't do anything sacred alone. Doesn't work like that, A. And B, that if you have nine people a minyan doesn't work," Fishman said. "You absolutely need to have 10, which means that first, second, third, fourth, seventh, eighth, ninth, 10th are all equally important because without any one of them we don't have what we need."

The March dinner was such a hit among attendees that Fishman and Ela decided to continue hosting monthly dinners. In addition to the Shabbat meals, Minyan hosted a large-scale Shavuot gathering in May, and has partnered with groups including OneTable and The Big Table for events in Tel Aviv. Minyan held its 19th small-group Shabbat dinner earlier this month.

Shalom Simcha Elbert, who participated in Minyan's first Shabbat dinner, lived in Italy for four years before returning to Israel in the middle of the pandemic. He grew up religious but became more secular as an adult; in Italy, he re-embraced his religious roots, putting on tefillin every morning and celebrating the holidays. That changed again when he got back to Israel.

"When I came back [to Israel], it kind of faded away," he explained. "And I think Minyan gives you that feeling of yearning, like wanting to go back...it really gives you an itch that you want to scratch every time that you go, and you feel like you can do more and you can learn more and you can be more connected."

Minyan's work to connect secular Israelis with religious practice comes at a time of heightened tensions between the country's secular and religious populations. "Segregation between religious and non-religious Jews is so big here, and the gap is just growing and growing," Elbert said. "To find a neutral ground where people can

connect on what everybody's tradition is, I think that's very unique."

The gatherings have been inspired in part by Ela and Fishman's own experiences with the American Jewish community. Fishman, who was born in Israel, grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area. Ela served as a *shaliach*, or emissary, at UCLA for three years.

While Ela described her upbringing as "not religious, but traditional," she explained that she identified as an Israeli more than she did with Judaism, something she attributes to her parents' immigrant roots.

"I think that because my parents came from Kurdistan and from Iraq, the sense of us being Israelis was very important," she explained. Being Israeli, Ela added, was her "primary identity."

Fishman, whose parents are both Israeli, expressed a similar sentiment. "For my parents' generation, the core of identity came from building the state, strengthening the state, sustaining the state," he said. "Today, the state's in a place where it can build and sustain and strengthen us as people."

Ela's three years at UCLA marked her first sustained encounter with the American Jewish community as an adult. "Suddenly," Ela said, "I discovered Judaism in 100 different colors, and it's not black or white, or it's not even 50 shades. It's like hundreds, and everybody can be who they are and connect with their Judaism in their own way." In L.A., she said, "I found something that I was missing. And I started looking into my Jewish identity and started to shape it and started to understand in which aspects I find...I belong."

The feelings took root during the pandemic, as Ela and Fishman sought to find community in an increasingly isolating landscape. As holidays came and went, they felt a longing for a hub to serve as a center for their Jewish experiences.

"We were like, 'Where would we go?'" Ela explained. "We didn't have anywhere to go, where we feel that we belong. So we're like, 'Maybe we should start something.' And I think both of us are very millennial-wise, right? So if we don't have something, let's just create it. We don't need to know how, but we'll figure it out along the way. And by actually creating something for us, we realized that it's not just us [who] are looking

for this. It's not just us that are looking for spiritual paths for reclaiming their Jewish identity, for actually connecting back to who we are, and creating something out of it, creating something new."

The group's seed funding came from the New York-based Julius Stulman Foundation, which issued a rare open request for proposals ahead of founder Steven Stulman's 90th birthday. Fishman, who noted that small groups often struggle to find seed funding to get off the ground without deep relationships in the philanthropic space, put together a submission asking for enough for five dinners.

Months later, grantees were notified that they'd received some funding, but not the exact amount, which would be announced on a Zoom call with all the foundation's grantees. "We're sitting in my living room," Fishman recalled. "We're listening, and he's handing out the grants one by one... And then right before he finishes, he says, 'There's two people, an educator and an urban designer. And they really have a dream to do Shabbat dinners in Tel Aviv. And for me, Shabbat was the first time that I discovered how important Jewish ritual tradition is to me, and so I believe in them enough that they asked for a certain amount, but I'm actually going to be doubling the amount.'"

That money, Fishman said, sustained the group for the entirety of its first year. Now, the group seeks to find additional sources of funding as it works to expand its offerings and reach larger numbers of people.

Fishman connected with Aliza Kline, the president and CEO of OneTable, a nonprofit that helps individuals create Shabbat experiences, whom he had known since he lived in the U.S. OneTable and Minyan have since partnered on events, including one centered around the Jewish Federations of North America's General Assembly in Tel Aviv earlier this year.

When Fishman came back to Israel as an adult, Kline observed, he could see those around him were looking for a spiritual connection. But he also understood that they didn't know how to access it on their own.

Though the two organizations have similarities — OneTable provides support and resources for individuals to create Shabbat experiences in their own homes —

they found differences in their audiences' needs.

"In [OneTable's] case, we use technology and connections and coaching and resources and nourishment support," Kline, who now sits on Minyan's advisory board, explained. "And [Fishman] was saying, 'No, I think in Israel, I actually need an even more supported experience' — where at least initially, he could model what it could be, so people could start to imagine that their needs could be met."

Ela and Fishman "scratched an itch, right?" Kline asked rhetorically. "It's not just that people are like, 'Oh, this is such a beautiful event. I want to go to another event.' The question is if they have this beautiful event, what does it change in themselves that they realized that they could do that more? Do they have the capacity to actually start to do it themselves? That, I think, will be the interesting evolution of Minyan."

Ela reflected on the organization's Shavuot event, its first large-scale gathering. "I looked at all these people and I thought that this is how a synagogue should look like. Because people pray for their loved ones. People send different prayers for people who are sick, who they care about, who they want. [They're going] through something that is very spiritual, as a group of people who just met... But we had something in common."

"And I stood there and I said, 'This is how I want our place to look — people gathering and feeling that they are part of something bigger.'" ♦