

## THE WEEKLY PRINT

*Amos Hochstein, Biden's go-anywhere, get-things-done guy, faces his toughest deal yet; How the Israel-Hamas war upended online dating; U.S. ambassador to Lebanon acknowledged Israeli sovereignty over Golan; UCLA professor's 'wake-up call' to anti-Israel hostility on campus; Senators reject genocide accusations against Israel ahead of ICJ hearing; With help from her Dallas community, Israeli teacher reunites her class after student released from Hamas captivity; 'Passages' brings pro-Israel Christian college students to Washington; As Nativ goes on hiatus, Conservative teens lack clear Israel gap-year alternatives; and Ramah launches Camp Sasson to give kids with cancer, and their families, a free camp experience.*

JANUARY 10, 2024

## Amos Hochstein, Biden's go-anywhere, get-things-done guy, faces his toughest deal yet

*The longtime staffer has Biden's ear and an expansive portfolio. Can he prevent an all-out war in Lebanon?*

By Gabby Deutch

On a mild Wednesday in September, a genteel century-old Upper East Side mansion played host to some of the biggest names in the Middle East — and optimistic conversations that now, in the altered post-Oct. 7 reality, seem almost quaint.

King Abdullah II of Jordan stopped by amid a busy week of meetings to speak to the few hundred Middle East watchers, fixers, journalists and diplomats gathered on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly. Other speakers at the

*Al-Monitor/Semafor* Middle East Global Forum included the prime minister of Iraq, the foreign ministers of Oman and Tunisia and a top Emirati diplomat.

By late afternoon, after hours of speeches and panels, attendees perked up when Amos Hochstein, an aide to President Joe Biden, took the stage.

"Of all the speakers today," said Andrew Parasiliti, president of *Al-Monitor*, "the one who least needs an introduction is Amos."

Hochstein's official title is deputy assistant to the president and senior advisor

for energy and investment. Unofficially, he's Biden's go-anywhere, get-things-done guy — someone whose job is ostensibly to focus on wonky energy issues but who is increasingly the person dispatched by the president to deal with the most challenging global issues from Mexico to Africa to the Middle East.

Early in the moderated conversation, Hochstein was asked to address one such quest. In 2022, he negotiated a deal between Israel and Lebanon to resolve a long-running dispute over the countries' maritime border.

It was the first official agreement between the two nations, which are technically still at war.

“Everyone told me it wasn’t possible, which is why it happened,” Hochstein said. “Then everybody leaves you alone. They think you’re crazy and you go and negotiate something.”

It was a line that sounded a lot like language used by another recent White House official who had served as an important deputy to a president.

“Whenever I spoke with colleagues and confidants ... they thought the concept was impossible,” Jared Kushner wrote in his 2022 book, referring to the 2020 Abraham Accords negotiations. “Lots of things could go wrong. We had to keep it quiet.”

Like Hochstein, former President Donald Trump’s son-in-law became a key foreign policy advisor to the commander-in-chief in the Middle East and beyond. (Hochstein, like Kushner, is also an Orthodox Jew.)

Both of them “have the complete trust and confidence of the White House,” said a former Trump administration official who worked on foreign policy. “Hochstein has that aura, the dealmaker, the guy who can finish.”

Now, he has to prove it again — in the middle of a growing war. Everyone is again telling him it can’t be done. But this time, they might be right.

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Two and a half weeks after that high-energy event in New York, the Middle East described by Hochstein and the other prominent speakers imploded.

Hamas terrorists invaded Israel from Gaza on Oct. 7 launching a massive terror attack that killed more than 1,200 people, and taking over 200 hostages back to the enclave. In response, Israel launched a major offensive in Gaza, aiming to eradicate Hamas and bring home the hostages.

A smaller-scale war of attrition is playing out on Israel’s border with Lebanon. Iran-backed Hezbollah militants in southern Lebanon have lobbed missiles into northern Israel, leading tens of thousands of Israelis who live close to the border to flee. Houthi fighters in Yemen have carried out two dozen attacks on commercial shipping vessels and

paralyzed global shipping in the Red Sea.

Hochstein’s services as a high-stakes negotiator are again being employed by Biden — but this time, the consequences of failing to reach a deal could be much deadlier. And if convincing Israel and Lebanon to sign onto the maritime border deal during peacetime was a yearslong challenge, then persuading both countries, and Hezbollah, to put down arms will be even harder. Not that the maritime deal was easy: “There are not many people who could have pulled off the successful conclusion of the Lebanon-Israel maritime border deal,” United Arab Emirates Ambassador to the U.S. Yousef Al Otaiba told *Jewish Insider*. “Most leaders I know trust and respect Amos and his ability to get things done,” Otaiba added.

For a region that is constantly on the brink of conflict, the threat of an all-out regional war has never felt closer. Preventing the war from growing is a key goal of Biden administration diplomacy. But that objective, though largely successful thus far, may prove difficult in the longer term.

“To any country, any organization, anyone thinking of taking advantage of this situation, I have one word: Don’t. Don’t,” Biden said in an Oct. 10 address about the Hamas attacks. He and other top diplomats have stuck with that simple message, but whether it is effective remains an open question. (The White House declined to comment for this story and did not make Hochstein available for an interview.)

Last week, Hochstein met in Washington with Lebanon’s foreign minister before traveling to Israel for a series of high-level meetings with Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. He is in Beirut this week, while Secretary of State Tony Blinken visits Israel to push diplomacy. Both have visited the Middle East several times since Oct. 7.

Gallant and Netanyahu told Hochstein that their preferred outcome for the increasingly unpredictable situation on Israel’s border with Lebanon is diplomatic — reaching a deal to push Hezbollah’s fighters back to the demarcation line in U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701. (Recent actions, though, suggest otherwise; this week, Israeli forces killed the commander of a major Hezbollah unit and three other Hezbollah fighters. Hezbollah responded with a rocket

barrage on northern Israel.)

This stated desire for diplomacy in the north stands in contrast to the Israeli government’s goal in Gaza, which is the total eradication of Hamas by military means.

Netanyahu told Hochstein on Thursday that Israel “is committed to bringing about a fundamental change on its border with Lebanon,” according to a statement from Netanyahu’s office. “The Prime Minister emphasized that we will not stop until this goal has been achieved, whether diplomatically, which Israel prefers, or in some other way.” Without a solution, Netanyahu and Gallant both conveyed to Hochstein, the 80,000 displaced residents of Israeli border communities cannot return to their homes.

It’s a difficult task, given how Hezbollah — designated a foreign terrorist organization by the U.S. — maintains a stronghold on Beirut. On the same day he met with Hochstein in Washington, Lebanese Foreign Minister Abdallah Bou Habib gave an interview to CNN in which he revealed the extent to which the Lebanese government is in the thrall of Hezbollah.

“The decision is theirs,” Bou Habib said of Hezbollah, when asked whether the Shiite militia will respond to the killing of a senior Hamas official in Beirut last week. “We hope they don’t commit themselves to a larger war.”

That makes resolution much harder, even for a savvy negotiator like Hochstein. Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati said Tuesday the country is ready to discuss negotiations “to achieve a long-term process of stability in southern Lebanon,” he told a U.N. official.

But Hezbollah “is an organic part of the society of south Lebanon,” said Sarit Zehavi, president of the Alma Research and Education Center, a think tank located 7 ½ miles from the Israel-Lebanon border. She does not believe that a diplomatic agreement will last, pointing to the failed cease-fire at the end of the 2006 Lebanon war that culminated in a strong Hezbollah faction with a large cache of missiles directed at Israel.

“For all of us that live here, you — I mean the international community — cannot fool us again with a fake diplomatic arrangement. We’ve been there, done that

17 years ago, and nothing happened,” said Zehavi. Polling shows that most Israelis think the Hezbollah threat warrants a military response.

This is the crucial distinction between Hochstein’s current task and what he accomplished in the maritime negotiations: The people calling the shots in Lebanon now are Hezbollah terrorists, backed by Iran.

“The maritime border was mostly about the gas, and it was more of a Lebanon-Israel agreement. Hezbollah had a say in it, but it was really about Lebanon, and the economy and the gas of Lebanon. It was not about the security risks between Hezbollah and Israel,” said Hanin Ghaddar, a Lebanon expert at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. The current escalation, meanwhile, “is not a Lebanese issue. It’s Hezbollah. It’s an Iranian issue.”

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For nearly 30 years, Hochstein diligently but ambitiously worked his way up the Washington ladder. It’s a fairly typical path for a career politico — Capitol Hill aide, lobbyist, presidential campaign staffer (Chris Dodd’s failed 2008 bid), State Department official, private sector work when his party didn’t control the presidency — that has culminated in a particularly close relationship with the president.

“People like people that are connected,” said Tom Nides, who was serving as U.S. ambassador to Israel during the Israel-Lebanon maritime negotiations. “It’s not easy getting into the Biden inner circle, but [Hochstein] is certainly part of it.”

Hochstein started his Biden administration tenure in the State Department before moving to the White House, where he could be closer to Biden and have more leeway to pursue bigger projects.

“The reason that people are so happy that he moved to the White House is that he’s a dealmaker,” one Israeli who knows Hochstein told *JI* in the fall. “He’s not into just academic bullshit.”

His portfolio entails a broad remit that reaches from China to Africa to the American heartland, encompassing everything from electric vehicle manufacturing domestically to the clean energy transition to the war

in Ukraine. Before joining the Biden administration, he was an executive at a natural gas company.

Hochstein first met Biden on a 2011 trip to Europe when he was working in Hillary Clinton’s State Department. Soon after, he began to brief then-Vice President Biden occasionally on energy-related matters. By the second term of the Obama-Biden administration, Hochstein was on the plane with Biden — or sitting next to him in meetings — nearly every time the former vice president traveled overseas.

“You’ll have a rotating cast of policy experts who will brief the then-vice president, now-president, on issues. Amos really stood out and built a relationship with the vice president by being somebody that the VP could rely on to be direct,” said a former senior official who worked under both President and Vice President Biden.

Before Oct. 7, Hochstein was a key negotiating partner, alongside White House coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa Brett McGurk, in efforts to bridge ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia. The team’s momentum gained prior to the Hamas attacks has mostly stalled, at least publicly. But even this week, Saudi officials admit they remain interested in a deal with Israel and the U.S., while also seeking the establishment of a Palestinian state.

The Saudi portfolio played on Hochstein’s strengths as an energy expert. He took on the Israel-Lebanon maritime deal in the first place because, at its core, it was about energy; defining the countries’ maritime border really meant deciding ownership of natural gas fields at sea.

“It can take many years to establish a boundary, particularly when you have oil and gas resources at play, because even small movements of the line in one direction or the other can have implications in millions or billions of dollars,” said Alisa Newman Hood, an energy industry executive who was an advisor to Hochstein at the State Department in the Obama administration, when the negotiations first started. “And that timing is for *friendly* neighbors.”

In October 2022, to mark the completion of the deal, Hochstein flew first to Lebanon and later to Israel to get the document signed. Officials from Lebanon and Israel would not appear in the same room together. His

Lebanese counterpart, Deputy Parliament Speaker Elias Bou Saab, proposed calling the agreement “the Amos Hochstein accord.”

Later, in Jerusalem, then-Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid was blunt: “Nobody had faith in you,” he said to Hochstein. “Whatever.” The men laughed loudly over a long handshake.

This time around, Hochstein faces even longer odds than he did on the maritime issue. It could be said, again, that no one has any real faith that the negotiations will proceed to any kind of long-lasting solution.

But that hasn’t stopped Hochstein yet. ♦

# How the Israel-Hamas war upended online dating

*The morass of dating apps was already a nightmare to muddle through. Then came a terror attack, a war and a growing cultural chasm*

By Gabby Deutch

After the Oct. 7 terror attacks in Israel, Rose, a 24-year-old graduate student in New York, took a break from dating. She had family and friends in Israel and was too distraught by the attack to log into the apps and navigate the morass of men.

"The idea of sitting across from a stranger and being like, 'I'm really passionate about Israel' — I don't want to have to explain it to people," she reflected.

When she reopened her dating apps a few weeks later, Rose was stunned to find that the war between Israel and Hamas had transformed the way many men presented themselves in their profiles.

"I'll fall for you if...you're a leftist," one man wrote, with a Palestinian flag emoji, on his profile on Hinge, a popular app used by people looking for serious relationships. "Give me travel tips for...Ramallah," another person wrote. On the app Bumble, Rose saw a person write, "A non-negotiable: free palestine."

"It shouldn't say that much about a person, a cute little prompt," said Rose, who asked to be identified by her middle name because her employer doesn't allow her to speak to the press. "When you're taking that prompt, and you're putting the most loaded geopolitical issue of our year — in my opinion, of our lifetime — it's just like, 'OK, this person has no nuance,' which is what I'm looking for."

Much as the Israel-Hamas war has had major ramifications on college campuses and in the workplace, the events in the Middle East have fundamentally changed the experience of dating for many American Jews, particularly those using dating apps. Eleven Jewish singles living in major U.S. cities spoke to *Jewish Insider* about their experience on the apps after Oct. 7, and they paint a picture of a dating landscape, always

fraught, now filled with politically-tinged minefields.

Many confessed to rethinking their own dating preferences; some are now only dating Jews, even when that had not been their practice before. All said they have seen a marked increase in people who talk about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on their profiles.

"I'm mostly having trouble with how it's infiltrating the space because I do not see differentiation between Israel and Judaism," said Shayna, a woman in her 20s in New York. "I can't tell if the statements are political or discriminatory and that makes me want to close out the apps all together."

On some profiles, the issue is highlighted in a subtle way: A photo on a profile showing a person in Israel in front of the Western Wall, or a mention that they speak Hebrew.

Others are more overt. Several people have come across profiles that say, "Zionists swipe left." (Swiping left means turning the person down.) One man included a photo of him holding up a sign that said "Let's have hummus, not Hamas" at the November pro-Israel rally in Washington. The lead photo on one woman's profile showed her at a pro-Palestine rally in San Diego, holding a sign that called President Joe Biden Israel's "puppet."

"Someone who makes a point of using one of their few brands to list that in their profile as being really important to them, I just don't think they would be open to having a discussion," said Amy, a 27-year-old in Boston. Amy has family in Israel but also has concerns about Israel's offensive in Gaza, and she wants someone who understands the issue's complexity. (At a "MatzoBall" event for Jewish singles in December, a man called her a "sheep" for not agreeing with every aspect of the Israeli government's actions since Oct. 7.)

One New York lawyer in his 30s has been surprised by how frequently he sees anti-Israel content on dating apps. He shared screenshots of several examples.

One woman wrote in her profile, "You should leave a comment if...you're a big spoon and you're serious about abolition, organizing, freeing palestine, and/or ending capitalism." Another described herself as a "nice short + loud jewish gal (free palestine)." One woman on the app Feeld, which is geared toward casual sex and people who want to "explore gender, sexuality and desire outside of existing blueprints," described herself as a "busy law student" and added a note of warning: "Obviously I don't f\*\*\* zionists or cops."

The lawyer had seen similar "far-left virtue-signaling" before Oct. 7, usually with references to the police or capitalism. But the anti-Israel messaging is new.

"The fact that that's perceived as cool right now, it's kind of scary as an American Jew," said the lawyer, who requested anonymity, citing constraints from his employer.

One-third of Americans have tried online dating, including more than half of 18- to 29-year-olds. While posts about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are new, discussion of politics on the apps is not. On Hinge, users can describe their politics, and many liberal users swipe left on anyone who writes "conservative" or even "moderate," viewing it as a less-overt way of saying Republican. (David, a 30-year-old in New York, told *JI* he removed "conservative" from his profile after receiving trolling responses; since then, he has matched with more women.)

"Jewish or not, since 2016, people have been more vocal about their politics on their profile," said Erika Ettin, a New York-based dating coach who helps people develop their online dating profiles. She said her clients

still often come across profiles that say, “If you support [former President Donald] Trump, swipe left.”

“Even if you completely agree with that, which I certainly do, the sentiment is really negative to have in the profile,” said Ettin. “Even my liberal clients are still not necessarily going to choose someone who writes that in their profile because it’s overkill sometimes.”

Some of the Jewish singles who talked to JI said that the strong political language on both sides can be off-putting, making it hard to connect in a genuine way.

“I’d definitely be less inclined to swipe right on someone if I think they harbor a lot of anti-Zionist sentiment,” said Joseph, a 27-year-old gay man from Chicago. “If I think someone presents as too pro-Israel to the point of disregarding the Palestinian side of the story, that’s also a no.”

For others, the proliferation of Israel-focused posts on the apps has actually been a boon to their dating lives: It allows users

to swipe quickly past those with whom they might clash in favor of those who align with them on the issue.

“A lot of men have posted things like, ‘If you’re not pro-Israel, I’m not interested.’ I think people are very much being more specific and intentional about that on their profiles,” said Hannah, a 30-year-old in New York. “I’m seriously dating, so it gets that conversation out of the way.”

Sydney, a 28-year-old New Yorker, recently posted a photo of herself at a Shabbat dinner — with challah and other Jewish imagery front and center — as a nod toward her connection to Judaism. She is now only dating Jewish men; previously, she hadn’t strongly considered religion as a factor.

“I am now looking more closely at those signals. If I see an Israeli flag, it’s an immediate yes. If I see a photo from someone who was at an FIDF [Friends of the Israeli Defense Forces] gala or a UJA event, immediate yes. No question,” said Sydney.

“I am definitely looking to find someone whose values align with mine.”

One of Ettin’s clients responded to the Oct. 7 attacks by pivoting only to JDate, a move Ettin advised against: Once a pioneer in Jewish online dating, JDate has fallen in popularity as apps like Hinge, which allow users to filter by religion, have become more widely used. A newer dating app called Lox Club, which requires users to be approved for membership and pay a monthly fee, has seen its membership explode in the past three months.

“It’s making Jewish people realize it’s more important than ever to date a Jewish partner, especially since the war began, because talking about complex issues like that isn’t easy with people who don’t deeply understand or empathize with the Jewish culture,” Lox Club founder Austin Kevitch told JI this week. More than 10,000 matches took place on the platform since Oct. 7, more than twice as many as the period before the Hamas attacks. ♦

JANUARY 11, 2024

## U.S. ambassador to Lebanon acknowledged Israeli sovereignty over Golan

*‘The Golan Heights, including Shebaa Farms, remains critically important to Israel’s security,’ Lisa A. Johnson said*

By Marc Rod

U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon Lisa Johnson affirmed during her confirmation proceedings last month that the Biden administration recognizes Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights and its importance for Israeli security.

The administration has been reluctant to publicly and firmly state that it stands behind the Trump administration’s decision in 2019 to recognize Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, stating when questioned publicly that there had been no change in U.S. policy, without clearly specifying what that policy entails.

“The Trump administration recognized

Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights in a March 25, 2019 Proclamation,” Johnson said in written responses to questions submitted by Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) prior to her confirmation. “The Biden Administration has not changed that policy.”

In the written response, which was obtained by *Jewish Insider*, Johnson went on to quote from a 2021 response by Secretary of State Tony Blinken highlighting the Golan’s importance to Israeli security, describing Blinken’s comments as “all the more true following Hamas’ horrific October 7 terrorist attacks and subsequent Hizballah and other terrorist operations targeting Israel.”

“Israel must protect itself from Hizballah and other terrorist and regional threats,” Johnson continued. “In this regard, the Golan Heights, including Shebaa Farms, remains critically important to Israel’s security.”

Cruz’s questions had referenced the U.S.’ vote in favor of U.N. Security Council Resolution 2695, which included language describing “the occupied Shab’a Farms,” referring to a territory inside the Golan Heights between Lebanon and Syria. ♦



# UCLA professor's 'wake-up call' to anti-Israel hostility on campus

*Sharon Nazarian, who also serves as an ADL board member, told JI: 'The idea of Jewish victimhood is one [students] are not willing to accept'*

By Haley Cohen

When Sharon Nazarian started teaching a new class on Oct. 4 at the University of California Los Angeles, designed to look at antisemitism from a global lens, she couldn't have known just how timely the topic was about to become. Three days after the class began, Hamas terrorists infiltrated Israel and launched a massive terror attack that killed more than 1,200 Israelis. In the wake of the war that followed, rates of antisemitism skyrocketed on college campuses around the U.S.

"I have to admit that when I designed the class, 'The Globalization of Antisemitism: A Survey of Transnational Trends,' largely based on my Anti-Defamation League experience, I had no idea what Oct. 7 would bring," Nazarian, the former senior vice president of international affairs and current board member of the ADL, told *Jewish Insider*.

"Everything that you have read about in terms of the challenges on U.S. campuses showed up directly in my class and with my students," she said, calling the class, made up of 25 students from diverse backgrounds (an estimated 30% of whom are Jewish), a "wake-up call" about today's students.

The class ran in the global studies department – which Nazarian, a former adjunct professor at UCLA from 2005-2017, said provided a more diverse group of students than doing so through the Jewish or Israel studies departments would have.

"Students are unwilling to hear theses that challenge their own worldview. Students today have far less knowledge of history and analytical thinking skills than previous generations, and this becomes a huge challenge when teaching critical issues such as antisemitism," Nazarian said, noting

that social media — TikTok in particular — has contributed to "the relativism trap."

"I asked students which figure personified pure evil to their generation as Osama bin Laden did to ours; they mentioned President Donald Trump and Ronald Reagan," Nazarian said. "I listed Hitler, Stalin, Mao. You get the point."

When Israel responded to Hamas' attack by launching a ground invasion of Gaza, "the tone of students in class shifted – they questioned my perspective," Nazarian said, adding that after Oct. 7, students wanted "to hear me constantly speak to Israel's killing of innocent Palestinians and complained to administrators that I did not offer a safe space for them to do so."

"The idea of Jewish victimhood is one [students] are not willing to accept. They are so entrenched in the narrative of Palestinian victimhood that there is no space for the concept of Jews as victims," Nazarian added.

UCLA's administration responded by disciplining Nazarian about keeping the focus of the class on the Jewish experience around the globe, she said. "They tried (unsuccessfully) [to have me] stay away from thorny policy issues in the Israel/Gaza dynamic, but nevertheless I was trapped." In spite of this, Nazarian said it is important to make clear that "UCLA welcomed my class. They didn't have to allow me to teach this, it was a privilege."

Anastasia Hollande, a senior majoring in global studies who was a student of Nazarian's, also noted a "significant" shift in the class after the Israel-Hamas war started. "Before, the class was about everyone being curious. After Oct. 7 there were a lot of heightened emotions," she said. As protests around campus were held during class, the environment became "really charged," she

said, adding that "a lot of people just stopped coming."

Hollande said she came into the class with "quite a bit [of knowledge] on U.S. foreign policy and Middle Eastern diplomacy."

"[Other classes taught that] Israel is an ally, but I never before studied how Israel is internally," Hollande, who is not Jewish and "leans pro-Israel," said.

Hollande said that pro-Palestinian students in the class appeared comfortable to speak up, while most Jewish students did not, which she said mirrors the overall climate on campus. "It's been really hard [for Jewish students]," she said. "The other day there was a big banner on campus that said Israel is committing Nazi-style occupation. It's difficult for me to see so many pro-Palestinian rallies taking over and getting so boisterous. Everything is a little bit scarier."

Nazarian echoed that the Jewish students in her class generally did not engage. "But [they] told me privately that it felt it was useless to try to challenge what was being said by their classmates," she added.

Nazarian said the end of the semester was particularly fraught, when some students requested from the head of the department to miss the final lectures and asked to not be penalized for missing class despite 20% of their grade being for class attendance.

"The UCLA administrator strongly suggested that I offer them other ways to make up for those lost points, meaning allowing them not to show up to class," Nazarian said, which she found "utterly shocking." According to Nazarian, the administration said that policy was to accommodate students not only given the

stresses on them post-COVID, but also due to mental health issues. “Of course, this was not the case; they simply didn’t want to hear my narrative,” she said.

The UCLA administration did not immediately respond to JI’s request for comment about the course.

The views Nazarian observed in her classroom echo a new narrative that has spread in the Middle East and beyond, recasting Jews as oppressors. That radical view is prevalent among Americans between the ages of 18-29, who sympathize with Palestinians over Israelis, recent polls show.

Still, Nazarian said some of the students,

like Hollande, had a genuine interest in learning and kept an open mind. One student was active in Students for Justice in Palestine and said he signed up to hear another perspective. Another student expressed that most of his high school class had become alt-right and neo-Nazis; he wanted tools to counter those extremist ideologies.

Nazarian, who was born in Iran, noted that a design flaw was that only about a quarter of the students had any formal Middle East education. She said that if the class runs again, a prerequisite needs to be required for such courses “since any discussion of ‘anti-Zionism is antisemitism’

demands a more in-depth understanding of Middle East history and politics.”

While Nazarian does not know if she personally would offer the course again, she said she would like to see similar ones — looking at the threats of global antisemitism and how that leads to an array of global challenges — at universities worldwide. “This information should encourage universities and administrators to do more,” she said.

“We need more of what I’ve done,” Nazarian continued. “I tell donors not to push away from universities, just repurpose your dollars and invest in antisemitism education.” ♦

JANUARY 11, 2024

## Senators reject genocide accusations against Israel ahead of ICJ hearing

*‘Maybe South Africa ought to sit this one out,’ Sen. John Fetterman said*

By Marc Rod

Senators rejected accusations that Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza, ahead of a hearing at the International Court of Justice about genocide allegations leveled by South Africa against Israel.

“Maybe South Africa ought to sit this one out,” Sen. John Fetterman (D-PA) said at a luncheon on Capitol Hill hosted by the Orthodox Union on Wednesday, adding that it’s “appalling” to accuse Israel of genocide “given the history there.”

Israel has the “ability to actually do that, if they wanted to, but they’re there to eliminate Hamas,” Fetterman continued. “Hamas hides behind civilians... If Hamas decided to stand up on a real battlefield, they’d be incinerated in 15 minutes.”

Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) also condemned South Africa’s genocide accusations.

“To say this is a genocide is absurd. It’s not what genocide means,” she said. “And it’s an outrageous thing [to be] attributed to the Israeli people.”

Gillibrand said that, on recent visits to

Israel, she’s heard from Israeli officials about their careful procedures for limiting civilian deaths in their strikes.

“I heard of many instances where targets were denied because there were too many civilians around the one target,” she said. “They’re using extremely sophisticated and robust reviews of every single target — thousands of targets chosen every day and reviewed one by one to protect innocent life.”

Fetterman, who has emerged as an outspoken defender of Israel amid the current war, vowed that he’d be “the last man standing” in the Democratic caucus against a premature cease-fire and conditions on aid to Israel, should such a situation arise.

“I’m always going to be on one side in this situation. And that is on the side of Israel,” he said. “And that is the easiest choice I’ve ever made as a senator here... Perhaps you might be aware that I’ve taken a little bit of blowback for that. Great. I welcome the smoke, then.”

Gillibrand, who recently visited Saudi Arabia, Israel and Jordan with

other members of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said she believes that “Arab states are ready to rebuild the Palestinian state free of Hamas, to actually be the ones to invest in rebuilding, to have a long-term peace agreement with Israel, to provide regional security, to have a defense agreement between Israel, the United States, Saudi Arabia and the Abraham Accords, countries along with Jordan and Egypt.”

Sen. Ben Cardin (D-MD), the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, also described a future Saudi-Israeli normalization deal as connected to a path toward a two-state solution after the Gaza war.

“Sen. [Lindsey] Graham and I are leading this effort, to work with the countries in the region for normalization with Israel. It would be a game changer,” Cardin said. “It also needs to recognize there must be a path forward for responsible leadership for the Palestinian people, one that will recognize Israel’s rights and security.”

Cardin said that “regular conversations are taking place” on the Saudi-Israel deal

and that “there’s a lot of real reasons for some optimism as we move forward on how we can turn this tragic event into a bright future,” but talks cannot come to fruition until Israel destroys the Hamas threat.

Cardin added that the past decade, and the period since Oct. 7 in particular, had shaken his feeling of safety as a Jewish American.

“I always thought we’d be safe here in America... I knew that we had our leaders that had our back, that our leaders would never give oxygen to hate,” Cardin said. “That changed in America, has changed around the world.”

“But we always had Israel,” he continued.

“Oct. 7 changed that perception, that Jews are safe in Israel. So this is a dangerous time.”

Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL) said that the past few months have been “eye-opening” in revealing antisemitism that has “been simmering under the surface for a long time.”

“The reality is that there are people in our country who view what happened [by Hamas] as justified. It’s not just anyone. It’s people in charge of important things,” Rubio said.

The lunch also included speeches by Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) and Sens. Thom Tillis (R-NC), Katie Britt (R-AL), Susan Collins (R-ME), Kevin

Cramer (R-ND), Tim Scott (R-SC) and Marsha Blackburn (R-TN).

The lawmakers expressed their support for additional aid to Israel and the need to free the remaining hostages, as well as funding for the Nonprofit Security Grant Program at home and other efforts to fight antisemitism, including improved educational programs.

Some senators also spoke about experiences with anti-Israel protesters in response to their support for Israel — Tillis said his neighborhood was flooded with fliers while activists screamed at Collins on a plane flight home to Maine. ♦

JANUARY 8, 2024

## With help from her Dallas community, Israeli teacher reunites her class after student released from Hamas captivity

*Jewish Agency emissary Aya Margalit in Texas vowed to visit Erez Calderon after he was taken hostage on Oct. 7; this week, she made it happen*

By Judah Ari Gross

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

To the neighbor, it was just a bunch of kids being loud and stinking up her yard doing an art project with spray paint outside her apartment building. “It’s really hard to work with all this noise,” she yelled at them, peeking her head up over the fence.

What she didn’t know was that this was no normal midday party for 12-year-olds. The Sunday gathering was the first time that the 6B class of Shachar Eshkol Elementary School — a community school for the towns throughout the Eshkol region near the southern Gaza border — had gotten together in over three months, since the Oct. 7 terror attacks upended their lives. Every member of the class — who came from some of the hardest-hit communities in the Hamas attacks, including Kibbutz Nir Oz, Kibbutz Holit and Kibbutz Nir Yizhak — lost family

members, friends or, as often, both.

Following the attacks, the various communities were evacuated and the members were scattered across the country — some to hotels by the Dead Sea, some to Tel Aviv and others to the Eilat area.

What brought them back together on Sunday morning was a vow that their former teacher, Aya Margalit, had made to the mother of Erez Calderon, 12, who was kidnapped by Hamas on Oct. 7, along with his father, Ofer, and 16-year-old sister, Sahar. Erez and Sahar were released in November by Hamas as part of a deal between the terror group and the Israeli government. Their father remains in captivity.

In August, Margalit, along with her husband and three children, traveled from their community of Nir Yizhak to Dallas to spend the year as a Jewish Agency emissary, the senior community *shlichah* at the city’s Temple Emanu-El. She was there on Oct. 7, watching from afar as her community

and the communities of her students were overrun by terrorists, and her family has remained in Dallas since the attacks.

“When Erez was in captivity, I told his mother, Hadas, that when Erez came back, I would be there. I vowed a vow,” Margalit said using the Hebrew term, *neder*, referring to an oath that effectively cannot be broken.

“Once he was released, I told her and him, that whenever he is ready, I’d be there. A few days later, he wrote in the class WhatsApp group, ‘Aya are you coming to visit?’ I said, ‘Do you want me to?’ He said, ‘Yes.’ So I started planning to come,” Margalit told *eJewishPhilanthropy*.

She bought a plane ticket, which the Temple Emanu-El community paid for, and set up a GoFundMe page to raise money for a party for the class.

When she hit that goal, Margalit started raising additional funds for students’ families that were struggling financially because of the war, which has devastated



the local economy.

For her former students, Oct. 7 is “a nightmare that won’t end,” Margalit said. They have lost family, friends and homes, and now most of them are still displaced.

“I knew that when Erez came back, that I wanted to do something to bring them together,” she said. “I’m not their teacher anymore, but I’m with them forever.”

Margalit landed in Israel last Friday. She came alone, deciding that this trip was going to be focused on her students and on connecting her Dallas community to her home community of Nir Yizhak, and the Gaza border region more generally. Coming with her family, she said, would have been far too difficult.

The party on Sunday was held at the spacious Tel Aviv garden apartment of a friend who asked to remain nameless.

Shortly after everyone else arrived, Margalit went out to meet Erez Calderon and bring him in to meet the rest of his class, who huddled around the front door, waiting for their friend, who had spent 52 days in Hamas captivity.

Calderon was greeted with hugs and high fives and claps on the back. In a group photo, he was honored with having the class mascot — a green pencil sharpener; it’s an inside joke — placed on his head.

The party was “catered” by residents of the apartment building, who made pasta dishes, stews, homemade breads, pastries, roasted vegetables and cheeses.

“One of the mothers came up to me and said, ‘The best part is that there’s home-cooked food, not the food we have every day in the hotels,’” Margalit said.

Though they picked a bit at the home-cooked fare, as 12-year-olds, the kids first went straight for the dessert cart that had been hired for the party, loading up plates of ice cream and crepes with chocolate sauce, mini-marshmallows and other candies.

Beyond over-satisfying their sweet teeth, the 22 members of Shachar Eshkol’s 6B class generally acted as the sixth graders that they are. They played backyard volleyball, making up rules as they went; the boys and girls self-segregated by gender; they joked and rough-housed and laughed and hugged and squealed and showed off their new shoes.

For the adults, the reunion was far

more visibly difficult. As the kids played, the parents who attended stood off to the side, laughing and joking and catching up with one another too, but also occasionally breaking down in tears.

After the volleyball game and ice cream, the host brought out a box of disposable coveralls, spray paints, templates and enormous sheets of paper. Each kid was able to make their own graffiti-style poster, signed using a custom-made stencil of their names (despite the discomfort of the host’s neighbor).

“It was a healing event. It brought back hope. It reminded me of what we had,” Margalit said.

“The hardest thing [about Oct. 7] is that these kids were ripped out of their childhood,” she said, noting that this class had also gone through the COVID-19 pandemic, having school through Zoom or missing it entirely.

“They are all going through so much right now, and they are doing it all in a new world,” Margalit said. “They [would normally] spend most of their time in school and then go to after-school clubs with the same kids, and now they don’t see each other at all.”

And yet, she said, when they met up on Sunday, it was like no time had passed at all. “They immediately went back to doing what they were doing before,” Margalit said. “They didn’t want it to end. They kept asking to stay longer and longer and longer.”

“A kid from my class, who lost his father and his uncle and his cousin, was able to come today and smile, and his mother thanked me that we were able to do this and told me how important it was and how much it moves her — that’s an honor, that’s my mission,” Margalit said.

Reflecting on the day, Margalit said that it was “moving, flooding me with emotions, but it was also difficult. I didn’t try to show it, but it was very hard, having all of those feelings together.”

Margalit, who returns to the U.S. next week, said it has been one of the most “complicated” things for her to have been in the U.S. when the Oct. 7 attacks happened and to have remained there since.

“It’s very hard for me that I wasn’t with them, that I’m not with them now, but I am glad that I could bring them together and

that the parents brought them together. Some woke up before dawn in order to be there today,” she said.

Margalit, who spoke to eJP earlier in the war about her experiences, said she almost didn’t go to Dallas because of how hard it would be to leave her class, which she’d been with since second grade, but ultimately decided to go ahead with the plan. Margalit, who had served as a Jewish Agency *shlichah* at a summer camp in the U.S. in 2001 and spent a year as a child in Wisconsin when her parents came to be emissaries for the Weizmann Institute, is the first *shlichah* that her Dallas community had ever had.

“I was creating a new position in that community,” Margalit said.

“I hadn’t accomplished much [before Oct. 7]. We arrived and got settled, and then it was the High Holy Days, which were my first introduction to the community. We were just starting to recognize faces, and then on Erev Simchat Torah, everything happened,” she said.

A few hours after getting home from synagogue, Margalit said her phone — which still had the Israel Defense Forces’ Home Front Command app on it — started going off.

“From the number of sirens, I understood that something serious was happening,” she said.

Throughout the night, Margalit was glued to her phone, watching her community’s WhatsApp group, speaking to students in her class’ group — it’s called “Aya’s loves” — and privately.

“They start writing what’s happening to them, that they are scared, that they hear voices, that they hear terrorists,” Margalit said. She tried to reassure them that everything would be OK, that they would be safe, that they should do whatever they needed to stay calm.

It was through WhatsApp that she learned that Calderon, who lived on Kibbutz Nir Oz, had been kidnapped. “I messaged Erez, and there was no answer,” she recalled.

After Oct. 7, her job in Dallas changed. She was no longer working to develop a general connection among community members to the State of Israel. She was now representing her community and her region, and people’s lives were on the line.

“The connection that I thought was

just getting started and needed to be built and developed was suddenly incredibly powerful, especially for a community that had never had *shlichim* before,” she said.

Members of the Dallas community organized a meal train for Margalit’s family and reached out to see how they could help. “Everyone hugged us tight,” she said.

Though it was emotionally difficult for her to be so far from home, Margalit said it has been her “privilege for me to be in a position to fight for my community.”

“If we were at home, we would have just been another family that went through hell. Now, I can be much more effective,” she said.

In Dallas, Margalit helped organize clothing drives, fundraising efforts, a Hanukkah program and other activities connecting the Texas city to Nir Yizhak.

“It’s the greatest privilege that I can have in my life to be this bridge between [Dallas] and Nir Yizhak,” she said. “It’s my calling, it’s my role, it’s my time, and I’m here to serve.”

While in Israel, Margalit plans to visit her community, which has been relocated to Eilat, a kibbutz just north of Eilat, and spend time with her parents and family. For the end of her trip, she will help lead a delegation from Dallas, which is scheduled to meet with survivors and the families of hostages.

She will then bring the delegation to her Eshkol region, where they will visit Kibbutz Be’eri and her hometown of Nir Yizhak. Five members of the kibbutz were murdered in the Oct. 7 massacres and eight people were taken hostage, five of whom were later released. Last month, a member

of the kibbutz’s emergency response team, Tal Chaimi, who was initially thought to be missing, was determined to have been killed on Oct. 7; his body was taken captive.

Before the Oct. 7 attacks, Margalit said she had “dreamed of bringing people from my [Dallas] community to the kibbutz.

“I wanted to show them that even though we live in the Gaza periphery, it’s heaven. I never imagined I’d bring them to an empty kibbutz,” she said.

“I am sure that it will be very challenging for me [to visit Nir Yizhak]. There are people watching the houses, working in the cowsheds and the fields, but the community is empty,” Margalit said. “It will be difficult, but it will be important.” ♦

JANUARY 9, 2024

## ‘Passages’ brings pro-Israel Christian college students to Washington

*The program included a visit to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and wrapped up with a gathering in front of the U.S. Capitol*

By Haley Cohen

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

For the 300 Christian college students who gathered in Washington, D.C., the conference over the weekend was something of a rite of passage — a three-day crash course in modern-day Israeli history, society and culture at a fraught moment for the Jewish state.

The gathering was organized by Passages, a group that runs trips to Israel for Christian college and high school students, often referred to as “Christian Birthright.” And they seemed ready to embark on a learning process about Israel and all its complexities, according to Mykenzie Johnson, a former Passages employee who is active in their alumni program and was part of the D.C. event.

She relayed to *eJewishPhilanthropy*

some of the sentiments she heard from the college students: “I used to default that ignorance is bliss, but now I feel that as a Christian it is my responsibility to be educated about Israel,” said one. “We want to go to a Hillel Shabbat dinner,” said a second. Added a third, “We want to pray with Jewish students.”

The conference, held in multiple locations around the city, was held in place of winter trips to Israel that were canceled due to the country’s ongoing war with Hamas.

Scott Phillips, the CEO of Passages, said that because the group has postponed Israel trips until the summer, the weekend was “an opportunity for us to bring Israel to them.”

“It was a chance to give the Passages mission in three days,” Phillips told eJP, adding that the mission is “discovering the roots of Christian faith, which exists in Israel,

connecting to that and connecting them to modern Israel and what’s happening right now in Israel.”

The program included visits to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Museum of the Bible. It culminated on Sunday with a gathering in front of the U.S. Capitol, with participants wearing shirts that read: “Christians Stand With Israel.” They held signs with pictures of Israeli hostages and prayed for the safe return of the 136 people still being held captive in Gaza.

Panels included a briefing on the war in Gaza, as well as direct accounts from Israeli speakers “to really understand what their life is like right now,” Phillips told eJP.

Johnson, who graduated from the University of Florida in 2020 and was active in Passages while on campus — including traveling to Israel with the group in 2018

— told eJP that before staffing the D.C. conference, she was concerned how students who did not get the firsthand experience of going to Israel would view the Jewish state — especially in the current climate, where antisemitism and anti-Zionist groups are on the rise on college campuses nationwide. “My first question was how are they primed for this weekend? We’re fielding questions on a topic that they really have very little exposure to,” Johnson said.

“Passages offers a great pre-trip course before the Israel trip, and I knew these students hadn’t had that so that was something different to me,” she continued. “But I ended up being so impressed and moved by the debrief time I had with my group of 23 students. Each shared their reflections of the weekend without ever having the exposure of physically traveling to Israel.”

The conference took place at a critical moment for the Christian community as it relates to Israel. Polling shows that evangelical Christians between the ages of 18 and 29 are less supportive of Israel than their elders. According to a recent University of North Carolina at Pembroke study, there was significant slippage among younger evangelicals’ support for Israel between

2018 and 2021.

Phillips called the decreased support for Israel among young evangelicals “alarming.” But he noted that views are far more pro-Israel among Passages participants, pointing to a survey conducted by Lifeway, the media division of the Southern Baptist Convention, on young evangelical attitudes on the current Hamas-Israel war.

“We polled a diverse sample of our alumni and found that, because of Passages, the views are much more favorable to Israel,” Phillips told eJP. Compared to about one-third of the general Christian public ages 18-29 who say they are following the war closely (at least weekly), 92% of Passages alumni say the same.

Nearly all — 96% — of Passages alumni reported believing that Oct. 7 atrocities occurred, compared to 64% of young Christians in the Lifeway poll. Ninety-eight percent of Passages alumni said Israel has the right to defend itself, compared to 87% of the general respondents, and 40% called on the U.S. to do more to support Israel, compared to 29% of the other Christians surveyed.

Phillips added that among Christians aged 18-29, “most don’t know what to think. They are very neutral about Israel. They

don’t hear about it in churches most of the time, and they don’t have a framework of what to think about Israel.”

One of the most moving parts of the program came when Rivka Kidron, co-founder of Passages and former adviser for Diaspora and Christian affairs to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, shared her experience helping Israeli families of hostages garner publicity.

Kidron said she felt her effort to help was just a “drop in the bucket.” But the father of one of the hostages said to her in return, “Yes, it’s a drop in the bucket. But someone else will put in another drop, and soon enough, it will turn into a tsunami that will bring our people home again,” Kidron recalled, going on to encourage the Christian students in the room to do what they can — even if it’s small.

Robert Nicholson, co-founder of Passages, said in the same panel interview, “The Israel-Hamas war has given us as Christians tremendous moral clarity. I’ve never been more convinced of the righteous necessity of standing with Israel and the Jewish people than I am right now. And I would hope the broader Christian community in the United States sees it this way too.” ♦

JANUARY 5, 2024

## As Nativ goes on hiatus, Conservative teens lack clear Israel gap-year alternatives

*Decision not tied to Israel-Hamas war but to existing issues in the program, which saw a major decrease in enrollment this past year*

By Haley Cohen

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

High school seniors affiliated with the Conservative synagogues, schools or camps planning to defer college for a year to participate in Nativ, the movement’s Israel gap-year program, are scrambling for alternatives following the announcement that the program has been put on an indefinite hiatus beginning this

fall. The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the movement’s congregational arm — while “committed to educational experiences in Israel,” according to its CEO — has offered little guidance for students searching for a suitable replacement.

“New economic realities, recruitment challenges, and the changing nature of what young adults are looking for in their gap year” have all contributed to ending the program, according to an email sent to

Nativ alumni at the end of December by Conservative movement leaders, including USCJ CEO Jacob Blumenthal.

The Ramah network, another branch of the Conservative movement, is considering developing its own gap-year program, but that will not be ready in time to serve as a replacement for Nativ this fall.

Amy Skopp Cooper, director of Ramah, told eJP that Ramah plans to play a part in the 2025 experience. “Ramah believes that

the Conservative movement should provide a transformative gap-year experience in Israel and is currently looking into what our role could be in leading that effort,” she said. “We have not yet begun meeting with our parents and high school students,” she continued.

Nativ has typically enrolled upwards of 80 teens annually for 43 years — and while participants during the Second Intifada came home early, canceling the program is unprecedented. But this year, enrollment plummeted to fewer than 20 students (some briefly left after Hamas’ Oct. 7 terrorist attack but returned).

However, the cancellation does not appear to be related to Israel’s ongoing war with Gaza. Rather, troubles were first announced last March when the program put out a call for emergency aid for the current Nativ cohort. “We will not be able to run Nativ 43 unless we raise \$100,000,” the program’s director and assistant director, Sara Miriam Liben and Deb Shafran, wrote in an email to alumni at the time. Enrollment for Nativ opened as scheduled in September.

In the announcement that Nativ will not run next fall, USCJ did not endorse or recommend another program. Blumenthal told *eJewishPhilanthropy* that there “are conversations to figure out what that plan is.”

“This is an important moment in our movement in that we are looking at everything we do to find ways to be more effective, relevant and meaningful. We feel this is a moment where we should take a pause and figure out what the needs are in our community and the best way to meet them. We are firmly committed to educational experiences in Israel and to leadership development that we need for our movement,” he continued.

Eitan Gutin, the former director of lifelong learning at Tifereth Israel Congregation in Washington, D.C. and a 1995 participant of Nativ, said the announcement is “sad and the wrong decision for the movement.”

“Nativ was one of the best funnels for leadership in the movement, both of professionals and volunteer leaders,” Gutin told eJP. “My own Nativ produced multiple rabbis, multiple other Jewish professionals, a number of lay leaders and plenty of people who have sent their own children to the

Conservative movement’s programs.”

Now the father of a high school junior active in United Synagogue Youth, USCJ’s youth movement, Gutin said that the cancellation signals a larger concern within the movement. “If it were only Nativ it would be one thing. Since the pandemic, programs have been disappearing for our middle schoolers and teens. I’m sure there are financial reasons behind it but that doesn’t make it any less frustrating as a parent. Every time the movement cuts a program, it’s one less pathway to building the future leadership of the movement. As someone who cares about the Conservative movement, that concerns me on a macro level.”

Gutin’s son is interested in yeshiva study after graduating high school “so we’ve already been looking at things other than Nativ,” he said, “but for families for whom Nativ would have been the best match, there just isn’t a program like it to my knowledge, especially the aspect of Nativ focused on living in a Conservative Jewish community while living in the State of Israel.”

A 2020 Pew survey echoes Gutin’s observation that the movement is experiencing a decline. The poll found that denominational switching within Judaism has led to the largest net losses for the Conservative movement, which, in the 1950s and 1960s, represented the largest branch of American Jewry. In the survey, a quarter of adults who currently identify as Jewish or were raised Jewish say they were raised in Conservative Judaism, while 15% identify as Conservative Jews today. For every person who has joined Conservative Judaism, nearly three people who were raised in the Conservative movement have left it. By contrast, the Reform movement — now the largest American Jewish denomination — has experienced a net gain due to switching of denominations; 28% of current or former U.S. Jews say they were raised as Reform Jews, while 33% currently identify with the movement.

The suspension of Nativ also comes amid a growing number of both liberal Orthodox and pluralistic gap-year Israel experiences offered to teens — significantly more options than when Nativ was founded more than four decades ago. Still, there are few options that cater specifically to kosher-

and Shabbat-observant students who also want a gender-egalitarian experience, which Nativ offered.

Young Judaea, which offers a pluralistic gap year program called Year Course, told eJP it is a “natural fit for us to take the majority of Nativ participants until they get their gap-year program back up and running.”

Dafna Laskin, Young Judaea’s director of services, said, “We are not offering a specific alternative program, but we are beefing up our Jewish studies track option and will be actively recruiting those who would have gone on Nativ.” Laskin noted that many teens active in the Conservative movement have been choosing Year Course over Nativ for years.

Simon Cohen, co-founder of Aardvark Israel, another pluralistic gap-year in Israel program, told eJP that the group is “very sad to see that Nativ won’t be opening as we believe they are providing a good quality program for those students looking for a Conservative gap-year experience in Israel.”

“We are continually adding new tracks and ideas to reach out to new demographics; for example, next year we are opening the Aardvark Israel Culinary Track,” Cohen said, adding that Aardvark’s aim to increase the number of students on its programs has no connection to Nativ or what other programs are doing.

USCJ’s Blumenthal, himself a 1985 alumnus of Nativ, told eJP that the “goal is that we will have a movement gap-year experience in the the fall of 2025.”

For high school seniors graduating this spring who would have wanted to participate in the program fall of 2024, Blumenthal said, “We certainly want to encourage any students who want to spend a year in Israel to be in Israel.” ♦



# Ramah launches Camp Sasson to give kids with cancer, and their families, a free camp experience

*Three-day experience is offered to any Jewish family with a child who has or had cancer, even if they don't have ties to the Conservative movement*

By Haley Cohen

*The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.*

When about 20 families gather around a scenic lake in the small town of Palmer, Mass., for arts and crafts, sports and Shabbat services this spring, the weekend will closely resemble a shortened version of the typical overnight summer camp experience at Camp Ramah in New England. But in other ways, it will look different — some kids will be missing a limb or have a bald head. Therapeutic sessions designed specifically for parents, siblings and children living with cancer will make up a large chunk of programming.

On April 12-14, Camp Ramah, a network of Jewish summer camps affiliated with the Conservative movement, will launch Camp Ramah Sasson — the Hebrew word for joy. The initiative is the movement's first experience offered specifically to families with children battling cancer and is available free-of-charge, even to families who have never been involved with Ramah or the Conservative movement, such as Jeni Rhodes, a resident of Newton, Mass., and her 9-year-old daughter, Anya.

Anya was diagnosed with osteosarcoma, a type of bone cancer, when she was 7. She's now cancer-free, but receives follow-up scans every three months. The nine-month battle resulted in the amputation of Anya's leg. "It's something that you never go back to how life was before exactly," Jeni Rhodes told *eJewishPhilanthropy*, adding that the best way to move forward is to be in a community, like the one she is expecting Ramah Sasson will offer. "I'm looking forward to a chance to form a distinctly Jewish community of families that have also gone through this and faced childhood

cancer," she said.

Anya's father and two sisters, ages 5 and 11, are also planning to participate in the weekend. "When so much of a family's time and energy goes toward the survival of one of the kids, that has a huge impact on the siblings," Rhodes said. "So anytime there is a chance to all be together as a family with the support to allow us to have fun and all play together, and also for it to be uniquely Jewish, we're really excited to be able to share in this together," she continued, noting the experience "fills a gap."

"We've done camps that are not Jewish and some of our friends who are Jewish and keep Shabbat haven't been able to participate in those with us," she said, noting that Anya also participated in an Orthodox camp that didn't include parents or siblings.

Rabbi Ed Gelb, CEO of Ramah in New England, said he was inspired to create Camp Sasson from conversations over the years with parents of children who have cancer. "Up until now, we have not been able to provide them with the Ramah experience," Gelb said in a statement. "Now, we hope to bring the community, support, meaning and joy of camp to the entire family and let them know they have a home here."

Riki Wiederhorn, Ramah's director of year-round programming, told *eJP* that kids battling cancer or other illnesses "are sometimes an invisible part of the Jewish community. So we want to shed light." She said that if the pediatric cancer program goes well, the goal is to run similar initiatives through Camp Sasson catered to children and families dealing with various other serious illnesses, and to also include them in the general summer camp.

"Our long-term goal is also to incorporate these children into the typical summer

camp experience in whatever experience they are able to, for example maybe they'd come for 10 days instead of the typical four weeks campers come," Wiederhorn said. "Teenagers don't want to feel different, but an 8-year-old might be different," she continued, noting that that experience would also be free of charge. "But first is getting to know the families and their needs through family camp."

Camp Ramah Sasson receives financial backing from National Ramah. "But in order to expand the program, we need bigger and more communal partners," Wiederhorn said, declining to specify the precise costs of the program.

"As far as we know, we are the only liberal, egalitarian stream of Judaism that offers this opportunity," she continued. "We're in a unique position to offer help. We already know how to run a family camp. Our learning is how to meet the needs of this particular cohort. We're putting our own camp expertise to that." ♦