

THE WEEKLY PRINT

Erdogan meets with Jewish leaders, amid warming relations with Israel; Biden, Netanyahu play nice in New York, 'even with our differences'; UPenn president declines to intervene in antisemitic conference on campus; Keeping the faith — at arm's length; Qatari emir slams 'Judaization' of Jerusalem in U.N. speech; A modern 'Gateway' to an ancient city; NYC's Perelman Performing Arts Center opens at World Trade Center site; and From Suleiman the Magnificent's love poems to a ninth-century Quran.

SEPTEMBER 21, 2023

Erdogan meets with Jewish leaders, amid warming relations with Israel

The Turkish president fielded questions on a range of topics, including renewed Turkey-Israel ties, rising antisemitism, Holocaust education, Russia's war in Ukraine and Iranian nuclear capabilities

By Matthew Kassel

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reiterated that he intends to visit Israel as soon as possible in a private discussion with American Jewish leaders in New York City on Wednesday afternoon, according to participants who were present for the conversation, a day after his first in-person meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly.

Erdogan, who made a similar pledge last year, offered no clear timeframe for a potential trip to Israel, which restored full diplomatic ties with Turkey in 2022 after years of strained relations.

Instead, he confirmed that he would first host Netanyahu in Ankara before his own

trip to the Jewish state, two attendees told *Jewish Insider* on Wednesday.

Netanyahu had been scheduled to meet with Erdogan, who recently won reelection to a third five-year term, in Turkey this summer but postponed the trip due to health concerns following a pacemaker implant. The two leaders, who had only spoken by phone before the U.N. meeting, agreed during Tuesday's conversation to coordinate mutual visits, according to a senior Israeli diplomatic source. Israeli President Isaac Herzog visited Turkey in March 2022.

During Erdogan's meeting with approximately 30 Jewish leaders in Manhattan, which went on for more than an hour at the Turkish House across the

street from U.N. headquarters, the Turkish president fielded questions on a range of topics, participants said, including renewed ties between Turkey and Israel, rising antisemitism, Holocaust education, Russia's war in Ukraine and Iranian nuclear capabilities.

"I've been attending these meetings for about 20 years since he's been president, and I would say this is the most cordial meeting that I remember," Abe Foxman, the former longtime director of the Anti-Defamation League who was among the participants who met with Erdogan, said in an interview with *J.I.* "The rhetoric on both sides was respectful."

Foxman said there were a few reasons for increased cordiality, citing the presence of

Turkish Jewish leaders who were included in the meeting and the recent rapprochement between Israel and Turkey. “He’s always had time for the American Jewish community because he understands that it’s part of his relationship in this country,” Foxman said of Erdogan.

In his introductory remarks, Erdogan delivered greetings recognizing the Jewish new year and emphasized that during “all of his visits” to the U.S. he has “always attached great meaning to meetings with Jewish leaders,” recalled Ezra Friedlander, an Orthodox Jewish lobbyist whose clients include the Turkish government.

William Daroff, the CEO of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, described the meeting as “warm and engaging” in a statement to JI. The Turkish president “reaffirmed his commitment to a stable and fruitful relationship with” Israel as well as “his resolve to combat antisemitism, which he referred to as a ‘crime against humanity,’” Daroff said.

The Jewish leaders who attended the meeting, Daroff added, “pledged to welcome” Erdogan’s upcoming visit to Jerusalem “and to work to ensure the relationship” between Turkey and Israel “continues to improve and flourish.”

There were some points of tension, according to participants who asked

to remain anonymous to discuss more sensitive elements of the conversation. “There are issues,” said one participant, who noted that some attendees had privately raised concerns over hostages held by Hamas, which has maintained a presence in Turkey.

Meanwhile, Erdogan was somewhat vague in addressing a question about the prospect of Iran securing a nuclear weapon, according to another participant. “His response was, ‘We are against countries in the region acquiring nuclear weapons,’” the attendee told JI.

The attendee said that Erdogan was also asked if he would pray at the Western Wall during his visit to Israel, after he had reportedly expressed interest in praying at the Al Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. In response, the Muslim president insisted that he would “never force anyone” to pray anywhere, suggesting that the Western Wall was not on his agenda, according to the attendee. “But he didn’t say, ‘I will not pray at the Western Wall,’” the attendee told JI.

Participants also included Amb. Deborah Lipstadt, the State Department’s special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism; Jonathan Greenblatt, the CEO of the Anti-Defamation League; Malcolm Hoenlein, the vice chair and former CEO of the Conference of Presidents; Harriet Schleifer, the chair of

the Conference of Presidents; Rabbi Levi Shemtov, the executive vice president of American Friends of Lubavitch; and Harley Lippman, a longtime AIPAC leader.

During last September’s UNGA, Erdogan first promised to visit Israel while meeting with representatives from the Conference of Presidents, AIPAC and J Street, among other groups, for an hour-long discussion that one participant recalled as “conciliatory.”

Erdogan did not appear to have made any additional commitments on Wednesday, even as attendees tried to lobby him on some causes. Foxman, for instance, said he encouraged Erdogan to visit the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum on his next visit to Washington. “My feeling is it’s an easy ask,” said Foxman, who is a Holocaust survivor.

The Turkish president “didn’t say ‘yes’ or ‘no,’” Foxman said, noting that Erdogan had instead emphasized his opposition to antisemitism. Still, when Foxman said he would personally accompany him to the museum — and to Israel, if preferable — Erdogan seemed more receptive. “He said ‘OK,’” Foxman recalled.

Additional reporting contributed by JI’s senior political correspondent Lahav Harkov. ♦

SEPTEMBER 20, 2023

Biden, Netanyahu play nice in New York, ‘even with our differences’

The president offered Netanyahu a long-awaited invitation to the White House by the end of the year.

By Lahav Harkov

President Joe Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu offered an upbeat outlook of U.S.-Israel relations in their meeting in New York on Wednesday, even as tensions over the Israeli government’s judicial reform plan simmered.

The meeting was the first between the leaders since Netanyahu returned to office in December, with Biden making clear that he was holding out because of his disapproval of both the Israeli government’s judicial overhaul plans and extremists in Netanyahu’s coalition. The fact that they

met in a hotel in New York and not in the White House was a disappointment to the Israeli prime minister and his allies.

Yet Biden dangled a long-coveted White House visit before Netanyahu, saying: “I hope we will see each other in Washington by the end of the year.”

The leaders met one-on-one for close to an hour. Asked about the apparent thawing of Biden-Netanyahu relations, a senior Israeli diplomatic source took issue with the premise, saying ties were always good because of their “deep personal relations,” adding that they “talk like two old friends.”

Both leaders emphasized in their opening statements Biden’s recent announcement at the G20 of a rail and infrastructure link from South Asia to Europe via the Middle East, as well as the prospects of Saudi-Israel normalization.

The project will “make Israel a very important hub on a highway to unprecedented prosperity,” Netanyahu said.

The economic corridor will help build a “more stable, more prosperous Middle East,” and Israel and Saudi Arabia working together on it is “a big deal,” Biden said, despite an arrangement in which the two countries are not in direct contact on the matter.

“I suffer from an oxymoron, Irish optimism,” Biden quipped. “If you and I 10 years ago were talking about normalization with Saudi Arabia, I think we’d look at each other like, ‘Who’s been drinking what?’”

“A good Irish whiskey,” Netanyahu interjected.

The Israeli prime minister said he was confident that Biden can “forge a historic peace between Israel and Saudi Arabia,” and mentioned a demand that Washington and Riyadh have been making in relation to normalization talks — tangible steps to help the Palestinians.

“I think such a peace [between Israel and Saudi Arabia] would go a long way for us to advance the end of the Arab-Israeli conflict, achieve reconciliation between the Islamic world and the Jewish state and advance a genuine peace between Israel and the Palestinians,” Netanyahu said.

The prime minister’s view is that “the Palestinians have to be part of the [normalization talks] but they should not have a veto on the process,” the senior diplomatic source in his delegation said.

Despite members of his coalition taking a hard line against any concessions to the Palestinians, not only in matters related to the West Bank and east Jerusalem but also regarding funding to the Palestinian Authority, the source said. Netanyahu believes that he will be able to reach an agreement with the Saudis without breaking up his governing coalition, and that he will be able to convince them that he will only agree to gestures to the Palestinians that will protect Israel’s vital security interests.

Netanyahu “will never compromise on Israel’s security,” the source said.

Netanyahu and Biden delved into the details of normalization, and their positions on a Saudi civilian uranium enrichment program “completely overlap,” the senior diplomatic source said — while not detailing what those positions are.

Discussions of a defense pact between the U.S. and Israel are “part of the overall package that we’re considering,” the source said.

Even with the efforts to keep up a

convivial atmosphere in public and the positive trend towards Saudi normalization discussed in private, tensions over changes in Israel’s judiciary were evident. While a few hundred protesters gathered near Biden’s hotel, they could not be heard inside.

“We’re going to discuss some of the hard issues, that is upholding democratic values that lie at the heart of our partnership, including the checks and balances in our systems and preserving the path to a negotiated two-state solution, and ensuring that Iran never, never acquires a nuclear weapon,” Biden said.

Netanyahu, for his part, said that while “we live in uncertain times, rapidly changing times, I want to reassert here before you, Mr. President, that one thing is certain, and one thing will never change, and that is Israel’s commitment to democracy. We will continue to uphold the values that both our proud democracies cherish.”

In the meeting itself, however, the senior diplomatic source said the judicial reform issue took up very little time. Biden asked Netanyahu about it, and Netanyahu responded with the same statements he has made publicly: that he will try to reach agreements with the opposition, and if that fails, find a solution popular with the public that would include some changes to the Judicial Selection Committee.

Biden put a positive spin on the matter: “Even where we have some differences, my commitment to Israel, you know, is ironclad. I think without Israel, there’s not a Jew in the world who is secure. Israel is essential.” ♦

SEPTEMBER 21, 2023

UPenn president declines to intervene in antisemitic conference on campus

In letter to ADL CEO Jonathan Greenblatt, UPenn’s Elizabeth Magill highlights its ‘commitment to open expression’

By Matthew Kassel

Citing the University of Pennsylvania’s “commitment to open expression and academic freedom,” the school’s

president, Elizabeth Magill, indicated in a private letter to the Anti-Defamation League that she would not directly

intervene in a Palestinian cultural festival that begins on Friday and features a number of controversial figures who have voiced

antisemitic rhetoric.

In the letter to the ADL sent on Wednesday, Magill indicated other steps to support Jewish students on campus during the three-day conference. The university has faced mounting calls to exclude high-profile speakers including Roger Waters, an outspoken critic of Israel who has “a long track record of using antisemitic tropes to denigrate Jewish people,” according to the State Department.

“As you know, Penn’s commitment to open expression and academic freedom are central to our educational mission,” Magill explained to ADL CEO Jonathan Greenblatt in the letter, which was obtained by *Jewish Insider*. “This is true even — and especially — when keeping those commitments is most challenging.”

Instead, Magill emphasized that the university has implemented a “series of actions” to address “concerns raised about some of the speakers invited to the Palestine Writes Literature Festival,” which is scheduled to take place Sept. 22-24 on Penn’s campus in Philadelphia.

Among other steps cited in the letter, Magill said that university leaders had worked “in close partnership” with Penn Hillel to “provide support” in advance of the festival and had boosted security for campus Jewish groups during Rosh Hashanah and through Yom Kippur, which begins on Sunday evening.

Despite the increased security measures, Penn Hillel was vandalized on Thursday morning before a service for Orthodox Jewish community members, when an unidentified perpetrator damaged the building’s lobby while shouting antisemitic slurs, according to witnesses who spoke with *The Daily Pennsylvanian*, UPenn’s student newspaper.

It was not immediately clear if the incident was directly related to the controversy over the upcoming festival.

In a statement posted to social media on Thursday afternoon, the ADL said it was “still collecting information” on the alleged attack, adding that it was “deeply disturbed by the antisemitic incident” at Penn Hillel. “Thankfully no one was hurt, but perpetrators need to be held accountable. Security measures need to be reviewed and adjusted.”

In a follow-up tweet, the ADL called on Magill and university leadership “to issue an unequivocal condemnation of the antisemitism associated with the festival this weekend and to completely dissociate the university from it.”

A spokesperson for UPenn did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Thursday afternoon.

Greenblatt was among the first national Jewish leaders to publicly speak out against the festival last week, when he called Penn’s decision to host the conference “mind-boggling” and “insulting” in a sharply worded statement shared with JI. “If this were a conference to explore and celebrate Palestinian literature, none of us would object,” he said. “However, it is not. It is a gathering of anti-Israel and anti-Zionist activists, some of whom have a long history of antisemitic statements and comments.”

Since then, Greenblatt has spoken directly with Magill and followed up in writing, according to the letter obtained by JI on Thursday. The ADL’s Philadelphia chapter and the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia have also been in touch with university leadership in recent weeks to urge the administration to publicly condemn the festival.

In a joint statement last week led by Magill, the administration condemned “antisemitism as antithetical to our institutional values,” while stressing that “we also fiercely support the free exchange of ideas as central to our educational mission. This includes the expression of views that are controversial and even those that are incompatible with our institutional values.”

But the festival — and the university’s response — have continued to field opposition. On Friday evening, for instance, Penn Hillel is planning a “massive” Shabbat Together demonstration to celebrate “Jewish pride, unity and togetherness” as the festival begins, according to a recent statement posted to social media. Ted Deutch, the CEO of the American Jewish Committee and a former Democratic congressman from Florida, will be among those in attendance, according to a spokesperson for the organization.

The festival’s organizer, Susan Abulhawa, has defended the conference, which features more than 100 speakers, accusing critics of

engaging in “Zionist hysteria” that is typical of “the colonial mentality,” she told JI last week.

Other speakers who are scheduled to participate in the festival include Noura Erakat, a Rutgers University professor who has suggested that Zionism is a “bedfellow” to Nazism, and Marc Lamont Hill, a former CNN commentator who was dismissed from the network after he used a phrase widely interpreted as a call for Israel’s elimination.

While Magill has described some of the event’s speakers as “deeply offensive, misaligned with the festival’s stated purpose” and at odds with Penn’s “institutional values,” she has reiterated the university’s “responsibility to foster open dialogue and cultural diversity on campus.”

Still, in her recent letter to the ADL, Magill acknowledged that the administration had yet to perfect its approach to addressing anti-Jewish prejudice.

Moving forward, she said university leadership would refer to the Biden administration’s national strategy to combat antisemitism and the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s working definition of antisemitism, among other resources.

“Our commitment to countering antisemitism on Penn’s campus extends far beyond this event,” Magill averred. “There is more we can and will do to continue to create an environment where all members of our community can thrive and succeed.” ♦

Keeping the faith — at arm's length

Claudia Sheinbaum, who may become Mexico's first Jewish president, plays down her Jewish roots amid a rise in antisemitism

By Matthew Kassel

Hours before the start of Rosh Hashanah last Friday, Xóchitl Gálvez, the leading opposition candidate in Mexico's upcoming presidential election, shared a brief message wishing the Jewish community a happy new year and a "blessed" Yom Kippur. "May you have a 5,784 full of health, happiness, prosperity and may you be sealed in the Book of Life," she said on X, formerly known as Twitter.

By contrast, many followers couldn't help but notice that Gálvez's chief rival, Claudia Sheinbaum, who is Jewish, had herself made no public acknowledgment of the Jewish High Holy Days, which she grew up observing as a young girl in Mexico City.

Her silence was hardly unusual: Sheinbaum, the former mayor of Mexico City, barely ever alludes to her Jewish background and is not meaningfully connected to Mexico's tight-knit organized Jewish community. Though she has privately expressed pride in her Jewish roots and has recalled celebrating "all the Jewish holidays" with her grandparents, who were immigrants from Bulgaria and Lithuania, the 61-year-old leftist has otherwise emphasized that she was raised in a secular home, which reportedly valued political activism over religious affiliation.

Even if her connection to Judaism is tenuous, however, Sheinbaum may also have strategic reasons for keeping her ethnic heritage at a relatively safe distance, rather than risk further awakening a recent uptick in antisemitic rhetoric that has entered Mexico's public discourse as she campaigns for president, according to interviews with more than a dozen academics, political analysts and Jewish leaders in Mexico and the U.S.

"She won't deny it if she's asked, but she's definitely not mentioning it," Pablo Majluf, an analyst in Mexico City, told *Jewish Insider*

last week. "I think she would prefer it that way."

Next June's Mexican presidential election promises to be a historic contest no matter the outcome, with two women vying to become the country's first female head of state in what political observers have called a watershed moment for Mexican politics. That Sheinbaum would also be Mexico's first Jewish president, meanwhile, has been heralded with less fanfare in the world's largest Spanish-speaking country — not least by the candidate herself, a member of Mexico's governing party, Morena, and a protégé of the populist sitting president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who is term-limited.

Unlike Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who has embraced his position as the world's most prominent Jewish leader since Russia's invasion last year, Sheinbaum fits into a parallel category of secular politicians on the left and center-left who, amid a global rise in antisemitism, have more cautiously downplayed or elided their Jewish backgrounds in favor of universalist language or overtly nationalist rhetoric.

During her fledgling campaign for president, Sheinbaum, who was picked as Morena's nominee two weeks ago, has eschewed specific references to her family biography, as an emerging strain of identity politics has fueled nativist rhetoric that has cast suspicion on her European Jewish roots and, consequently, her claims to Mexican heritage.

In recent months, Sheinbaum, the first Jewish and female mayor of Mexico City, has been forced to confront an online misinformation campaign falsely alleging that she was born in Bulgaria — where her Sephardic maternal grandparents fled the Holocaust in 1942 — and therefore ineligible to run for president. To fend off such

insinuations, Sheinbaum has described herself as "100% Mexican" and "more Mexican than *mole*," a traditional sauce viewed as Mexico's national dish. "Enough with the speculation, already," she wrote on X in June, posting a copy of her birth certificate showing she was born in Mexico City.

Still, Mexico's right-wing former president, Vicente Fox, brought increased prominence to the birther conspiracy theory a few weeks later, when he shared a meme on social media calling Sheinbaum a "Bulgarian Jew" while promoting Gálvez, a senator with Indigenous roots who represents the conservative National Action Party, as "the only Mexican" in the race. He later apologized for his comments, which were widely criticized.

The effort to target Sheinbaum, who is currently favored to win the election, is part of an ongoing — and increasingly ugly — national conversation over Mexican authenticity, as both parties have sought "to discredit the candidate of the opposing group," said Daniela Gleizer, an associate researcher at the National Autonomous University of Mexico's Institute of Historical Research who specializes in Jewish immigration to Mexico during the Nazi era.

While Fox's tweet was a "sign of the great xenophobia that exists" in Mexico, Gleizer explained that López Obrador — an avowed nationalist who has frequently used inflammatory, race-based language to belittle his adversaries as enemies of the working class — bore responsibility for establishing "the parameters of the discussion" along such lines.

"The question being debated here," Gleizer said in an email, "is who can be the true candidate 'of the people,' and speak on their behalf. So, Sheinbaum is accused of being 'foreign' or Jewish — of not being truly

Mexican — while the left accuses Gálvez of not being truly Indigenous, and of being rather bourgeois.”

At the same time that Sheinbaum’s Jewish background has drawn scrutiny from the opposition, antisemitic prejudice has also risen from the fringes of Morena itself. Perhaps most prominently, Alfredo Jalife-Rahme, a conspiracy theorist who says he helped found the party, recently claimed that he will not vote for Sheinbaum because she is a “Zionista.” He has previously accused the former mayor of being too cozy with Jewish developers in Mexico City.

Majluf, the political analyst in Mexico City, said Sheinbaum is no doubt “aware of tensions in her own party and her movement over antisemitism,” stressing that “she is a contradiction to the ethno-nationalist rhetoric” and Christian symbology seen as trademarks of López Obrador’s so-called “fourth transformation” of Mexican politics. But he echoed other experts who spoke with JI in speculating that Sheinbaum’s close relationship with the president, to whom she is fiercely loyal, would almost certainly insulate her candidacy from broader internal skepticism.

“What they’re trying to sell is that Sheinbaum is a traditional leftist, a social actor, a student protester,” Majluf observed. “They’re not playing her identity card, for obvious reasons.”

Moreover, multiple analysts suggested that Sheinbaum herself has attempted to obscure her Jewish roots in public appearances where she is pictured wearing skirts emblazoned with an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a national symbol appropriated by Morena. Luis Rubio, a political analyst and think tank leader in Mexico City, said he had “no doubt whatsoever” that Sheinbaum’s dress was an effort to mask her Judaism. “The message is impossible not to catch.”

The choice of Catholic imagery indicates that Sheinbaum views at least one particular kind of “religious identity as instrumental to her political goals,” Tony Payan, the director of the Mexico Center at Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy in Texas, said in an email to JI. “She does not openly talk about that.”

Still, he argued that “most Mexicans are more focused on the political polarization

that is going on in the country, rather than” Sheinbaum’s Jewish identity. “There will always be some groups that may show antisemitic inclinations, but as of right now, that is not what has dominated the public discourse,” Payan said, adding that “her political stance, personality and her relationship with López Obrador are likely to be much more salient.”

According to Renee Dayan-Shabot, the executive director of Tribuna Israelita, a leading Jewish community organization in Mexico, antisemitic incidents remain relatively low across the country, despite the recent misinformation campaign against Sheinbaum. The group, which tracks antisemitism domestically, registered just 22 incidents last year, including graffiti, “verbal aggression” and remarks on radio and television.

In an email to JI, Dayan-Shabot said that Tribuna Israelita had maintained a “close collaboration” with Sheinbaum during her time leading Mexico City, which is home to the majority of Mexico’s estimated 40,000 Jews.

“Regarding her Jewish origin, when it comes to politicians and public servants, religion or its origins are irrelevant, the important thing is the efficiency they have to carry out their office,” Dayan-Shabot said. “We didn’t see any important rise in antisemitism during her campaign to Mexico City’s government or her administration. People have questioned her origins and in some cases make antisemitic remarks, but we think eventually they will judge her for her actions and not her religious origins.”

Dina Siegel Vann, a native of Mexico City who directs the American Jewish Committee’s Belfer Institute for Latino and Latin American Affairs and previously led political affairs at Tribuna Israelita, said in a recent interview that Sheinbaum has demonstrated a sensitivity to Jewish communal issues, citing her efforts to counter far-right extremism after a secret concert last year in Mexico’s capital that was attended by hundreds of neo-Nazis.

Now that she is running for president, the former mayor, who resigned in June to mount her campaign, has indicated that she is interested in continuing such advocacy. For instance, Siegel Vann said she had met with Sheinbaum’s chief advisor,

Diana Alarcón González, on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly on Tuesday.

Their conversation, which González requested in advance, covered such topics as security, “combating hate” and economic development, Siegel Vann said in an email on Wednesday. Moreover, González “mentioned Israel as a value-added in cybersecurity” and “water management,” according to Siegel Vann, who clarified that the meeting was not an endorsement of Sheinbaum’s campaign because the AJC is nonpartisan. González did not respond to a request for comment.

Even as Sheinbaum has maintained a cordial if somewhat distant rapport with Jewish leaders, a Jewish activist in Mexico City, granted anonymity to discuss a sensitive issue, emphasized that there is “no love lost” between Sheinbaum and the Mexican Jewish community. “I have heard from many people who actually know her that she is quite reluctant to be perceived as a member of the community,” the activist explained in a recent email to JI. “She almost never acknowledges her Jewish identity or heritage, and she is not close to, or affiliated with, or maybe even especially sympathetic to, the community.”

In March 2020, Sheinbaum met with top Jewish community leaders in Mexico for a closed-door discussion at the Centro Deportivo Israelita, a major Jewish sports and cultural center outside Mexico City, which she recalled visiting as a child. “With love, memories and projects for our great Mexico City, I was very happy to share with the Jewish Community of Mexico,” she wrote in a visitor’s log during the visit. “Our memory and history make us share the history of humanity and of our country.”

But despite a shared history, Sheinbaum is unlikely to gain significant support from Mexico’s traditionally conservative Jewish voters, who are largely resistant to her party’s populist agenda, even as they remain hesitant about openly expressing their views because of López Obrador’s frequent and forceful efforts to vilify Morena’s critics.

Meanwhile, even impartial Jewish observers of Mexican politics seem reluctant to claim Sheinbaum as one of their own. “I think she could be a president of Jewish *origins*, but she’s not a Jewish *leader*,” said

Daniel Fainstein, the dean and professor of Jewish studies at the Universidad Hebraica in Mexico, in a recent interview.

"Nobody in Mexico sees Claudia Sheinbaum as a 'Jewish president,' nor does she identify herself as such," Gleizer, the researcher at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, argued to JI. "She identifies as Mexican 'with Jewish origins,' or with Jewish grandparents. She never alludes to the fact that both of her parents are Jewish, and always refers to her grandparents. In my opinion, this may be to place her Jewish origins in a more remote time, and to distance herself from them, or because her parents perhaps did not identify as Jewish either. Or both."

Whatever the reason, Sheinbaum, a renowned physicist who completed her doctoral studies in environmental engineering at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in California, has long been more viscerally connected to a tradition of left-wing political activism that extends to her Ashkenazi paternal grandfather, Juan Sheinbaum, who emigrated from Lithuania to Mexico in the 1920s. He was the only Jew accepted into Mexico's Communist Party,

where he served as the general secretary for 10 years, according to Gleizer.

In 2000, Sheinbaum, who could not be reached for comment, was appointed as López Obrador's environmental secretary after he was elected mayor of Mexico City. She later served as a mayor of the city's Tlalpan district before rising to head of government in the Mexican capital in 2018.

While Sheinbaum is the first Jewish candidate to run for president in Mexico, she would not be the first Jewish president of a Latin American nation, said Raanan Rein, a professor of Latin American and Spanish history at Tel Aviv University, noting that former Peruvian President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski Godard was the son of Jewish parents who fled Nazi Germany. He added that Javier Milei, a far-right libertarian campaigning for president in Argentina, has expressed interest in converting to Judaism and claims to regularly study Jewish topics with a Buenos Aires rabbi.

"Jews, people of Jewish descent, as well as Judaism and concepts related to this religion and civilization are therefore very much present in Latin American politics," Rein told JI. "Reading much of the literature

on Jewish experiences in Latin America, one might get the feeling that Jews had been removed from national politics and were either mostly victims of it, or have focused on internal community life or on diasporic ties with the real or imagined homeland Israel. This is, of course, far removed from the truth."

If there is excitement among Mexican-born Jews that the country is poised to elect its first Jewish and female president, however, it seems to extend more from a shared belief in Mexico's social improvement rather than a feeling of personal identification with Sheinbaum's heritage, which she continues to keep at arm's length.

"I have a sense of pride more in Mexico as a national project," Siegel Vann, the AJC leader who met with Sheinbaum's chief advisor this week, told JI, even as she expressed concern over recent instances of antisemitic rhetoric. "But you have to give Mexican society some credit. This provides a very good opportunity for Mexico to come to terms with what it means to be a Mexican." ♦

SEPTEMBER 21, 2023

Qatari emir slams 'Judaization' of Jerusalem in U.N. speech

Jordanian King Abdullah II, speaking at the U.N. General Assembly, called Israel's capital a 'flashpoint for global concern'

By Melissa Weiss

Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani railed against what he called Israel's "Judaization of Jerusalem" in his address to the U.N. General Assembly in New York on Tuesday, as Jordanian King Abdullah II on the same day called the Israeli capital "a flashpoint for global concern."

Israel "responds to Arab peace and normalization initiatives with more nationalist and ultra-Orthodox intransigence and extremism," Al Thani

said, which is "reflected in government coalitions and further settlement expansion, in addition to the Judaization of Jerusalem, attacks on the holy sites and heavy-handed and draconian measures against the people in Gaza."

Doha, Al Thani said, "provides extensive political, humanitarian and development support to our brotherly people in Palestine and we also contribute towards rebuilding the Gaza Strip."

Earlier this week, it was reported that

three months ago Qatar halted some \$7 million in payments to Hamas in the Gaza Strip, funds that were intended to pay the salaries of civil servants.

Al Thani, whose government earlier this week served as a middleman in the transfer of \$6 billion in unfrozen Iranian funds as it seeks to promote its position as an interlocutor in the region, denounced the "intransigence of the Israeli occupation and the rejection by consecutive Israeli governments of any just political solution

according to international legitimacy.”

While Al Thani’s 19-minute speech largely focused on regional issues, as well as Doha’s recent hosting of the World Cup, King Abdullah II, who also spoke on Tuesday, dedicated one-third of his speaking time to the Palestinian issue.

The king again called for a Palestinian state along the 1967 borders, while

describing 2023 as “the deadliest for the Palestinian people in the past 15 years.” A majority of the more than 200 Palestinians killed in clashes with Israel since the start of the year have been identified as members of terrorist organizations including Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hamas and the People’s Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

Abdullah also touted U.N.-funded

education programs for Palestinians — which have come under fire for curricula that include incitement and the glorification of terrorism against Jews and Israelis — suggesting that the alternative to the U.N. schools “will be the black flags of terror, hate, and extremism.” ♦

SEPTEMBER 20, 2023

A modern ‘Gateway’ to an ancient city

A new construction project at the entrance to the holy city will change the face of Jerusalem, Mayor Moshe Leon tells Jewish Insider in an interview

By Ruth Marks Eglash

Jerusalem, with its deeply spiritual holy sites and ancient Old City, is preparing for a modernizing makeover with a series of massive infrastructure projects that are set to dramatically change the look and feel of Israel’s capital.

The largest of these construction projects is one that aims to put Jerusalem on the map as both a cultural and high-tech hub. Named Jerusalem Gateway, the new district is located at the entrance to the modern section of the city, starting at the iconic Chords Bridge and circling the Central Bus Station and the Yitzhak Navon Train Station. It will include multiple new streets, pathways, gardens and high-rise towers whose glassy facades may no longer justify the city’s legendary moniker: Jerusalem of Gold.

However, those behind the project, which includes the municipality of Jerusalem and the national government, are hoping it will breathe new life into the city, which in recent years has faced accusations of being neglected and abandoned. It is also hoped that the new quarter will ultimately attract large multinational companies, become a venue for massive international conventions and draw hundreds of thousands of new residents.

“Jerusalem is going through a revolution, not only at the entrance to the city but all across the city,” Jerusalem’s Mayor Moshe

Leon told *Jewish Insider* in an interview. “My vision is that Jerusalem becomes a strong city economically and that attracts hundreds of thousands of new residents.”

The process, said Leon, who is up for reelection in October, is already underway with planning and construction at various stages to create thousands of new housing units, places of employment and leisure opportunities. Most significant of these, he said, is the massive construction project to revamp and modernize the entrance to Jerusalem.

Plans for the Jerusalem Gateway district were initially laid in 2014, with building work beginning one year later. Deemed a national infrastructure priority, the project, which stretches from the Chords Bridge to the edge of the Mahane Yehuda market and around to Sacher Park, the Knesset and other government offices, has received hefty financial backing from the government and will include several governmental offices. In addition, a large number of the new buildings, as well as an expansive new commercial center, are being bankrolled by private investors.

According to materials obtained by JI, the area is slated to become Israel’s largest transportation hub, with the already existing Central Bus Station offering bus routes countrywide and the Yitzhak Navon station, which opened in 2018, offering

high-speed rail links to Modiin, Ben Gurion International Airport, Tel Aviv and beyond.

In addition, the new quarter will serve as the intersection for three proposed light rail lines that will span the city. The red line, which has been running for several years, is to be extended to reach the western edge of Jerusalem by the end of this year, while new yellow and green lines, which will reach other corners of Jerusalem, will become operational within the next two to four years.

Also promised in the new neighborhood are nearly two miles of bike lanes and a myriad of pedestrian walkways and public gardens that will weave between the new buildings, as well as 2,000-plus parking spaces. Within the next month, a new road and tunnel running under the quarter are set to open, in a bid to ease the constant traffic block at the city’s entrance.

As well as the transportation advances, the new project, which will be completed in phases over the next five years, will create “a new era of economic development for Jerusalem,” explained Deputy Mayor Fleur Hassan-Nahoum, who is responsible for foreign affairs and economic development in the city.

“As the city works hard to develop its innovation ecosystem, this project will serve as a high-tech, banking and professional hub for companies choosing the capital as

its base and providing employment for a new generation of Jerusalemites,” she said.

Detailed plans of the new district show that there will be some 20 high-rise towers reaching to between 30 and 40 floors. Interspersed among those are several low-rise structures, parks and a large shopping mall. The mall, which builders say will be spacious and modern, will contrast with the more ancient look and cobblestone streets of Mamilla, a commercial street that opened a decade ago adjacent to the Old City.

Overall, Jerusalem Gateway, which is being developed by Jerusalem economic development company, Eden, will set aside 100,000 square meters for new residential units, and 25,000 meters for sheltered housing. There will be some 2,000 new hotel rooms, and it is hoped that the new area will create around 60,000 jobs. All of the construction is being built with LEED certification, say the project managers, meeting global environmental standards and making it attractive to international investors.

At the very center of the project is Jerusalem’s historic International Convention Center, better known in Israel

as *Binyanei HaUma*. Built in the 1950s as the official home of the Zionist Congress, the building hosted the organization’s first conference in the nascent country. Under the Gateway Project, the ICC will receive a significant expansion and its outdated facilities will be upgraded, say those behind the project, turning it into one of the Middle East’s largest convention centers.

Among the high-rise towers set for construction, at least one will be dedicated to Jerusalem’s legal sector and several others will house what is hoped will become the city’s high-tech sector. The cornerstone for the new judicial building, which will bring under one roof the various local and district courthouses and legal offices that until now were spread across the city, was laid in a special ceremony this week. The other buildings, which are required to use only 30% Jerusalem stone in their façades, are in various stages of construction.

“In a few years from now, that whole area, the entrance to Jerusalem, will be totally unrecognizable and filled with many office buildings offering employment,” said Leon. “I want Jerusalem, a city with more than a million residents, to have its own

high-tech center and there is no reason why it shouldn’t.”

Leon said that due to the high construction quality of the new buildings, Apple has already opened a branch in the city and has committed to moving into the new center once it is completed.

A short promotional video for the project – featuring well-known Israeli actor Michael Aloni – compares Jerusalem Gateway to mass urbanization developments in the U.S., such as Wall Street in New York, which thanks to some government backing and fast tracking, succeeded in creating the most powerful financial district in the world, and to San Francisco, which brought together the government-supported institutions and private investors that laid the groundwork for Silicon Valley.

“History proves that the convergence of government institutions, academia, business entrepreneurs, and cultural institutions provide winning conditions for success,” he says in the clip. “This is the exact opportunity of the Jerusalem Gateway district.” ♦

SEPTEMBER 19, 2023

NYC’s Perelman Performing Arts Center opens at World Trade Center site

After years in development, the \$500 million theater offers a space of entertainment and unity in Lower Manhattan

By **Tori Bergel**

The Perelman Performing Arts Center, also known as PAC NYC, opened its doors this week near the site of the World Trade Center after years in developmental limbo. The \$500 million center, which will host its inaugural performance on Tuesday night, marks the completion of a 20-year-long master plan to rebuild Ground Zero and the section of Lower Manhattan destroyed on 9/11.

“The ultimate response to hatred is love, and the ultimate response to destruction

is creation,” Bill Rauch, PAC NYC’s artistic director, told *Jewish Insider*. “I think it’s so appropriate that at this particular location, that there is a building and an organization that is devoted to creativity and to community — to making connections between people, bringing people together.”

“We have a real responsibility and a real opportunity to bring people together across all five boroughs and across the tristate area, at our location and that is certainly part of what excites me about all that lies

ahead,” he added. Rauch joined PAC NYC in 2018, toward the end of a 12-year stint as the Oregon Shakespeare Festival’s artistic director, before which he worked as the artistic director of the Cornerstone Theater Company in Los Angeles for 20 years.

The cube-shaped center with a striking marble facade was first proposed 20 years ago as an unspecified performing arts center to fill the final space at the new World Trade Center site. After a series of delays and operational shakeups, construction

finally got off the ground in 2016, thanks to businessman Ronald O. Perelman, whose \$75 million donation reignited the project and inspired the building's name.

While the center bears Perelman's name, its biggest benefactor is former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, whose previously undisclosed donation of \$130 million was made public in June. Bloomberg, who also chairs the 9/11 Memorial & Museum board, took over as chair of PAC NYC's board in 2020, a position previously held by Barbra Streisand since 2016.

Ahead of Tuesday's grand opening, the center held a ribbon cutting last Wednesday, with over 200 in attendance. Both Bloomberg and Perelman spoke during the event, alongside New York Gov. Kathy Hochul, New York City Mayor Eric Adams, 9/11 Memorial & Museum trustee Paula Grant Berry — whose husband, David Berry, died in the attack — Rauch and PAC NYC's executive director, Khady Kamara.

In his remarks, Bloomberg noted that Lower Manhattan had never housed a

performing arts center, and that adding such a space to the rebuilding plans was a top priority from the start.

"The arts, as we all know, is the heart of what makes New York a beacon of light for people around the world," the former mayor said. "After 9/11, many people thought New York's best days were behind us...Well, today it's where you want to be...Today, there are more businesses in Lower Manhattan than there were on September 10, 2001, and twice as many residents...The community is more diverse and dynamic than ever before, and the best, I think, is still yet to come."

With three performance stages, the goal of PAC NYC is to showcase not only diverse forms of artistic expression, but diverse voices as well — kicking off with a five-night global music series titled, "Refuge: A Concert Series to Welcome the World," featuring artists including Common, The Klezmatics and Shoshana Bean. The center will also present conversations and downtown sessions with notable celebrities such as Kerry Washington, Jada Pinkett Smith and Ben Platt.

"We will present and produce music, dance, chamber opera, theater, musical theater, and we'll even be a home for the Tribeca Film Festival a couple of weeks each year," Rauch told JI. "So the work is very multidisciplinary, really across the range of performing arts disciplines, and the work in our inaugural season is very deliberately eclectic, because we wanted to give as many different audiences reason to come into our building as possible. The main thrust of our opening season is to welcome people into our building and to introduce our organization."

While tickets to performances in the building's three main theaters start at \$39, the center itself is free to audiences seven days a week from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. The center also houses Metropolis, a new restaurant by acclaimed chef Marcus Samuelsson, for visitors to enjoy.

"We really want to be a welcoming home for New York and for visitors to New York," Rauch said. "I think that spirit of welcome and that sense of invitation is really active in the organization that we're trying to build." ♦

SEPTEMBER 18, 2023

From Suleiman the Magnificent's love poems to a ninth-century Quran

Islamic collection has room to grow at the National Library of Israel's new \$225 million building opening next month

By Linda Gradstein

The article first appeared in The Circuit.

When Israeli President Isaac Herzog made a state visit to Turkey last year, he presented President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan with an illuminated manuscript from a book of love poems composed in 1553 by Suleiman the Magnificent, the longest reigning sultan of the Ottoman empire.

The gift was a museum-quality replica of a page from the *Divan-i Muhibbi*, an anthology of poems written by Suleiman under the pen name Muhibbi, or "the lover."

The nearly 500-year-old manuscript — a masterpiece of Islamic literature decorated in gold leaf and intricate floral patterns — sits in the National Library of Israel and is one of five existing copies in the world.

Suleiman's book of verse is among the jewels of the library's collection of Islamic literature, which will become more accessible when the Jerusalem institution's new \$225 million building opens next month across the street from the Knesset, Israel's parliament.

"We have important theological works, Sufi mystical treatises, Persian poetry,

miniatures, scientific texts and mathematical texts," Samuel Thorpe, curator of the Islamic and Middle East collection, told *The Circuit*. "It's not the biggest collection in the region, but the quality is very high. There is a wealth of treasure here."

Since the Abraham Accords were signed three years ago, normalizing Israel's relations with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco, the library has sought to develop ties with its counterparts in the region. A team from the Emirates National Library and Archives visited in 2022. The director of the National Library of the

Kingdom of Morocco, Mohamed Elferrane, said he will attend the opening reception in Israel Oct. 17 where the two institutions will sign a preliminary agreement on scholarly cooperation.

The Israeli library has been less successful in cultivating connections with both Egypt and Jordan. While the two countries have long-standing peace treaties with Israel, their governments have discouraged tourism to Israel and rarely authorize cultural exchanges with Israeli organizations.

The library first started building its Islamic collection in 1924 before the State of Israel was declared when Palestine was ruled by the British. At least 6,000 volumes of Arabic and Islamic scholarship were contained in the private library of Hungarian scholar Ignaz Goldziher, which was bought by the World Zionist Organization and given to the library, Thorpe said. A festive opening was held that year on the Jewish holiday of Sukkot, where Jewish, Muslim and Christian scholars expressed the hope that the library would be a place of interfaith encounter.

The Islamic collection contains more than 2,500 manuscripts, including about 100 by Yohanan Ben David, an Iranian-born Jewish manuscript dealer living in London, who donated his holdings to the library in Jerusalem. Among other items in the collection is an illuminated Quran from the ninth century and one of the world's oldest manuscripts of "The Book of Healing," which dates back to the 11th or 12th century and was written by the Persian philosopher

and physician Abu Ali ibn Sina, also known as Avicenna.

Over the years, the library has sought to become a bridge between Jewish and Islamic scholars, particularly in the digital realm. Included in the collection are 300,000 Arabic books and newspapers, mostly Palestinian works from the prestate period. Last year, there were 1.3 million digital entrances into the library's Arabic website. So far in 2023, the numbers are up by 34%.

"For a while it was Saudi Arabia and Algeria, but now the Egyptians are at the top of our list," Raquel Ukeles, the library's director of collections, told *The Circuit*. "It speaks exactly to this mission of the library to be a meeting place, and if we can't do it physically, we can do it digitally. Digital boundaries are porous."

Amid the 4 million books, documents and artifacts housed in the new building are the "Damascus Crown," a 1,000-year-old volume of the Hebrew Bible, and a manuscript of a commentary in the handwriting of Maimonides, the Spanish-born Jewish philosopher and physician who lived in Egypt and Morocco. There are also pieces of Israeli history that will be on display such as the first draft of the song "Jerusalem of Gold" by Naomi Shemer, and the last verses written by Hannah Senesh, the Hungarian-Jewish poet and fighter, which were found in her dress pocket on Nov. 7, 1944, the day she was executed by a Nazi firing squad.

The library's 11-story building was designed by the Swiss architecture firm

Herzog and de Meuron and contains a robotic system to deliver and reshelve books. Built from white Jerusalem stone, the building is shaped with a dramatic curved roof to evoke an open book. Among the new library's funders are the Rothschild family's Yad Hanadiv foundation and the Gottesman Fund, a New York-based family foundation. In front of the building is a monumental stone sculpture by Israeli artist Micha Ullman. It is based on the ancient kabbalistic text called *Sefer Yetzirah* (the Book of Creation) and carries the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Inside the building are works by an assortment of Israeli and international artists, including two by Marc Chagall.

The library contains an education center where a special emphasis will be placed on education in Arabic. One program, run by a team of Arabic-speaking professionals, will bring Palestinian students from East Jerusalem to the library, introducing them to the Islamic collection and teaching research skills. In the past six years, 10,000 students from schools in East Jerusalem visited the library at its location nearby on the campus of the Hebrew University.

Salai Meridor, the National Library's chairman and a former Israeli ambassador to the U.S., told reporters on a tour of the new building last week that it will open the nation's history to new audiences.

"I hope this place can be a bridge, and not a narrow bridge, between the past and the future," he said. ♦