

THE WEEKLY PRINT

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AUGUST 24, 2021

Meet the man who wants to be Arizona's first Jewish governor

Aaron Lieberman is 'putting his kippah into the ring' in a bid for the state's top office

By Matthew Kassel

Aaron Lieberman, an Arizona state representative who flipped a Republican-held district in 2018, is hoping he can defy expectations once again as he embarks on a newly launched bid for statewide office. The former entrepreneur, a resident of northeast Phoenix, announced his candidacy in Arizona's open-seat gubernatorial election earlier this summer, joining a growing number of Democratic primary contenders vying to replace outgoing Republican Gov. Doug Ducey, who is term-limited.

If Lieberman prevails, he would take up where Arizona's last Democratic governor, Janet Napolitano — who resigned in 2009 to serve as secretary of homeland security in the Obama administration — left off. But the two-term legislator also wants to make history of another sort. "I'm running to be the governor of Arizona for all of our citizens, but I will also be the first Jewish governor of Arizona," Lieberman, 49, proclaimed in a recent interview with *Jewish Insider*. "That means something to Jewish people."

"He understands that his values as a political leader happen to be beautifully aligned with the roots of Jewish tradition, not the least of which is about justice and

equality and education for all," Rabbi John Linder of Temple Solel, a Reform synagogue in Paradise Valley, where Lieberman is a congregant, told JI. "I'm glad that he's putting his kippah into the ring."

Casting himself as a moderate lawmaker with a record of bipartisan cooperation, Lieberman argues that his campaign will appeal more broadly to voters who are eager for a return to "common-sense solutions" as Democrats and Republicans remain fiercely divided over false allegations of electoral fraud following last year's presidential election.

Such tensions are unlikely to dissipate anytime soon as the company hired by Republican state senators to conduct an audit of the 2.1 million general-election ballots cast in Maricopa County prepares to release its results. The partisan review, which has been criticized as flawed by elections experts on both sides of the aisle, had been expected to publicize its findings on Monday, but the company, Cyber Ninjas, postponed submitting a full report due to a staff-wide COVID-19 outbreak, Senate President Karen Fann announced yesterday.

"I fundamentally believe — and I think a lot of people believe this right now — that our politics are broken and that our

leaders aren't stepping up to the challenge," Lieberman said. "If you just go back and look at what we've all been through with COVID-19 — the hope and, I think, the belief was that we should be coming together, but instead it feels like we're coming apart."

While the Republican Party has occupied the Arizona governor's office for more than a decade, Lieberman suspects the GOP's reign will soon expire in the increasingly competitive battleground state, which handed President Joe Biden 11 electoral votes and is now overseen by two Democratic senators for the first time in nearly 70 years.

"The percentages of what I had to do to win in my statehouse district are exactly what you have to do to win statewide," Lieberman argued. "You've got to win two out of three independents, you've got to get about 15% of Republicans to vote for you, and to do that you have to present as a problem-solver who's focused on getting things done."

With the primaries just under a year away, Lieberman is in for an arduous primary battle as he goes up against two Democrats who have already declared — Katie Hobbs, the secretary of state, and Marco López, the former mayor of Nogales.

Hobbs, the only candidate to have previously won statewide office, has significantly raised her profile in recent months as she has clashed with Republicans over the 2020 election results. In June, her campaign announced that she had raised \$1 million just a week after entering the race.

Lieberman told JI he had pulled in more than \$250,000 in the first 24 hours of his campaign — no small sum. But he will still need to boost his name recognition throughout the state if he has any hope of emerging victorious in the August 2022 primary. Three political science professors in Arizona who were asked to assess his prospects — two in Tucson and one in Tempe — told JI they knew nothing about Lieberman's campaign or had never heard of him.

Though polling is scarce, a recent survey conducted by OH Predictive Insights, a nonpartisan market research company in Phoenix, showed Hobbs with a 74% favorability rating among Arizona Democrats, leading Nogales and Lieberman by 20 points. "There's still a lot of movement that can happen," Mike Nobles, chief of research at OH Predictive Insights, told JI. "Lieberman is in a decent position. Hobbs is clearly the one to beat."

"His name ID is actually not too bad," Nobles said of Lieberman. "However, roughly half of the electorate here in Arizona haven't really formed an opinion of him."

On the GOP side, Kari Lake, a former TV anchor who has positioned herself as a faithful ally of former President Donald Trump, leads the pack at 60%, according to the poll, followed by former Rep. Matt Salmon (R-AZ) at 51% and Arizona State Treasurer Kimberly Yee at 49%.

It will be some time until the candidates' prospects come more clearly into view as they are not required to disclose campaign contributions until the December 31 filing deadline.

In the meantime, Lieberman says he is focused on his ground game as he begins campaigning across the state, motivated by a belief that Arizona voters are largely more moderate than the current pitched political atmosphere would lead one to believe.

"Much more of the state is in the middle, and people actually want common-sense solutions that can be kind of implemented

and put forward to help deal with the big problems that are facing the state," said Lieberman, who advocates for increased public school funding, expanding access to universal healthcare and a more robust approach to curbing climate change with renewable energy resources such as electric vehicles. "Unfortunately, that's not what we've been doing in the legislature."

A similar observation influenced his first bid for office when he returned to the Copper State six years ago after decades as an executive in the business sector. Lieberman was born in Tempe, where his mother, who converted to Judaism from Mormonism, founded a Reform synagogue, Temple Emanuel. He was raised in Phoenix, studied at Yale University and went on to co-found Jumpstart, the national early education nonprofit, as well as Acelero Learning, which is affiliated with the Head Start program.

Lieberman moved back to Arizona in 2015 and worked as the CEO of Phoenix Spine & Joint, a surgery center in Phoenix, and then became a partner with a venture philanthropy organization called New Profit.

He was compelled to run soon after. "Honestly, moving back to Arizona, I was so disappointed by the nasty nature of our politics," Lieberman said. "It was so different than the Arizona that I grew up in when our Democrats and Republicans actually worked together for the good of the state."

"It's hard to know what you pick up on as a kid, and nostalgia is a powerful force," Lieberman acknowledged, but he believes that state has largely lost its way, particularly, he argues, as the GOP has become increasingly radicalized in recent years. "I really ran," he said, "to try to bring the state kind of back to the middle where I think most of its people are."

"There's probably extremes on both sides that are focused on kind of their way or the highway," Lieberman added. "But unfortunately, we haven't been able to get to that divided government where you actually have to have a negotiation that brings all groups towards the middle, and that's what will happen when I'm governor."

Lieberman said his tenure in office attests to that impulse. "If it has made sense, I've worked with Republicans on a whole

host of issues," he told JI. "I've been able to get millions of dollars for professional development for our schools during distance learning so that teachers can help be more effective remote instructors. I got \$50 million for preschool funds from the rescue plan dollars, \$5 million for small business loans."

Still, Lieberman recognizes that there are limits to bipartisanship. "I'll veto additional tax cuts, I'll veto any attacks on teachers, I'll veto any limits on a woman's right to make her own healthcare choices — and that'll be that," he said of his plans for the governorship. "On the flip side, I've spent three years in the legislature building relationships with legislators, and I'll be able to work with reasonable legislators on both sides to craft a budget that more broadly reflects where Arizonans are."

"He's been definitely a great asset to the legislature, someone who's willing to work across party lines to get things done for our communities," Alma Hernandez, a state legislator in Tucson, said of Lieberman, whom she has endorsed for governor. Hernandez told JI that Lieberman proved essential as she shepherded a Holocaust education bill, recently signed into law, through the state legislature.

Adam Goodman, a board member with the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Phoenix who has known Lieberman for years, echoed that sentiment. "I don't know if he was too modest to say it but he was kind of the unsung hero of that bill," Goodman said.

"That was an interesting journey," Lieberman recalled. "At one point, Republican leadership, who were supportive, wanted a Republican member to run it who isn't Jewish, and I just said in the meeting, 'Well, we'd need to do that if Hitler were successful and had killed all of the Jews, but fortunately, some of us survived and we're sitting right here as members of the legislature and we can run this bill under our own name.'"

Lieberman said he had just attended back-to-school night for his eighth-grade son at his local public school, where teachers were "proudly talking about how they were going to spend two weeks studying the Holocaust" in a district-wide curriculum.

"It made me feel so proud about that kind of impact I was able to have and what it will mean, not just for my kids but for all kids to really understand more about the Holocaust and other genocides."

The gubernatorial hopeful said he has made a persistent effort to stand in solidarity with the Jewish community on any number of issues. He visited Israel two years ago on a delegation to open an Arizona trade office in Tel Aviv, and during his first year in office supported a bill combating efforts to boycott the Jewish state.

"As a Jewish person, I'll always stand up for and believe in Israel, in terms of my day-to-day work as a legislator and even being governor," Lieberman told JI. "Israel's track record of producing entrepreneurs is just amazing, and we want those entrepreneurs to come and grow their businesses by launching them in Arizona."

He is guided, he said, by a deep sense of connection with his faith, one that has only

deepened since he was elected, when he began attending Friday night services at his local synagogue nearly every week. "I find it to be just about the best way to end the week and start a weekend," he told JI. "There's an important aspect of feeling grounded in that faith tradition that has really helped me in my public service."

Similarly, Lieberman said his resolve has only been strengthened as he prepares for a long and potentially acrimonious campaign that he regards as one of the most consequential elections in the coming cycle. "The stakes are incredibly high as to who is Arizona's next governor," he said.

"The woman who is likely going to be my opponent in the general election believes the election was stolen and that Trump is the rightful president of the United States," Lieberman said, referring to Lake. "I sure as heck don't want her hand on the pen when we need to certify the presidential election, especially when Arizona's electoral votes

could literally be the difference between who wins and who loses."

As for his own bid, Lieberman remains dedicated to connecting with "everybody and anybody who believes in this vision of an Arizona that works for everybody and an Arizona that will actually uphold our election laws," he said. "That's an important thing. As the next governor of Arizona, I will sign the certification of the 2024 election."

Lieberman is aware of the more immediate challenges ahead as he enters the race with some disadvantages, but he emphasizes that he has beaten the odds before.

"I'm committed to making sure we have all the resources we'll need to compete and win," Lieberman told JI. "But I need help, and for sure, I hope it will be attractive to members of the Jewish community all across the country, about the idea of this Jew in Arizona running to both fight for our democracy and fight for our kids." ♦

AUGUST 18, 2021

Soho House expands to Israel

The opening comes shortly after the company's debut on the New York Stock Exchange

By Matthew Kassel

Soho House, the global chain of high-end clubs that debuted on the New York Stock Exchange last month, is finally unveiling its first Israel outpost following a months-long delay caused by the coronavirus pandemic, a spokesperson for the company confirmed to *Jewish Insider*.

The Tel Aviv club will welcome select "founder members" for a brief soft opening beginning this week before a full opening in September, the spokesperson said.

Located in a "turreted building" on 27 Yefet Street near Jaffa's historic flea market, the Tel Aviv location will offer such amenities as a pool, outdoor bar and 24 bedrooms as well as a garden "dotted with 300-year-old olive trees from Galilee and set beneath a retractable pergola roof," according to a lavishly worded press release

provided to JI in advance of the opening.

Its art collection will highlight such Israeli-born artists as Elad Lassry, Tal R, Ilit Azoulayto, Shai Yehezkeili and Maayan Elyakim.

Plans for the members-only club have been in the works for more than a year as the company has navigated the throes of the pandemic. In July of last year, a spokesperson told JI the club was on track to open in early 2021, plans that soon shifted to spring and then finally landed on summer.

Amid the lockdowns of 2020, Soho House, which caters to elite members of the creative class, lost a reported \$235.3 million, despite receiving roughly \$22 million in small-business loans provided by the government's Paycheck Protection Program.

Even amid steep declines across the global hospitality industry, Nick Jones, the

founder and CEO of Soho House, which has never made a profit, was sanguine about the clubs' prospects in interviews last year as the pandemic intensified.

"I'd like to think we have quite a positive story out of all this," Jones, who had previously vowed to undertake a bullish expansion strategy of five new clubs a year, said in a July 2020 interview with the Financial Times, characterizing the company's "membership model" as "pretty robust through a serious crisis."

While Soho House furloughed most of its workforce last year, the company retained 92% of its members, even amid widespread shutdowns.

Soho House, which is backed by the billionaire supermarket mogul Ron Burkle, now seems equally if not more committed to its aggressive growth plan.

Its parent company, Membership Collective Group, raised \$420 million in a mid-July initial public offering at a valuation of approximately \$2.8 billion.

Following the June opening of a new Austin location, the company plans to break ground over the next few years in Nashville, Palm Springs, Philadelphia, Portland and other locations throughout the United States.

Outposts in Rome and Paris are scheduled to open this fall, and clubs in far-flung global destinations such as Stockholm, Tokyo, Tulum and Sydney are on the horizon.

Founded in London in 1995, Soho House now operates around 30 clubs worldwide.

The newest location in Tel Aviv is the company's second foray into the Middle East after opening in Istanbul in 2015.

Annual rates for membership in the Tel Aviv outpost are \$2,237 and discounted

by 50% to \$1,118 for applicants under 27, according to the press release.

It remains to be seen how the Tel Aviv club will fare as Israel battles the surging Delta variant of the coronavirus. Earlier this month, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advised that Americans "avoid travel to Israel," citing a "very high level of COVID-19."

Still, Howard Adler, a professor in the hospitality and tourism management department at Purdue University, said the company's approach conforms with a broader trend within the industry. "The major hotel companies in the world are still expanding and being aggressive especially in the luxury end of the market," he told JI.

"Israel is a strong market because it is a unique place which all faiths want to visit," often "more than once," Adler said. "I would be bullish for the future of this unique property."

Rob Karp, founder and CEO of Miles Ahead, a luxury bespoke hospitality company in New York, argues that Soho House is launching in Tel Aviv at an opportune moment. The high-earning millennials and Gen Zers the company tends to attract, he said, are now eager to treat themselves as they emerge from the pandemic — particularly amid a boom in luxury hospitality offerings throughout Israel.

Soho House is joining a number of new hotels that have opened in Israel this year, including the De' Mar Florentine, which launched in January, and Six Senses Shaharut, a resort in the Negev that opened in early August.

"There's a good amount of excitement around the country," Karp told JI, "and I think Soho House is well-positioned to capture the younger successful person." ♦

AUGUST 24, 2021

New report: Antisemitic videos spreading undetected on TikTok

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue report found that extremists use creative ways to promote hate while evading platform moderators.

By Gabby Deutch

The celebratory, familiar sound of "Hava Nagila." A video clip of John Travolta in "Pulp Fiction." An upbeat indie pop song by the band Fitz and the Tantrums.

Three unrelated cultural references. Yet all have been used to propagate antisemitism on the social media platform TikTok, according to a new report from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, a London-based think tank that studies extremism and misinformation.

The report, a copy of which was obtained by *Jewish Insider*, highlights the surprising ways that TikTok users advance antisemitic narratives on the video-sharing application, which was the most downloaded app in the world in 2020. Content creators use code words and numbers, duplicate accounts,

misspelled hashtags and more to evade detection on the platform.

One video with nearly 25,000 views uses the so-called "Confused Travolta" meme — which shows John Travolta's character in "Pulp Fiction" walking around and looking confused — with the caption "me in heaven looking for the 6 million," an oblique reference to Holocaust denial. A video from one account shows a baby crying, until he is given a paper described as "heresy," as "Hava Nagila" plays in the background. Another video, set to the lyrics of Fitz Tantrum's "Out of My League," has the words "America First" above a slideshow of fascist flags and images of Father Charles Coughlin, the isolationist, antisemitic priest who was popular in the 1930s.

"Extremists are going to find a way

to share their message," said Carla Hill, associate director of the Anti-Defamation League's Center on Extremism. "We'll see a video of something entirely different and during that video, they'll hold up a sign that says something extreme" — for instance, holding up a book promoting violence or espousing extremism — "or send the viewer to an extreme website. This type of content is so difficult to moderate."

ISD's report relied on a sample of 1,030 videos, consisting of more than eight hours of content that promote hatred and glorify extremism and terrorism. The report is not representative, but rather meant to be a random sampling of how hate manifests on the platform. With no official platform for researchers, any research into extremist content on TikTok must be done manually,

with videos hand-picked and viewed by real people.

The goal of the report, said author Ciarán O'Connor, is "to really just try to answer the question of, What does hate look like on TikTok, and how is the platform used? How are the features used, the hashtags, the music, the profile, the parts of the profile themselves, as opposed to [just the] videos?"

One area of focus is the video comments section, which may not be monitored as frequently or as rigorously as the clips themselves. ISD found one video that showed a clip of an ultra-Orthodox Jewish man dancing the hora, with the caption "These people sure make great dancers! For more make sure to look up 'dancing Israelis,'" a reference to a widely debunked conspiracy theory about the September 11 terrorist attacks.

"They're going to need a shower after all that dancing, I hear 1930's Germany has some showers that are out of this world," reads one comment on the video, referring to Nazi gas chambers. In response, the video's creator wrote, "I've heard the showers are to die for."

What makes TikTok so successful is its algorithm, which quickly learns the topics and types of videos users enjoy. But that also makes it hard for someone who is fed more

mainstream videos to see the dangerous content on TikTok. "TikTok is a bit like a walled garden. You can go down different sides of TikTok without ever seeing other segments of the site," O'Connor explained.

TikTok's audience skews younger than most social media platforms. More than half of users in the U.S. are under 30. "Young minds are easier to influence," said Hill. "Adults have their own life lessons that they can apply when they see things and interpret whether or not it is believable. It's still a problem, but at least an adult has the ability to understand what's being said could or could not be true."

This demographic presents a particular challenge in the realm of antisemitism. Recent studies show that American young adults know very little about the Holocaust. A September 2020 survey commissioned by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany found that 63% of millennials and Generation Z did not know that six million Jews were killed in the Holocaust, and 10% did not recall ever hearing the word "Holocaust" before. ISD found that antisemitism on TikTok manifested most frequently as Holocaust denial.

In recent years, major social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter and

YouTube have ramped up efforts to fight misinformation and extremism on their platforms. But they have all faced challenges in scaling their solutions to the problem.

"Every time a platform finds a way to stop something, [extremists] invent a new way to get around it," Hill told Jewish Insider. "This is going to be a never-ending project for all platforms to try to minimize the amount of content on their platform."

Social media platforms have struggled in recent years to counter violent and hateful content, with some advocates arguing that platforms are not doing enough to remove dangerous content.

Since TikTok, which was developed in China, became available internationally in 2018, it has been downloaded 130 million times in America. While the app has put out detailed guidance on policies against hate speech, extremism and misinformation, enforcement remains uneven.

"It still is so young," said O'Connor. It has shown signs that it's grown up, and they've learned the lessons that other platforms faced in tackling these problems. Their policies are quite robust. But this research shows I think that they still have a way to go." ♦

AUGUST 24, 2021

A 'military rabbi' reflects on his service in Afghanistan

After retiring as the Marines' top Jewish chaplain, Rabbi Irving Elson now 'cares for the caregivers'

By Gabby Deutch

Passover was one of Rabbi Irving Elson's favorite holidays to observe while he was stationed in Afghanistan. As a senior chaplain with a Marine expeditionary force, he traveled the country ministering to the needs of Jewish service members throughout the country.

"Passover was great, because we had a Seder the first night, the second night, the third night, the fourth, as we went around,"

Elson told *Jewish Insider*. "A lot of times it was for two or three Jewish Marines or soldiers. But that's what we do. We create meaningful Jewish life for them where they're at."

Until his retirement five years ago, Elson was the highest-ranking Jewish chaplain in the Marine Corps. He served in the U.S. military for 30 years, with deployments to countries including Afghanistan, Iraq, Italy and Japan. And though he no longer ministers directly to troops and senior

military officials, he is confronting a new spiritual challenge — a sense of despair and frustration among troops and chaplains he served with in Afghanistan who are now watching the country fall into the hands of the Taliban.

"How do you process everything that's going on there in terms of your service there? And I think, without exception — and I feel this myself — that we did the best we can," said Elson, who now serves as director of the

Jewish Welfare Board's Jewish Chaplains Council, which supports and advocates for Jewish military chaplains. "We helped people until we were not able to help people. As I talk to my rabbis, that's really what I say."

The past few weeks have been challenging for American troops who have served in Afghanistan. Some veterans are left wondering whether there was a point to their service, and to their injuries and the deaths of their friends.

"I hope these next few months don't increase the number of suicides with Afghan veterans," said Jeffrey Blonder, a Naval reservist who served for 15 months in Afghanistan. "I don't feel like my efforts were in vain. And I hope no one — even the people that paid the ultimate price, and I have several friends that did pass away over there ... We had a mission, and I think we accomplished what we had to do when we were there."

Blonder now serves as the Massachusetts commander for Jewish War Veterans of the USA, an organization that serves American veterans and fights antisemitism. He also speaks out about the high suicide rate among veterans: Roughly 18 veterans die by suicide daily, according to figures from the Department of Veterans Affairs. The VA has recently released resources for Afghanistan veterans who are struggling.

"It's important that people continuously put out that message that this is just a short-term effect, that there are resources for you if you are feeling down about the situation," Blonder added.

As a former military rabbi, Elson is now talking to other chaplains who are experiencing similar feelings about the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. And now that he is out of the service, he often speaks to Jewish congregations around the U.S. about Jewish troops, where he frequently addresses myths held by some American Jews about the military.

"The biggest misconception is that Jews don't serve," Elson explained.

There are some 10,000 Jews serving on active duty now, according to Elson. Jewish War Veterans, Blonder's group, was founded by Jewish veterans in the late 19th century in part to counter the falsehood that Jews had not fought in the military during the Civil

War. "It is a very honorable, Jewish thing to serve in the U.S. military," Elson argued. "This country has been just so welcoming and open to our people."

In Elson's case, serving in the military was also something of a family tradition; his father was a Marine in the Korean War. "My father said, 'Look, I don't care what you do with your life, but everybody in this family goes into the service for a couple years after college,'" Elson recalled.

But Elson also knew, from a young age, that he wanted to be a rabbi. He had a mentor, a rabbi, who also encouraged him to join the military. "The absolute best thing you could possibly do to become a well-rounded rabbi is to serve in the military for a couple of years," Elson recalled the rabbi telling him. He joined the Navy Reserve at the outset of rabbinical school at the Jewish Theological Seminary, knowing that his first job after entering the rabbinate would be in the military. It was the only rabbinical job he ever held.

"It's a little different than being a pulpit rabbi," Elson noted. His first job, at the lowest level of chaplaincy, was serving as chaplain to a battalion. He would make sure Jewish soldiers had kosher meals if they needed them, or festive meals or prayer services on holidays. But Jewish soldiers were not his only charges.

"There might be six Jewish Marines in a battalion of 600 people," Elson said. "It's that rabbi's responsibility to make sure that Catholic personnel have regular priests, or that Muslim personnel have halal meals, or Buddhist personnel have a place for them to worship in their manner." He would also provide moral guidance to commanding officers.

As Elson rose through the ranks and advised more senior military officials, his responsibilities changed. "The chaplain serves as advisor on the impact of religion on military operations. Is it wise to start a major humanitarian campaign during a Muslim festival?" Elson explained. "We become somewhat of a subject-matter expert, not only on specific religions but just on the impact that religion or faith would have on an operation — be it internal, our own operations or external operations."

Winning the trust of soldiers in his battalion was tough. But chaplains gain

credibility because "they serve everywhere where servicemembers are serving," Elson said. "How can you counsel a spouse when she says, 'I miss my husband,' unless you can say, 'You know what, I deployed too. I know exactly what you're going through. This is what helped me, or this is how my faith helped me get through this.'"

Serving alongside servicemembers means that chaplains are also at risk, and Elson — who served several tours in Iraq and was deployed twice to Afghanistan — had many moments in both countries where he feared for his safety and wondered whether he would make it home. "When you travel from one base to the other, there's a lot of bad guys between here and there," said Elson. In Afghanistan, he traveled frequently to meet with Jewish troops stationed around the country.

He rose to the rank of deputy chaplain of the Marine Corps, and he held the job until reaching retirement age. "My last duty station was in the Pentagon, and I always kid that you can still see the claw marks at my desk as they dragged me out saying, 'Hey, it's time to go,'" Elson joked.

Now, his job may be simpler; there are no tours to war zones, and he works from home. But he takes his responsibility to care for the caregiver seriously. "Chaplains are not immune" from the way veterans and troops are feeling about Afghanistan, said Elson.

"You've heard the expression 'boots on the ground.' We have very, very little, if any, say where the boots on the ground go. But we're taking care of the feet that are in those boots. And that's our mission," he explained.

As the U.S. military has evacuated thousands of people in recent weeks, military rabbis have new "feet in boots" to take care of: the Afghan refugees touching down at American military bases around the world.

"When I hear one of our rabbis that is now serving in Ramstein [Air Base in Germany], where they're laying out 5,000 cots and tents for refugees, that first person a refugee sees coming out of a plane might be a rabbi."

On their uniform is the insignia of a Jewish chaplain, the two tablets of the Ten Commandments. ♦

Bernie Moreno's sales pitch

The Cleveland entrepreneur looks to distinguish himself from the frontrunners in a crowded GOP Senate primary to replace Sen. Rob Portman

By Matthew Kassel

Despite his reputation as a prominent Republican donor, Bernie Moreno, the Cleveland car dealer and blockchain technology entrepreneur, appeared to be operating at a significant disadvantage when he jumped into Ohio's crowded Senate race this spring, joining a growing number of candidates jockeying to succeed outgoing Sen. Rob Portman (R-OH), who is retiring in 2022.

Vowing to crack down on such conservative bugaboos as socialism and cancel culture in his debut ad, "Buckle Up," the first-time candidate seemed at pains to distinguish himself from leading GOP primary contenders Josh Mandel and Jane Timken — the former Ohio state treasurer and Republican state party chair, respectively — who have put forth almost identical messages and are well-known across the state.

But Moreno, 54, took the political world by surprise last month as he revealed that his campaign had pulled in a sizable haul of \$2.25 million in contributions — more than any candidate in the race aside from Mike Gibbons, the Cleveland-based investment banker who is largely self-funding. J.D. Vance, the conservative author and venture capitalist, did not report his fundraising numbers because he entered the race after the most recent filing deadline.

"I've worked my whole life with one simple motto," Moreno boasted in an interview with Jewish Insider on Wednesday. "I will always out-work, out-hustle and out-think my opponents."

Moreno, a native of Colombia who immigrated to the United States at the age of 5 and ultimately made his fortune as a car dealership magnate, projected confidence that his personal story will give him an edge as he competes for the rare open Senate seat that Democrats are eyeing as a potential pick-up in next year's midterms.

"I'm connecting with voters, and it's the Democrats' worst nightmare, honestly," Moreno argued. "Think about it. The Democrats have this narrative that says Ohio is primarily made up of a bunch of white supremacist, racist hillbillies who hate every ethnic group in the world and are afraid of them. But wouldn't it be something when they elect a senator to represent them in D.C. who was born in Colombia, South America, who had to learn English, who had to become a U.S. citizen. It kind of breaks that narrative apart."

But the overwhelming narrative revolves around former President Donald Trump as the candidates have all repeatedly expressed their vociferous support for the ostensible GOP kingmaker, who remains deeply popular throughout the Buckeye State. Trump has yet to make an endorsement as he has done in other races across the country, and it is unclear if he will.

While Moreno was critical of the former president during his first campaign in 2015, he claims to have evolved and now describes Trump, in the hyperbolic manner typical of Republican primary candidates, as "the most conservative president we've ever had."

The Cleveland businessman employs a number of Trump allies on his campaign, including Kellyanne Conway, a former White House advisor, and Lana Marks, the former U.S. ambassador to South Africa. Moreno's daughter Emily, who served on Trump's re-election campaign, is also advising. She is engaged to Max Miller, the scion of a politically connected Jewish family in Shaker Heights and a former Trump aide who, with an endorsement from the former president, is running to unseat Rep. Anthony Gonzalez (R-OH) following his impeachment vote in February. Emily will be converting to Judaism for the marriage, Moreno informed JI. "I'm very proud of her

for doing that."

In conversation with JI, Moreno — who says he "would be the first United States senator that would have come from the retail automotive business" — discussed his game plan as he heads into what is expected to be one the most hotly contested Republican primary contests of the coming cycle.

The interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Jewish Insider: *You're a first-time political candidate. You've had a long, successful career in the private sector, most notably as a car dealer but also, more recently, as a blockchain technology entrepreneur. Why did you decide to jump into this race now?*

Bernie Moreno: It's pretty straightforward. I was born in Colombia, South America. I came here as a kid, legally. Learned English. Became a U.S. citizen. And this country gave me every opportunity on earth to succeed. It's a very special country, and I see this country heading in a very, very bad direction. I'd say we're heading over a cliff, and it's the same cliff that most countries have fallen over, whether it's authoritarianism, socialism, communism, Marxism — it's all the same. I saw that in Venezuela, I saw that in Cuba, we're seeing it in Peru, obviously China and Russia — two countries that I've been to. It's the same situation.

Between now and the last two or three decades, we really took a hard swing to the left, and what I see is that D.C. is completely broken. It's broken because we keep sending the same kinds of people to D.C. — people who have accomplished nothing in their lives, who all they do is talk, they say one thing and do another. I didn't want to just be angry about it, so [I] decided to put the jersey on and jump in the arena.

JI: *Had you ever considered running for*

office before this race?

Moreno: I met Ambassador Ric Grenell about a decade ago, and he's someone who encouraged me to run for Senate when I first met him. I knew other people who had said that to me, but I never really considered it seriously, only because I'm a relatively private person; my wife is an extremely private person. I enjoy being an entrepreneur, I enjoy creating businesses, I enjoy creating opportunities for people. And I really thought that there would be others who would take care of business, so to speak, in D.C., but what I've concluded is that there's not.

JJ: *You're running in a crowded field with a lot of formidable candidates. What gives you an edge in the primary next year?*

Moreno: Politics is interesting to me because I really consider it a job interview, and in a typical job interview, you not only talk about what you're going to do — and certainly that's maybe 10% of a job interview — but 90% of a job interview, at least in the normal world and not in the political world, is what have you done in the past. So if you say to me how am I going to stand out, well, we're all probably going to be equally outraged around the things that Biden has done — Afghanistan, energy inflation, all of those things. The border, for sure. The difference is, where's the track record of having accomplished things? And there's no question, with myself and my opponents in this race, that there's just no comparison between my track record of success, what I've done in taking hard positions, and them.

JJ: *You have a number of Trump allies in your camp. Grenell has endorsed you. Kellyanne Conway is advising your campaign. Lana Marks recently joined your steering committee. But do you expect Trump to make an endorsement in this race, and if so, do you think he'll give you the nod?*

Moreno: When I met the president back in March, he asked me my opinion on that, and I directly answered his question, which is that, at the time, he should not make an endorsement, he should let us do the hard work of raising money, connecting

with voters, traveling the state, and really seeking the most important endorsement of all, which is the endorsement of the 11.5 million people of Ohio. And it looks like he took that advice. Nobody knows what he'll do or when he'll do it except for him. That's the way he likes it. And the reality is I'm not obsessed with that. Obviously, I would love his endorsement — of course. But I'm focused on making sure that I connect with the people of Ohio, that they get to know me, and I think he will do what he wants to do when he wants to do it — as it should be.

JJ: *You expressed harsh criticism of Trump when he was running for president five years ago, as private emails published by NBC News revealed not long after you announced your candidacy. But your views seem to have evolved since then. How did you come around to supporting him?*

Moreno: Well, let's clear that up. Here's the situation. In 2015, of all the people running for president, the only candidate I really knew well was John Kasich, and I wasn't going to support him in a presidential, so I was shopping. I like to use the term from my previous career. And Josh Mandel was somebody I knew; I had supported him in 2012. He said to me, "Hey, listen, I know you're not going to support Kasich, I want you to meet Marco Rubio." So I met Sen. Rubio, got to know him, liked him. We connected, for obvious reasons. I loved his depth of knowledge on issues. So we went all in with Marco. I raised over \$1 million for him here in Ohio — and I'm proud of the fact that he donated to my campaign last quarter. Really good guy.

In 2015, there was another candidate — Donald Trump. I didn't know anything about Donald Trump other than what I saw on TV. I thought he was a liberal. I thought he was a Democrat. I thought he was somebody who I saw pictures of with Hillary Clinton and Chuck Schumer. I thought he was somebody who was not a serious candidate, who was making a mockery of the Republican primary. But I kept my mouth shut publicly, and when he was emerging as the nominee, I wrote a personal private email to a fundraiser for the Republican National Committee, and she asked me which candidate I was going

to support after Marco dropped out. I said that Trump was a lunatic and a maniac and I didn't think he was a conservative.

But I'll tell you this, when President Trump became our nominee, I was at the convention. I was there every day. We hosted people in Cleveland. I had a boat at the time. We took people out. I was fully supportive of President Trump. And I was wrong. He was the most conservative president we've ever had.

JJ: *In terms of statewide campaigning, how are you working to connect with voters and boost your name recognition as you go up against some candidates — like Josh Mandel, who's won statewide office, and Jane Timken, the former state party chair — who probably have a built-in advantage because of that exposure?*

Moreno: The second kind of funny thing about politics — versus the normal world, as I call it — is that there's this idea that you have to lose to win, that you have to fail upward. I'd never heard of such a thing in the business world. It's very odd. Listen, the way I focus my attention is connecting with voters with common sense messages, being able to talk about issues the right way. What I won't do is stupid things or publicity stunts to get attention. That's just not who I am. I think voters are sick of that stuff. They don't like it. They want to see real people doing real things and solving the problems that they see every single day. They don't want people to be loud and obnoxious. I just won't do that.

When I bought my first dealership, I sold four cars a month. When I sold the dealership, I was selling 3,500 cars a year. I did that through connecting with clients, providing better client service than any industry, period — forget car dealerships — and making certain that we advertised very effectively in what I call a surround-sound way.

That's what I'll do in this campaign. I think, as voters get to know me, they'll know that I'm a serious person, that I have a serious track record, and that I'm doing this for Ohio, not for myself, and I think they'll see that when they contrast me with my opponents. When somebody's chased a title and a position so many times, you've got to

ask, is it really about doing the right thing for the country, or is it really about getting a job for yourself to make money in the future? I'm doing it for the reasons that I said earlier. This country gave me every opportunity on earth. My first grandbaby was born an hour after I announced my campaign. This is about providing an America for her that my mom and dad saw for me. I will fight to make that happen. I'm not doing this for publicity, fortune or fame.

JJ: *Your comments would seem to be directed at Mandel, who has run for statewide office a number of times and continues to cause a stir thanks to his provocative social media presence. Is that a fair conclusion?*

Moreno: I don't like to speak ill about anyone by name. I think voters don't like that. They know what I'm talking about when they see not just one opponent that you may have mentioned but others who use trigger words or say and do things to try to get attention. It's just an unfortunate state of where we're at as a country. It's not what America is about. We should be an aspirational, forward-thinking, hopeful nation that is looking to the future and not trying to create artificial divisions between people. It's not healthy, and I won't do that.

JJ: *You recently reported a sizable fundraising haul of \$2.25 million in outside contributions, more than any other candidate in the race. How did you pull that off, and do you feel as if you can sustain that momentum heading into future quarters?*

Moreno: First, like you said, that's without any of my own money yet. I'm not going to telegraph to my opponents or anybody else what I'm willing to put in — they have to keep guessing. Secondly, I'm not taking corporate or union PAC money. There's a lot of opponents in this race who talk about "woke corporations" and how bad they are and how they're doing the wrong thing and "these big corporations are a mess." Yet they take their money. So to me that's very, very, contradictory; it's hypocritical. I'm calling on all of my opponents to return the corporate and union PAC money that they've taken and be consistent. Your rhetoric has to match your

actions, and if it doesn't then the voters are going to see you for what you are, which is a hypocrite.

In terms of how I did it, I've worked my whole life with one simple motto: I will always out-work, out-hustle and out-think my opponents. So we have to do it the hard way. The maximum contribution is \$5,800 per person. I think there's a lot of talk in this race about polls, which are obviously nonsense because no poll that exists today is going to tell you anything actionable other than that they recognize the name from somebody who's run 12 times or somebody who's on Fox News every single night. That's obvious. What the real poll is who's willing to write a check to invest in a campaign after having met somebody. And if you look at that poll, that's where I really stood out last quarter, and we're going to continue to do that right up to the general election next year.

I think my message is compelling, I think I have a great story to tell, I think I'm connecting with voters, and it's the Democrats' worst nightmare, honestly. Think about it. The Democrats have this narrative that says Ohio is primarily made up of a bunch of white supremacist, racist hillbillies who hate every ethnic group in the world and are afraid of them. But wouldn't it be something when they elect a senator to represent them in D.C. who was born in Colombia, South America, who had to learn English, who had to become a U.S. citizen. It kind of breaks that narrative apart.

JJ: *You were born in Bogotá and moved with your family to South Florida when you were 5, in 1971. What do you remember of your upbringing in Colombia?*

Moreno: We traveled back to Colombia a lot when I was growing up, from age 5 to 18 when I left for college. We saw the country deteriorate before our eyes. It was very sad. We saw countless relatives, friends, acquaintances who were kidnapped, many who were killed, because of the drug war. It was terrible. But what I also saw, which stuck with me and continues to stick with me today, is the demographic change in South Florida from 1971-85. I can't tell you how many people I ran into for whom it was the same story: "We left our home," "we left

everything behind," "we risked everything to come to America because we had a government that was imprisoning us for our beliefs that was taking away our businesses, taking away our rights."

And, of course, I'm talking about Cuba. I met so many Cuban families that transformed Miami in such a positive way, and then as an adult in college and beyond, met so many people from Venezuela. I was always envious of Venezuela — wealthier, more educated, they even had the more beautiful women. And to see that go from a shining example of what a South American country could be to a complete and utter failed state was so shocking to me as an adult, but it was the same story I remembered as a kid growing up that I saw from Cuba.

Like I said earlier, we're going to see the exact same thing in Peru, and when I visited China and Russia — same vibe, same feeling. That you're constantly being watched, that you're constantly being told what to do. You have to watch every word. When I was in China my first time, my tour guide — because I like to joke around — pulled me aside and said please stop making those jokes, we could be arrested and go to jail. I kept saying, "When do we get to visit the country of Taiwan?" That was my offense, that you could legitimately go to jail for calling Taiwan a country, and that is not something I think Americans viscerally understand — what it's like to live in an environment like that.

JJ: *You put out a press release earlier this summer touting support from "prominent auto dealers" around the country. That seems like a unique base.*

Moreno: I would be the first United States senator that would have come from the retail automotive business. I think car dealers are the quintessential entrepreneurs. We know how to work hard. We know how to hustle. We know how to balance a lot of different variables. Most people don't realize car dealerships are really five or six businesses all under one roof, so we have experience in a lot of different areas. We're typically very politically active, and we're also typically very, very tied into our local community. There's a lot of issues coming up before the federal government in the next decade

around auto dealers — the future of auto retailing, the push toward electrification and autonomous vehicles, obviously what the franchise itself means. I think I've been able to connect with that group.

JJ: *Can you describe the relationships you've built with Jewish community members in Cleveland, and are you engaged in any outreach to Jewish leaders or pro-Israel advocates in Ohio as you embark on this campaign?*

Moreno: Let me do the second one first. The idea of Jewish outreach is, to me, for most political candidates very artificial. I haven't done Israel or Jewish outreach; I've been ingrained in the community for as long as I can remember. My friends growing up in South Florida were predominantly Jewish. I went to a private school at which I'd say 60-70% of the students were Jewish. I've gone to more bar mitzvahs than most. When I moved to Andover, Mass., my wife taught preschool at the temple down the street. All my kids went to that temple preschool. I would say that my wife would win in Jewish trivia versus 95% of Jewish Americans.

Here in Cleveland, where we have an amazing Jewish community, I've been part of that community since the day I got to Cleveland. I'm somebody who's traveled to Israel many times. To me, somebody who's a serious candidate for the United States Senate who has not visited Israel is a disqualifying factor for that person. I can't even imagine you having the audacity to say, "Hey, I'm going to represent Ohio in the United States Senate, I haven't even taken the time in my life to ever visit our most important ally in the Middle East." To me that's totally disqualifying.

But beyond visiting Israel, I've brought delegations from Israel to Cleveland to bring them with non-Jewish people to invest in Israeli tech companies. I think it's incredibly important for us to entangle our relationship with Israel on the financial side. I've also brought Israeli companies to Ohio and encouraged them to headquarter here. I've invested millions of dollars in Israeli tech companies because I think it's important for us as Americans to have that entangled relationship and really understand the true dynamic of what that is.

I'm also proud that my second daughter is getting married to Max Miller, and she's going to be converting to Judaism. I'm very proud of her for doing that.

JJ: *Max Miller, who is soon to be your son-in-law, is now running to unseat Rep. Anthony Gonzalez in suburban Cleveland. You previously supported Gonzalez but now take a critical view of him since he voted to impeach Trump in February.*

Moreno: I supported Anthony when he first ran and when he ran for reelection. What he did by voting to impeach Donald Trump is an inexcusable mistake. I don't think he voted his conscience. I think what he did is he took a bet that the Republican Party was going to move on beyond Trump and he wanted to be at the forefront of that — and he made a really bad decision and was wrong. And the voters are extraordinarily upset with him — rightfully so. He betrayed them. So I wasn't going to support Anthony no matter what. The fact that Max happens to be the candidate who's running — I've gotten to know Max really well. I met him back in 2015-16 in the Rubio campaign. Of course, I vetted him. I'm in his district. I vetted him as a father as well. He's a man of incredible values and morals, strength, courage and intelligence, and he will 100% win this race. It's not even a question. I fully support him and everything that he's doing.

JJ: *Last month, a deeply reported Politico piece detailed a number of troubling allegations about Miller's past aggressive behavior, including a recent instance of domestic abuse and a violent incident dating back to his high school years. How did you view that article? Does it give you concern?*

Moreno: I bifurcate two different things. Listen, the day I met him, Max told me about what his life was like when he was a kid — 18, 19, 20 years old. If any of us had to be judged by our worst moments in our lives, I don't think any of us would do very well. The Bible teaches not to judge others and to not throw stones in glass houses, and listen, Max's story is a great story. I love his story. I told him that. I said, you shouldn't be ashamed of what happened to you when you were in college. You should embrace

that. You're the story of redemption. Here's a guy that was obviously seeing some troubles, wasn't finding his way when was a kid, a teenager going into college, and turned his life around, served our country, worked for President Trump, and he wouldn't be the man he is today had he not gone through that hardship. So I tell him all the time, I say, Max, you should embrace the heck out of that because it made you the man that you are today, which I'm very proud of.

In terms of the recent allegations, listen, this is what drives me crazy about politics. You can make an allegation about something or somebody, you can put their name through the mud, and there's zero ramifications for any accuracy or truth to that. Those allegations are totally and completely false. It's disgusting that people can make those charges for political revenge or commentary. It's not right. I've told Max, listen, just don't pay attention to that stuff. I know what's in your heart. I've seen you close up and personal, and I wish people will see the Max that I know. I am so happy that my daughter has met him, and they're going to have an amazing life together. He's going to be the father of my grandkids, and I couldn't be happier to call him my son-in-law.

JJ: *You mention in your first ad that you support term limits. Any sense of how long you'd plan to stay in the Senate if you're elected?*

Moreno: Oh, 100%, please keep this tape handy: I will run for reelection once and once only. I will serve 12 years and go home. Like I said, play this tape every day forever and ever and ever if I don't hold that pledge. I will. I think it's important for us to have new fresh blood and fresh thinking in Washington, D.C. ♦