

## THE WEEKLY PRINT

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SEPTEMBER 23, 2021

## The Met Gala and the far-left vs. the far-right

*'The Squad is culturally fashionable, and AOC just proved it by getting an invite and rocking a controversial dress at the Met Gala'*

By Matthew Kassel

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) set off a days-long firestorm of media commentary last week when she arrived at the Met Gala in Manhattan wearing a white Brother Vellies dress emblazoned in bold red letters with the not-so-subtle phrase “Tax the Rich.”

The two-term New York City congresswoman, an avowed socialist who casts herself as a champion of the working class, was widely criticized as out of touch for attending the elite, \$35,000-a-ticket fund-raising event, where she shared a table with co-host and Condé Nast artistic director Anna Wintour. Even some progressives renounced the gesture as superficial.

Viewed at a broader angle, however, the controversy was a confirmation that Ocasio-Cortez, 31, has achieved a level of celebrity such that even an anodyne slogan written across the back of a designer gown was capable of driving the news cycle for multiple days.

“She is a genius of our time in the sense of what is required to get ahead these days in politics,” Mona Charen, the policy editor of *The Bulwark*, a conservative news and opinion site, told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview. “It’s a talent for self-promotion,

and she has that in spades.”

For some Jewish leaders and commentators, the congresswoman’s high-profile appearance at New York’s most exclusive fête underscored how some far-left lawmakers are increasingly accepted in mainstream culture — in contrast to right-wing provocateurs in the House who are largely shunned from such events and tend to operate in their own isolated silos on the margins.

“The Squad is culturally fashionable, and AOC just proved it by getting an invite and rocking a controversial dress at the Met Gala,” said Thane Rosenbaum, an author and distinguished university professor at Touro College, referring to the growing coalition of powerful House Democrats including Rashida Tlaib (D-MI), Ilhan Omar (D-MN) and Ocasio-Cortez, who is known colloquially as AOC. “Conservative Republicans wouldn’t receive an invite to a Greek diner on Madison Avenue.”

The Met Gala stunt may have missed the mark somewhat because the policy proposal Ocasio-Cortez was presenting as subversive is already popular among the majority of Americans, who believe the wealthiest earners should pay more in taxes, according to recent polling.

Still, Ocasio-Cortez defended her approach in an Instagram post after the event. “I thought about the criticism I’d get, but honestly I, and my body, have been so heavily and relentlessly policed from all corners politically since the moment I won my election that it’s kind of become expected and normalized to me,” she said, adding: “The more intersections one has, the deeper the disdain.”

But Jewish leaders expressed concern that Ocasio-Cortez and her allies in the House are leveraging their outsized cultural influence to smuggle in views that until recently were taboo within the Democratic Party, including, among other things, calls to withhold American aid to Israel.

“For me, what’s particularly concerning about that is that this is a moment of tremendous hope right now,” said Barry Shrage, a professor in the Hornstein Jewish Professional Leadership Program at Brandeis University, alluding to the new unity government in Israel. “This is the time when people, at least on the center-left, ought to be able to say, ‘Hey, it’s really time to give Israel a chance to make steps toward peace.’”

He wasn’t getting his hopes up. “This is something that the Squad is going to fight

against with all their might,” said Shrage, the former president of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston.

On Tuesday, a group of prominent House progressives successfully pressured Democratic leadership to remove \$1 billion in missile-defense funding for Israel’s Iron Dome system from a spending package designed to avert an impending government shutdown. The progressives, including Ocasio-Cortez and Omar, threatened to vote against the bill if the funding remained.

“The fact that there are members of Congress who wish to stop funding to this life-saving system is deeply concerning,” said Eric Lynn, a Democratic congressional candidate in Florida who, as a former Pentagon staffer in charge of Israeli defense initiatives, helped convince the Obama administration to fund the Iron Dome system. “I am outraged to hear this. To be clear, this funding that is being threatened is not new funding or an increase in funding, but sustained funding that has been promised.”

The Iron Dome showdown was just the latest escalation in an ongoing intra-party feud over Israel that has grown increasingly contentious in the months following the May conflict between Israel and Hamas. Last week, Ocasio-Cortez introduced an amendment that would block a \$735 million arms sale to Israel, following a previous failed effort to submit a resolution condemning the sale.

Moreover, a number of progressive House candidates, who are running for office this cycle, have called for conditioning aid to the Jewish state.

Beyond foreign policy, some progressives have been accused of using antisemitic language while addressing Israel or social issues more broadly. This has caused alarm among Jewish leaders who fret that such rhetoric may become normalized on the left because it emanates from high-profile lawmakers in the House.

“It’s not policed on the left,” said the conservative columnist Bethany Mandel. “It’s just running rampant.”

Omar and Tlaib, for instance, two of the most outspoken Israel critics in Congress, have been criticized for invoking antisemitic tropes. Omar has suggested, among other things, that Israel “has hypnotized the

world,” while Tlaib was recently accused of “antisemitic dog-whistling” while addressing a convention of the Democratic Socialists of America.

“For me as a Palestinian-American, we also need to recognize, as I think about my family and Palestine, that continue to live under military occupation and how that really interacts with this beautiful Black city that I grew up in,” Tlaib said. “I always tell people that cutting people off from water is violence. And they do it from Gaza to Detroit. And it’s a way to control people, to oppress people and it’s those structures that we continue to fight against.”

Far-right upstarts such as Reps. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA), Madison Cawthorn (R-NC) and Lauren Boebert (R-CO) have, of course, also been accused of antisemitism.

“Sure there are some alt-right extremists who hate Jews, but where are they, how many are they, and what possible influence could they have, as compared with progressives on college campuses and in media (mainstream and social), who have cultural cache, social influence and serious numbers behind them,” Rosenbaum said in an email to JI. “And they have high-profile platforms from which to speak: lecture halls, favorable press, and throngs of Twitter and Instagram followers.”

For Rosenbaum, it comes down to, as he put it, “much smaller numbers, negligible social capital and cultural irrelevance that distinguishes progressives from extremist Republicans.”

That’s not to imply that Jewish leaders are unfazed by right-wing antisemitism. “That’s an ongoing concern for the whole Jewish community and the leadership of the Jewish community,” said Shrage. “Nobody backs away from that. I mean, it’s just like, how many times can you say that she’s an idiot over and over again and that she’s an antisemite and that she’s dangerous,” he added, referring to Greene, who made headlines in January when she suggested that California wildfires were caused by a space laser controlled by a Jewish banking family.

“Of course, the Trump phenomenon magnifies the power and makes you worry about the power of the right,” Shrage told JI. “So you’ve got both those things happening at the same time.”

But in “the intellectual life that most of us will encounter on the campus, it’s the other one,” he said. “There’s no support for the right on the campus or in the corporate world or in all the other places where the debates over intersectionality take place,” Shrage added, referring to an academic concept about overlapping layers of identity that some Jews believe discounts their oppression. “In all of those places, there are important cultural issues at stake that affect the Jewish people in an important way.”

James Kirchick, a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution and a columnist for Tablet, echoed that view.

“As we have seen in just the past few years, arcane concepts and obscure jargon that were once the sole province of university ethnic studies departments are now the dogma of major corporations, national newspapers, prominent museums and Hollywood celebrities,” he told JI in an email. “It is therefore understandable that (some) Jewish and pro-Israel leaders would be more alarmed with the antisemitism and hostility of the Squad — better understood as social media influencers than legislators — than a crackpot like Marjorie Taylor Greene.”

It is perhaps impractical to imagine Greene attending the Met Gala, simply because it would never happen. But that may be the point.

“Why the obsession with AOC? As in the inter-war years so [too] now, the Jewish left attracts more attention from the Jewish community because it is peopled by ‘our own children and grandchildren,’” Jonathan Sarna, a professor of American Jewish history at Brandeis University, told JI. “There are Jews on the extreme right too, and always have been, but it is the Jews on the left who historically have both echoed ‘prophetic ideals’ and endangered Judaism and the Jewish future.” ♦

# How Ayanna Pressley shifted her stance on Israel

*‘When you attack one of us, you attack all of us,’ the Boston congresswoman said in 2019, after two Squad members were denied entry to Israel. Last week Pressley voted against Iron Dome funding.*

By Gabby Deutch

After a bill calling for \$1 billion in additional funding for Israel’s Iron Dome missile-defense system overwhelmingly passed the House of Representatives last week by a vote of 420 to 9, members of the Boston Jewish community are grappling with the fact that Rep. Ayanna Pressley (D-MA) — who upon first entering Congress in 2019 was seen as a supporter of the Jewish state — was one of just nine members to vote against the measure.

Jeremy Burton, executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston, has known Pressley, who served on the Boston City Council until her election to Congress, for years, and has previously defended her pro-Israel bona fides in the face of attacks from the right. But Burton told *Jewish Insider* that last week’s vote was a “severe disappointment.”

“It is self-evident to anybody observing her statements and votes that Councilwoman Pressley, congressional candidate Pressley and Congresswoman Pressley in her first six months in office are not the same person, in their perspective and approach to the U.S.-Israel relationship, as Congresswoman Pressley is in the fall of 2021,” Burton said.

In a statement, Pressley explained her vote against the bill was related to the process, criticizing the speed with which the measure was brought to the House floor. “If we can’t move with urgency on critical domestic spending in the midst of an unprecedented pandemic, there’s no reason we should move this way on military spending,” Pressley said.

And while she stated that she had no objections to the Iron Dome technology, she did not say whether the U.S. should take a role in funding it or supporting it. A

spokesperson for Pressley declined to offer additional information about her views on Iron Dome.

“It is Israel’s prerogative to protect its residents through the use of the Iron Dome, I take no issue with that responsibility or sacred task, it is one of the fundamental roles of a sovereign state,” Pressley said in the press release. “But this is not the way Congress should consider an unprecedented \$1B in funding above and beyond what’s called for in the 2016 Memorandum of Understanding with Israel.”

Pressley was elected in 2018 after an insurgent primary campaign that unseated 10-term incumbent Rep. Michael Capuano (D-MA). Shortly after her election, Pressley became closely associated with the “Squad,” a group of four left-leaning legislators — all women of color — elected the same year.

But unlike Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), Ilhan Omar (D-MN) and Rashida Tlaib (D-MI), Pressley at first took a more moderate stance on Israel-related issues in the House. Soon after her election, JTA published a story titled “How we got new House Rep. Ayanna Pressley wrong on Israel,” and wrote that “Pressley’s views on Israel differ little from the long-serving Democrat she unseated in the primary.”

When she got to Washington, Pressley stuck to these positions — for a time. In July 2019, she was the only one of the four Squad members to vote to condemn the BDS movement, despite receiving criticism from some on the left.

“What I heard resounding in [the] community was that voting yes on this resolution affirmed to my constituents raised in the Jewish faith Israel’s right to exist, a view I share as a supporter of a two state solution,” Pressley tweeted at the time.

Now, it appears to some observers that

Pressley would sooner criticize Israel for its treatment of Palestinians than speak of her support for the country. In May, as tensions between Israel and Hamas in Gaza flared during an 11-day conflict, she delivered a fiery speech on the House floor condemning U.S. aid to Israel.

“Many say that ‘conditioning aid’ is not a phrase that I should utter here, but let me be clear. No matter the context, American government dollars always come with conditions,” said Pressley. “The question at hand is should our taxpayer dollars create conditions for justice, healing and repair, or should those dollars create conditions for oppression and apartheid?”

## New relationships

What changed between Pressley’s 2019 vote condemning BDS and last week’s vote against Iron Dome funding?

“Only when she arrived in Washington did she enter into a relationship with Palestinian women and expose herself to a different perspective than the one she was coming in with,” said one progressive member of the Boston Jewish community who knows Pressley but asked to remain anonymous to share details of private conversations. Pressley’s 2018 campaign had focused on issues related to vulnerable women and children in Boston.

“Since getting elected, she has chosen to narrow her perspective on who she’s in relationship with and elevate one particular perspective on what it means to stand up for victims of violence that doesn’t allow for a relationship with the Jewish community to inform who she’s giving voice to,” said Burton.

It was after that July 2019 vote that Pressley met with local progressive Jewish

activists who are critical of Israel.

"We reached out, just expressing some disappointment [about the anti-BDS vote], and she actually responded [by] asking for a meeting," said Kayla Neumeyer, a volunteer organizer with the Boston chapter of IfNotNow. "The communities that I'm in were also pretty disappointed in the vote. We saw it actually as not necessarily being aligned with her positions on the ability to boycott and free speech."

"We were expecting a conversation with her staffers, which I think would have been great. We just wanted to be in more communication with her office. But [Pressley] did come to the meeting, and actually she stayed for a long time," said Neumeyer. Pressley "hadn't heard from everybody and she really wanted to listen to us."

This meeting appeared to be significant for Pressley, who began attending IfNotNow events in Boston shortly thereafter. She spoke at a 2019 Hanukkah party the group hosted at a brewery in Jamaica Plain and called herself a "sister in solidarity" with IfNotNow activists. "Really every vote since that 2019 bill has been in support of Palestinian rights," Neumeyer said.

"She publicly aligned herself with our movement, so I think it was a pretty transformative relationship," Neumeyer added. "For us, it was really amazing seeing her commitment to listening to her constituents and expressing views that were aligned with her other positions on human rights, including her focus on racial justice and civil rights struggles."

Even when Pressley was first campaigning, she offered a hint that she would not stick to all the same policies as her then-opponent. As a candidate, she said she supported a bill from Rep. Betty McCollum (D-MN) that would regulate U.S. aid to Israel to ensure that it not be used for the "detention and mistreatment of Palestinian children." Capuano had opposed the bill, saying he did not think it "presents a balanced account of the continuing tragedy of the Israel-Palestinian conflict."

Pressley's views at the time were largely aligned with those of J Street, although J Street's affiliated political action committee never endorsed Pressley. Her campaign website in 2018 delineated her positions on

other Israel-related issues. She expressed support for a "two-state solution that will safeguard Israel's future as a Jewish and Democratic state, and establish a sovereign and independent Palestinian [state]," and described herself as opposed to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel. Her current campaign website does not mention Israel at all.

Her vote against the supplemental Iron Dome funding last week seemed to place Pressley to the left of J Street, which supported the measure. But J Street's Vice President of Communications Logan Bayroff told JI that the organization respects Pressley's vote, and pointed out that she voted to advance \$3.3 billion in funding to Israel earlier this year.

"While we have a different view than Rep. Pressley on this, we respect that she and a number of her colleagues have legitimate concerns about the process and rationale behind the request to appropriate this large amount of additional money for Iron Dome at this time," Bayroff said. "We are appalled by hyperbolic attacks that seek to present Rep. Pressley and her colleagues who did not vote for this supplementary appropriation as anti-Israel or somehow sympathetic to terror."

Pressley spoke at J Street's virtual conference in April, telling participants, "J Street, I am grateful. I'm grateful for you. I'm grateful for your partnership and for your advocacy for the Biden administration to embrace a foreign policy doctrine that centers the humanity and dignity of all people."

### **Sticking with the Squad**

Around the time of her meeting with IfNotNow, Pressley was beginning to show signs that she was moving toward the other Squad members' positions on Israel.

In August 2019, weeks after her vote condemning BDS, Pressley was outraged when Omar and Tlaib were barred from entering Israel by then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Former President Donald Trump urged Netanyahu to shut down their visit, and Netanyahu obliged, arguing that Omar and Tlaib's support for boycotting Israel meant they should not be allowed in the country.

"When you attack one of us, you attack all of us. Netanyahu is stoking division and punishing dissent just like the occupant of the White House," Pressley said in a statement at the time. "We should reevaluate our relationships with any country who seeks to ban Americans and threatens the safety of anyone, including government officials."

"I think that did have an impact," Neumeyer argued. "It definitely showed the orientation of the Israeli government towards members of Congress. And I think that those are her colleagues and she stands with them, and she thought that was a pretty big blunder."

In December 2019, the House voted on a resolution reaffirming American support for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Pressley joined Omar, Ocasio-Cortez and Tlaib in voting against it — the only Democrats to oppose the measure.

On multiple occasions in 2020, Pressley spoke about her opposition to potential Israeli annexation of parts of the West Bank, and in August of last year she co-sponsored a bill that would stop U.S. aid to any Israeli areas of the West Bank annexed by the Israeli government. IfNotNow commented on her actions at the time, praising her evolution on the issue.

"We're very proud of her position in this letter!" said a tweet from IfNotNow in June 2020, after Pressley signed onto a letter addressed to then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo from Ocasio-Cortez warning Israel against annexation. "We've been grateful to have developed a relationship with Congresswoman Pressley (she came to our Hannukah party). She comes from community of activists and understands how our struggles are tied together."

In May 2021, when Pressley gave a speech on the House floor condemning Israel's treatment of Palestinians, IfNotNow circulated an open letter defending her, signed by close to 200 members of groups including Never Again Action, a Jewish group that protests Immigrations and Custom Enforcement, and the anti-Zionist Jewish Voice for Peace.

### **Community ties**

For many of Pressley's backers in the Boston pro-Israel community, last week's vote on Iron Dome funding was an especially painful blow.

After the vote, the Boston JCRC released a statement with eight other local JCRCs (the first time, in Burton's memory, that any JCRCs have released a joint statement) praising Congress for passing Iron Dome funding. The locations of the nine JCRCs to sign on corresponded to the districts of the nine members who voted against the bill.

"We want to make sure that members who really took a terrible vote [last week] did not pretend that some of their communities were less upset than others," Burton noted. "There was truly wall-to-wall — in our community — clarity about the importance of a vote in favor of this funding."

Andrew Tarsy, a social impact consultant and supporter of Pressley's who served as executive director of the Anti-Defamation League's New England office until 2008, said the congresswoman's vote against the Iron Dome funding did not concern him, noting that she expressed her support for Iron Dome even when she voted against it.

"I don't see the vote this week as an ideological issue that has to do with Israel. I see it as a responsible member of Congress finding her feet and finding her voice about an ad hoc vote to spend a lot of money on something that she's already been supportive of," Tarsy said, who argued that she should not be expected to align herself entirely with the Jewish community.

Pressley "doesn't have to be thinking

about [Israel] the way the Jewish federations think about it," Tarsy noted. "She has a very broad constituency. She has her own mind and her own access to experts, and she has a different opinion than some people in the Jewish community. Why is that such a controversial thing?"

But Barry Shrage, who led Combined Jewish Philanthropies in Boston, the city's federation, for three decades, views Pressley's singling out of Israel among other foreign policy issues as concerning.

"Why on earth would this issue emerge in the midst of, every other day headlines on the Uyghurs, or headlines on the [Rohingya] in Myanmar," Shrage questioned. "Why would this emerge, of all the different problems in the world?"

Pressley's 2018 candidacy did not garner major endorsements from within the Boston Jewish community, perhaps because she was taking on an entrenched incumbent and did not appear to have a chance of winning. No Democrat ran against her in the 2020 primary, and she won 86% of the vote in the 2020 general election.

"No one I know in the Jewish community was involved in her race at all," said Shrage, who added that "there were people who were hopeful" about her campaign.

One of Pressley's close advisors in her first campaign was Alex Goldstein, a Democratic strategist who runs a Boston-based communications firm called 90 West. After her vote last week, Goldstein tweeted that he did not speak to her about the Iron Dome issue and that the pair had

last spoken several weeks ago when she attended his father's shiva. (When reached by JI, Goldstein declined to comment.)

Burton also has not spoken to Pressley since the vote, but said he has talked to a number of her supporters in the Jewish community.

"There are people in our community who have been supporters and friends of hers, throughout her career, who have in the last 24 hours exclusively expressed disappointment to me and, I believe, are communicating that disappointment to her," Burton said last week.

Still, he acknowledged that his organization, which works on a range of local issues including poverty reduction, public education and refugee resettlement, will continue to work with public officials regardless of their approach on Israel.

"Nine members of Congress voted to align themselves with those who demonize Israel and deny Israel's right to defend its civilians from terrorist attacks. That has to impact anyone's understanding of how we relate to those members," Burton explained. "That does not mean that we stop caring about a whole range of other issues, and that we don't care about our relationship with all of our public and civic leaders."

Nevertheless, Burton cautioned that the Jewish community's reserves of tolerance are not limitless when a member of Congress votes against pro-Israel policies.

"We have to have some self-respect in how we approach public officials who don't show us a lot of respect." ♦

SEPTEMBER 20, 2021

## An interview with Michael Herzog, Israel's incoming ambassador to the U.S.

*'The tent is a big one and we have to talk to everyone inside the tent,' Herzog told JI*

By Ruth Marks Eglash

Acknowledging the fraying ties between Israel and some segments of American Jewry, Michael Herzog, Israel's incoming ambassador to the U.S., has offered an outstretched hand.

In his first interview since being approved for the position by the Israeli government earlier this month, Herzog, a retired brigadier general, longtime scholar and diplomatic envoy, told *Jewish Insider*, "I would like Jews in America to feel that when

we talk about Israel as a nation-state of the Jewish people that they are, in one way or another, stakeholders."

"I think what needs to be done is to foster a dialogue with as many Jewish groups as possible — the tent is a big one and we have

to talk to everyone inside the tent,” Herzog continued. “I want to bring a message of dialogue and building bridges.”

Herzog, the grandson of Israel’s former Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Halevy Herzog, the son of Israel’s sixth President Chaim Herzog and older brother of Israel’s current President Isaac Herzog, will need every bit of his pedigree as he takes up Israel’s most important diplomatic posting at a perilous time in the relationship between Israel and the U.S., and Israelis and American Jews.

“My background is relevant in more ways than one,” Herzog told JI. “I grew up in a family where my grandfather was chief rabbi, my father president — elements of Jewish destiny and solidarity were a fundamental part of my education.”

It is these fundamentals that have guided Herzog, 69, through a 40-year career in the Israeli military, serving as head of strategic planning, and later as a chief of staff and military secretary to four former defense ministers. For 25 years, Herzog also actively participated in back-channel peace negotiations with Israel’s neighbors, including the Palestinians, and from 2009 to 2014 was an official peace envoy.

More recently, Herzog has spent the past decade at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the Jewish People Policy Institute, researching and writing extensively about nearly every issue that he

will now be tackling in Washington.

“Mike Herzog is an inspired choice to be ambassador to the United States,” former U.S. diplomat Dennis Ross, co-chairman of JPPI’s board of directors, said recently at a farewell event in Jerusalem, also broadcast on Zoom, for Herzog at the institute.

Tevi Troy, a senior fellow at the Bipartisan Policy Center and former senior White House official in the George W. Bush administration, told JI that Herzog was “arriving at a challenging time for the U.S.-Israel relationship.”

“He needs to rebuild relations with the Democrats, who are increasingly split on Israel; broaden the support for Israel within a divided Jewish community; and try to figure out a way to keep the U.S. and Israel on the same page when it comes to thwarting Iran’s nuclear ambitions,” said Troy. “And, like every Israeli ambassador to the U.S., he needs to think about what he wants as his long-term legacy from a typically short-term tenure.”

“It is a great honor to do this job, I do not take it lightly,” Herzog, who is waiting for accreditation from the Biden administration before moving to Washington sometime next month, remarked. “I am preparing for this job very seriously and since there are some open and very pressing issues, I will have to hit the ground running.”

Herzog is succeeding Israeli Ambassador

Gilad Erdan — who will maintain his position as Israel’s ambassador to the United Nations — and says he plans to follow up on subjects raised during Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett’s recent visit to Washington.

First and foremost, Iran. “We are at a junction where there will or won’t be a [nuclear] deal and there will be a dialogue and specific strategies, so that will be a main issue for me to deal with vis-a-vis the administration.”

Herzog also said he would also focus on “the need for broad bipartisan support for Israel in the U.S.,” as well as countering the “international campaign to delegitimize Israel, which is also prevalent in the U.S.”

At the JPPI farewell event, former U.S. Ambassador to the E.U. Stuart Eizenstat, also the institute’s co-chair, urged Herzog to welcome legitimate criticism of Israel but make clear that supporting the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement that targets the Jewish state crosses the line. He suggested Herzog conduct early outreach to progressive legislators in Congress and listen and engage with them.

“My message is going to be really showing Israel’s diversity,” Herzog told JI. “We are a very diverse, open society and certainly far away from the stereotypes [associated with Israel], and we need to make that very clear.” ♦

SEPTEMBER 27, 2021

## Little Sesame offers an education in hummus for the Washington set

*The restaurant ushered in a hummus boom in D.C. A pandemic pivot to a packaged version upended the business model*

By Gabby Deutch

Good hummus doesn’t need many ingredients: chickpeas, fresh lemon juice, tahini, some garlic and salt.

But that doesn’t mean it’s easy to make. Washingtonians would know: Until a few years ago, it was nearly impossible for residents of the nation’s capital to find

a restaurant serving the fresh dip like those that line the streets of some Middle Eastern cities. So, when the Israeli-inspired restaurant, Little Sesame, first showed up in downtown Washington as a basement pop-up in 2015, it quickly became a local favorite.

After the coronavirus pandemic sent sales at Little Sesame’s two downtown

locations into a tailspin, the company’s chefs figured it would be easy to create a packaged version of its popular hummus to sell in local grocery stores. It’s just a few ingredients, they thought. Right?

“It’s a whole new business. There’s a lot of learning we had to do,” Little Sesame co-founder Nick Wiseman told Jewish Insider

in a recent interview. After nearly a year of experimenting with acidity levels and pasteurization, Little Sesame's hummus hit shelves at 13 Whole Foods locations in Washington, D.C., Maryland and Virginia over the summer.

Little Sesame's two storefronts are in Chinatown and Farragut Square, two business districts that have yet to see a mass return of office workers. But, Wiseman said, the team "couldn't be happier" with sales at Whole Foods.

Wiseman created Little Sesame with his cousin, Dave Wiseman — a lawyer, not a chef — and Ronen Tenne, an Israeli chef with whom Wiseman worked as a line cook at a restaurant run by Michelin-starred chef Michael White in New York. "We always dreamed of opening our own place one day," said Wiseman.

Little Sesame wasn't the trio's first project. Washington foodies will recall their previous restaurant, DGS Delicatessen, a Jewish-style deli that paid homage to the region's Jewish food heritage. It was named for District Grocery Stores, a 20th-century grocery cooperative that at its peak comprised 300 stores, most of which were owned by Jewish immigrants from Europe.

"We wanted to launch something that's very authentic to us and our family, honoring those traditions," said Wiseman, a third-generation Washingtonian. "Dave and I grew up eating Sunday brunch with smoked fish and bagels together. And so our first project was the Jewish deli. And the antidote to the deli was the vegetable-centric food that became Little Sesame."

When the Little Sesame pop-up first appeared in 2015, it did not have much Israeli hummus competition in Washington. That has since changed. In 2016, the kosher-certified and vegan Shouk — a fast-casual Israeli street food restaurant — opened in Mount Vernon Square. Taim, a popular New York hummus and falafel chain from chef Einat Admony, opened in Georgetown in 2019. And Sababa, a sit-down Israeli restaurant that has earned a Bib Gourmand distinction from Michelin, opened in Cleveland Park in early 2018.

Wiseman's DGS Delicatessen shuttered in 2018, but it was in DGS's basement that Little Sesame debuted in 2015. The restaurant's brand of Israeli-tinged Middle

Eastern cuisine was in growing demand at the time, but that food also offered a better business model than DGS. "Sourcing the quality of beef we wanted and serving it at that price point that's demanded in a Jewish deli, the economics just didn't pencil," Wiseman reflected. "The delicatessen is a hard model, and that's why I think you've seen it wane over time." (Wiseman also owns Hill Prince, a cocktail bar in D.C.'s H Street neighborhood.)

The high-quality beef that DGS served had become cost-prohibitive, while most of Little Sesame's products are plant-based, and the only meat served at the restaurants is chicken. (The restaurants are not kosher, and Little Sesame's grocery-brand hummus — while vegan — is also not certified kosher.)

The partners' journey from a deli to an Israeli hummus restaurant could be seen as a broader trend in American Jewish food culture playing out in miniature: a move beyond Ashkenazi foods like smoked salmon and bagels to include Sephardic and Mizrahi cuisines. But Wiseman is quick to note that Little Sesame's influences go beyond Israel. "It is inspired by Israel, but it's reflective of the food of the entire region," he said.

From the beginning, the goal of Little Sesame was to "shift American perception on hummus a bit and move it into the center of the table," Wiseman explained. The first Little Sesame brick-and-mortar restaurant opened in 2018.

Wiseman pointed out that Washington, home to many immigrant communities, has always had plenty of food from the Middle East, with Lebanese and Persian restaurants across the District, Maryland and Virginia. And he urged consumers hungry for Israeli food not to compare Washington's Israeli food scene to anywhere else, and especially not to New York.

"It certainly doesn't have the riches of New York, but it doesn't have the number of people of New York," Wiseman explained. "It's always a hard comparison to make."

Before the coronavirus pandemic hit in early 2020, Little Sesame was doing its part in teaching Washingtonians that hummus could be a meal, and not just a dip. They had a host of competitors to help with that education. And after their in-store sales plummeted, Little Sesame is reaching a

whole new audience through Whole Foods.

But Little Sesame has one more plan that will cement the lessons of the pandemic and its new remote workforce, a next step for many Washington restaurants growing out of their infancy — a new location in suburban Bethesda, set to open early next year.

"It's just clear people are working from home a lot more, and a neighborhood like Bethesda is, like, 'Live, work, play.' It's kind of got everything," Wiseman said. "It's a more certain bet in this market at this time."

But when Little Sesame arrives in Bethesda, it'll have competition. Shouk plans to open two Maryland locations, one also in Bethesda and the other in Rockville, this fall. ♦

# Matt Dolan walks an uncharted path in Ohio's Republican Senate primary

*The Cleveland lawmaker is testing whether he can clinch the GOP nomination without actively courting Trump's endorsement*

By Matthew Kassel

Former President Donald Trump has yet to make an endorsement in Ohio's crowded Republican Senate primary, but there is one candidate who won't be getting the nod: Ohio state Sen. Matt Dolan.

Hours after he declared his candidacy last Monday, Dolan received a sharply worded rejection letter from the ex-president. "I know of at least one person in the race who I won't be endorsing," Trump wrote in a fiery statement issued through his Save America political action committee.

"The Republican Party has too many RINOs!" Trump exclaimed, pejoratively characterizing the GOP hopeful as a "Republican in name only."

Not that Dolan was expecting it would go any other way. The 56-year-old state legislator has made it abundantly clear that he isn't actively seeking Trump's support — in contrast to the wide assortment of Republican candidates who are now locked in fierce and often obsequious competition for a coveted thumbs-up from the undisputed GOP figurehead.

Dolan, for his part, is staking out something of an uncharted path in the open-seat race to succeed outgoing Sen. Rob Portman (R-OH), a moderate who is retiring at the end of his term in 2022. For one, Dolan wholeheartedly supported the \$1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure deal negotiated by Portman, in spite of Trump's vocal opposition to the bill.

Echoing Trump, the other GOP candidates — including former Ohio State Treasurer Josh Mandel, former state party chair Jane Timken, author and venture capitalist J.D. Vance and Cleveland businessmen Bernie Moreno and Mike Gibbons — all bashed the spending package.

"I can only guess I'm the only person

who supported it because President Trump said he wouldn't endorse anyone who did," Dolan, who represents suburban Cleveland, said in an interview with Jewish Insider on Friday. "You've got to put the best interest of Ohio and the country above politics," he added, "and my opponents all failed the very first test — that they're going to follow politics before they follow what's in the best interest of Ohio."

In the Democratic primary, two candidates — Rep. Tim Ryan (D-OH), who had a short-lived run for the presidency in 2020, and progressive activist Morgan Harper, a former congressional candidate in Columbus — are vying for the nomination.

Dolan readily acknowledges that Trump lost the election in 2020, unlike some of his opponents who have avoided accepting the results, and he does not hesitate to point out that he disagreed with the former president on at least some policy matters, such as the negotiated withdrawal from Afghanistan recently enacted by the Biden administration.

On red-meat conservative culture war issues, Dolan takes a somewhat heterodox approach. His family, which owns the Cleveland Indians, announced earlier this summer that the Major League Baseball team will be changing its name to the Guardians next year out of respect for Native Americans who protested the current moniker as offensive. Trump, who has criticized the move as "cancel culture at work," cited the name change as motivating his opposition to Dolan, who vows on his campaign site to fight against "cancel culture."

Dolan said he understood the former president's critique. "But at the end of the day, I think it's fair to say that Native Americans didn't find that the name Indians was in any

way in support of them," he told JI. "Because when you talk to Native Americans, they consider themselves Americans, and then they consider themselves Ohioans or Arizonians, and then they consider themselves Erie or Cherokee or Apache."

He said the new name, after the "Guardians of Traffic" statues that stand on opposing ends of Cleveland's Hope Memorial Bridge, was one of his "top picks."

Despite his readiness to part ways with the former president on select issues, Dolan is quick to suggest that he largely approved of the former president's agenda — even if the feeling isn't mutual. The two-term state senator and former state representative lists a number of issues on his campaign site that suggest he is in line with the other Republican candidates in substance if not style, employing such terms as "socialist Democrats," "election integrity," "critical race theory" and "securing the border."

Dolan also makes clear that he would not have voted to impeach Trump for inciting the Jan. 6 Capitol riot.

On Israel, there is little to no distance between Dolan and his opponents, who have all expressed their staunch support for the Jewish state. Dolan said he would have voted in favor of providing \$1 billion to replenish Israel's Iron Dome missile defense system, as the House did last week after a contentious floor debate between pro-Israel Democrats and those in the party who have been critical of Israeli policies and want to see conditions placed on U.S. aid to the Jewish state.

"The Iron Dome is essential for Israel to protect itself, to protect its ability to be a stable force in the region," Dolan told JI, adding: "Any effort that we can make on behalf of securing that relationship and sending the strongest signal that there is

no daylight between the United States and Israel is where we need to be.”

The other GOP Senate candidates told *Jl* after the vote that they supported the spending as well.

Still, Dolan’s candidacy represents an unorthodox path in Ohio, where Trump’s base appears to remain energized as he mulls running in the 2024 presidential election.

With little available public polling, it is difficult to assess Dolan’s prospects as he seeks the nomination in next year’s primary. But as a co-owner of the Indians, Dolan is in a strong position to self-fund his campaign, and he is likely to appeal to moderate Republican voters, however significant their support may be, who feel alienated by the Trump wing of the GOP.

Just two days after he entered the race, Dolan earned an endorsement from the editorial board of the Cleveland Plain Dealer, which wrote that “Dolan has pointedly been differentiating himself from the Trump acolytes now leading the pack of those seeking Portman’s Senate seat on the GOP side.” Dolan’s candidacy, the newspaper said, “should be a call-out to all Ohio Republicans who hope to reclaim the soul of their party to step up and support him.”

But Dolan said it would be misguided to view his Senate bid as a test of Trump’s salience within the Republican Party.

“If we want an America that’s better and we want an Ohio that’s better, then you need somebody like me who’s pushing conservative Republican ideals that have produced results,” he told *Jl*. “That’s what I think this race is about.”

*The interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.*

**Jewish Insider:** Why are you running?

**Matt Dolan:** Two reasons. One is I know I can win, and two, the challenges that are facing us right now, in Ohio and in our country, need somebody like me who has the experience and the results to go to Washington, to fight for Ohio and to get things done for Ohio and for our country. The Biden agenda is killing our economy, our education, our way of life, our standing in the world. So stopping the Biden agenda

is important and job one. But I’m the only one in the race that also can put forth what we stand for, what I’ve done in Ohio, and can bring that same work ethic and results to Washington. I believe right now I’m the best person for the job to meet the challenges of today.

**Jl:** You launched a statewide listening tour this summer before you announced your candidacy. What were some of the lessons you took away from that tour in terms of voter concerns?

**Dolan:** Overwhelmingly, the issues that came up were economic issues and security issues. Republican voters want people to get back to work; they don’t want a government that’s subsidizing people to stay home. When they heard what I was able to accomplish in Ohio, they were excited. Any child has a pathway to career success, whether it’s a four-year degree, whether it’s in the skilled manufacturing and skilled trades or anything in between. That is a successful career, and we need to make sure that kids know that there’s work here — quality work, high-standard-of-living work — and make sure that’s available so employers win and future employees win.

Security: securing the Southern border. We’ve got to know who’s coming into our country and what they’re bringing. But also security in our neighborhoods. We in the [state] Senate support the police, despite that some communities were defunding them. The state of Ohio provided \$15 million for police. At the end of the day, they want somebody to go to Washington and get something done.

**Jl:** You drew some headlines this summer for your support of the bipartisan infrastructure bill negotiated by Portman. All of the leading GOP Senate candidates, echoing Trump, bashed the bill. Did you find that voters were receptive to the bill during your listening tour?

**Dolan:** I can only guess I’m the only person who supported it because President Trump said he wouldn’t endorse anyone who did. The U.S. senator for Ohio has to fight for Ohioans. Rob Portman negotiated a slimmed-down, very targeted

infrastructure bill that will dramatically help Ohio’s economy, and I’m the only one that supported it. How can you say you’re fighting for Ohio when you won’t support an economic development package in Cincinnati? You go to Appalachia and say, “I know you need broadband, but my opponents won’t support it.” You’ve got to put the best interest of Ohio and the country above politics, and my opponents all failed the very first test — that they’re going to follow politics before they follow what’s in the best interest of Ohio.

**Jl:** Trump released a statement the other day saying he wouldn’t be endorsing you, but his reason, somewhat curiously, had nothing to do with the infrastructure package. Instead, he said it was because your family was changing the name of the Cleveland Indians to the Guardians — a sign, he suggested, that your family was bowing to “cancel culture,” which you vow to fight against on your campaign site. What did you make of that?

**Dolan:** While I understand individually why somebody might be upset about a name change, anyone who’s been in private business knows that there is way more beyond politics [that goes] into a decision like that. And so it is what it is. I guess that’s what I’ll say.

**Jl:** Do you believe the Indians name change is an example of “cancel culture”? You write on your campaign site that “rights afforded by the Constitution, like freedom of speech and the right to due process, are under attack in our classrooms, town squares and sports stadiums.”

**Dolan:** Given the timeframe in which it’s happened, I completely understand why that is a talking point. What people won’t understand is that this wasn’t an issue made overnight. This is something that my parents have been talking about with Native American tribes throughout both Arizona and Ohio over the years. We have engaged with them numerous times. We have used some of our merchandise revenue to help support Native American causes both here and in Arizona. But at the end of the day, I think it’s fair to say that Native Americans didn’t find that the name Indians was in any way in support of them. Because when

you talk to Native Americans, they consider themselves Americans, and then they consider themselves Ohioans or Arizonians, and then they consider themselves Erie or Cherokee or Apache.

That is how they see themselves, and that's what would be honoring to them. The name Indians is a name that the whites gave them when they arrived in the country. While they get the pop culture, if you will, of the name Indians, they don't think it honors them in any way. So, over a long period of time, and I think with the [NFL's Washington] Redskins changing their name, the family made a decision after much discussion. But the reality also is, like I said, we are in the business of baseball, and we don't want free agents coming into Cleveland having to answer political questions. We want them to focus on joining our team and winning a World Series.

**JJ:** *Do you like the new name, by the way?*

**Dolan:** It was one of my top picks, sure. Yes.

**JJ:** *Have you ever met Trump or talked to him?*

**Dolan:** I have not, no.

**JJ:** *You're based in suburban Cleveland, which is home to a sizable Jewish population. What connections have you made with Jewish leaders throughout your time in office, and what conversations are you engaging in now that you're running for Senate?*

**Dolan:** I can tell you this: I would encourage you to go read a letter of support in The Cleveland Jewish News endorsing me, when I ran for reelection to the state Senate, for all the hard work I've done on behalf of not just the Jewish community but all of Northeastern Ohio. But in particular, they cited a number of issues — security issues I helped with; medical, nursing home and health and human service issues; supporting Israel with resolutions and things that I will follow through on as a United States senator. I've had a great working relationship with the Jewish community in Cleveland in my time. I've already had roundtables in the Cincinnati

area and the Columbus area with Jewish leaders, and I believe they went very well. I think my passion and results-oriented style is what they're looking for, and I'm hoping I can earn — collectively and individually — their support.

**JJ:** *Do you have any thoughts on the recent Iron Dome vote in the House? One interpretation of the vote was that it confirmed there is widespread bipartisan support for Israel. But some pro-Israel advocates were troubled that a small minority of progressive Democrats opposed the funding so vehemently.*

**Dolan:** To me, that's very sad and ultimately could be tragic, because we don't want to send any signal to any terrorist organizations — these are not countries, these are terrorist organizations that are threatening Israel — and we should be saying to Israel, "We unequivocally support your ability to defend yourself and your quality of life." So any suggestion that America is equivocating on that strong support, it's just sad. The Iron Dome is essential for Israel to protect itself, to protect its ability to be a stable force in the region. The Abraham Accords have helped Israel and other Arab countries develop trade relationships which would have been unheard of a few years ago. We, of course, want to continue to be a trade partner with Israel. So any effort that we can make on behalf of securing that relationship and sending the strongest signal that there is no daylight between the United States and Israel is where we need to be.

**JJ:** *Have you ever visited Israel, either as an elected official or in your own personal capacity?*

**Dolan:** I have not. I would look forward to it. Some of my brothers and sisters have been there, and my parents have been there. But I have not.

**JJ:** *You praised the Abraham Accords. You've said you voted for Trump twice and it seems as if you largely agree with his policies; despite that, you aren't courting his endorsement. What aspects of his foreign policy approach did you approve of or disagree with?*

**Dolan:** Trump was a Republican

president who did a lot of good things, and what I'm recognizing is that when Republicans are in charge, our position on the United States and our conservative economic principles are best for our country. So, I think, as President Trump investigates my record, he'll see that I did a lot of things that are consistent with what he tried to do for the country.

Now, as it relates to his foreign policy, there are areas of agreement and there are areas of disagreement. I strongly agreed with pulling out of the Iranian nuclear deal, and I would have fought hard to keep the sanctions in place because they were just starting to work, just starting to draw the pressure on that we need to have a real negotiation with Iran. But that deal kept Israel in jeopardy. I strongly agreed with the Abraham Accords. I think President Trump should be applauded for those efforts and the fundamental change in the Middle East when you have real Muslim countries working with Israel. When the economy of the Middle East rises, then maybe these young men and women who, right now, don't see any other choices in their lives except for listening to Hamas and other terrorist organizations, maybe they'll look around and say there's a better path — and that starts with these types of peace accords, these types of trade agreements.

Where I disagree with President Trump is I'm not an isolationist. I think when the United States withdraws from the world, leadership vacuums get created and they get filled — and they get filled by people who don't act in the best interests of the United States. I was against pulling out of Afghanistan. I think we should have kept a force there. The tragic way in which we exited was horrible and a sad loss of life. But even if the exit had been orderly, the vacuum would still be created, and now I believe the Middle East and the United States and all Western civilization is in jeopardy from these terrorist organizations.

I don't necessarily think that tariffs are the way we're going to solve the China problem. I think we've got to engage in the world. We create trade partners that are different than China — for example, Vietnam, India, Indonesia — and if a company is working in China we incentivize them to come back to the United States or to

sign up with a country that will partner with us and make it harder for China to compete.

**JJ:** *Are there any concrete actions you can take in the Senate to address the rising incidents of antisemitism we've seen in recent years?*

**Dolan:** I met with a series of Jewish leaders in Columbus yesterday, and it's very sad to hear that they're facing that in the year 2021. Not only can I do things, I have done things. I've worked with the Jewish community. We have established security grants that are developed to go to harden synagogues and schools and to make sure that people feel secure when they go to their place of worship. I got them in the budget two years ago, and I just extended them for two more years in this current budget. If I'm in the United States Senate, I would follow the lead of Rob Portman, who has also been able to draw federal dollars to make sure that places of worship, including synagogues, are protected. With the realities of today, we need to do that. I also believe education is a huge part of ending this cycle of bigotry. Myself and a lot of legislators, we created the Holocaust Commission, and I got the money to fund it in the budget to make sure that people understand the story and understand what a travesty [Jews] faced and how individuals overcame it.

**JJ:** *What did you make of the recent decision by Ohio Rep. Anthony Gonzalez not to seek reelection rather than face a Trump-backed primary challenger in the midterms? What do you think his decision portends for the future of Republican politics in Ohio and, more broadly, across the country?*

**Dolan:** Well, I do think Anthony made the wrong vote [on impeachment]. I don't think there was constitutional evidence to support impeachment. I would not have made that vote. I do think Anthony Gonzalez has been a solid conservative but practical legislator who is good for Ohio and good for our country. His decision not to run is personal to him.

**JJ:** *You've described the events of Jan. 6 as a "failure of leadership," but you're saying you wouldn't have voted for impeachment. You've*

*also said you don't believe the election was stolen, contrary to a number of your opponents who have refused to acknowledge that Trump lost. Have your views on the election caused any tension with voters in Ohio, who largely still seem energized by Trump?*

**Dolan:** Jan. 6 was a horrible day for America. The individuals who committed the crime should be punished. There's a recognition of the peaceful transfer of power and that we have a court system to challenge any irregularities — and that's what makes us the greatest country on the earth, that we have a peaceful transfer of power but we also have a system already in place to challenge that in a civil, open, transparent way. That's why I'm disappointed for Jan. 6. My focus is on 2022 to get the majority to stop the Biden agenda. And, I think, when I travel the state and will continue to travel the state, when I tell [voters] where my focus and energy is, it is to make sure that we stop the bleeding, as you will, from Biden and focus on what we can do and provide alternatives to Ohioans and Americans, where Republican ideals can lead us and how they are better for economic growth and for quality of life and to make people feel safe and secure. So it is not just enough to be against something; we've got to be for something.

**JJ:** *You were a registered Democrat before switching your party affiliation to Republican in 1994. How do you feel the GOP has changed since you joined its ranks more than 25 years ago, and how do you feel like you fit into it now as compared with then?*

**Dolan:** I was a lot younger then. I did become a Republican in 1994, but I didn't run for office for another decade, so it's not like I switched for any selfish reasons. I switched because, at a young age, I understood that Republican ideals are about helping the individual achieve his or her best potential, and that there is a level and a role that government plays in that, but it's a role of assistance, not dependence. And for the most part, over the years, the Republican Party has stayed true to that, and I would argue that the Democratic Party has moved even further to this idea that government creates a dependent class and that your lifestyle is dependent on how

much government can give you or do for you. So, the bulk of that decision remains the same and consistent. And, you know, maybe a little more controversial is [that], as I understood and began to understand and talk about abortion, pro-life became my position. And that's more consistent with the Republican platform.

**JJ:** *Does that have to do at all with your Catholic faith?*

**Dolan:** It definitely had to do with my Catholic faith and listening to my mother and my sister talking about the issue with me, and maybe even more personal: My son's mother and my wife at the time, we had a miscarriage, and that had a dramatic impact on me as to what life really means.

**JJ:** *Does your faith inform your political views in any other way?*

**Dolan:** No, I think it probably has more of an impact on my style. My mom has always told us, "Listen for God in everything you do." So it's hard for me to just go on the personality attack with somebody who disagrees with me if it actually might be a message of God because he speaks to us in many different ways. So I think it has more of an impact on my style. I don't see this as a bloodsport. It's very, very competitive. It's very tough. I've been a lawyer for 30 years. I've been in business for 22 years and public service for 15. Those are all very difficult businesses where you have to be tough. You just don't have to destroy the personality of the other side. And I have been very successful in all three without leaving a trail of destruction of personalities behind me. So I think my faith has dictated that more than my public positions.

**JJ:** *Are you alluding to some of the other candidates in the race — in particular Josh Mandel, who has made a number of inflammatory comments as he seeks the nomination?*

**Dolan:** Yeah. I think tone and rhetoric is not a substitute for results and good policy. And my focus is always on results and good policy. Whether I shout it or I just work quietly very hard, the result is the same: It's

better for Ohio. Just talking loud and calling people names is not public policy.

**JJ:** *There are a number of issues listed on your campaign site that overlap with the other Republican candidates in the race, including “cancel culture,” “socialist Democrats,” “election integrity,” “critical race theory,” “securing the border.” Would you agree that, barring any stylistic differences, there are areas in which you and your opponents share common ground?*

**Dolan:** I think there’s a lot of areas in which we have common ground. I think we all agree that the Southern border is a crisis that needs to be addressed, and Biden has been a failure. What I say is, it’s not the ideas that Biden is screwing up on, it’s who can execute on fixing those issues and promoting what we stand for. So, for instance, in 2017, Republicans had the White House, the Senate and the House. Yet, in four years, we couldn’t get an immigration policy into law. We had to rely on President Trump’s executive order. Why is that? We have no one to blame but ourselves. We

couldn’t get it finished. My point is, you better send somebody to Washington who knows how to execute on ideals and get it into law so that we have permanent stability at our border and any other areas. We didn’t get an infrastructure bill done when we controlled the House, Senate and the White House. You can’t just send people who just talk. You’ve got to send people who’ve had the results, the success and can execute on our good ideas.

**JJ:** *You’ve said that you don’t believe the last presidential election was stolen, but you list “election integrity” as an issue on your campaign website. What is your concern there?*

**Dolan:** I don’t worry a whole lot about Ohio. I think Ohio’s elections have been very solid, very safe, very secure and very accurate. What I do worry about, though, is that other states follow the model that Ohio has implemented so that the confidence in individuals’ votes stays where it is or increases. That’s why election integrity is important; it’s that people need to know that their vote counts. And also, it’s a state

issue. This should not be run by the federal government. So I am totally against what the Democrats are trying to push through in Congress, that somehow we’re going to federalize our elections. Ohio is a model, other states should follow it, people’s confidence will increase, our elections can still be the hallmark of the world, and we can elect our leaders and have a peaceful transfer.

**JJ:** *Do you view this race at all as a test of Trump’s influence within the party, given the fact that you’re not seeking his endorsement?*

**Dolan:** No, I see this race as Republican ideas and conservative principles that I have pushed and been successful [at implementing] are better for Ohio. And if we want an America that’s better and we want an Ohio that’s better, then you need somebody like me who’s pushing conservative Republican ideals that have produced results. That’s what I think this race is about. ♦

SEPTEMBER 27, 2021

## Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan donate \$1.3 million to Jewish groups

*The gifts reveal a focus on families, children and the fight against antisemitism*

By Helen Chernikoff

*This article first appeared on eJewishPhilanthropy.com.*

**M**ark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan are donating \$1.3 million to 11 Jewish organizations in a sign of their deepening connection with the Jewish community, *eJewishPhilanthropy* has exclusively learned.

The couple has also been meeting with rabbis, historians and scholars to learn more about Judaism and the Jewish community, a spokesperson for the Chan-Zuckerberg family office told eJP.

“Mark and Priscilla have made some

personal commitments in the past, but these new grants reinforce their interest in learning and deepening their connections with the community,” the spokesperson said.

Eleven organizations, most of which serve families and young people in the couple’s San Francisco Bay area community, received the funding, which comes not from the couple’s foundation — the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative (CZI) — but through their family office. They include three schools: Contra Costa Jewish Day School in Lafayette, Gideon Hausner Jewish Day School in Palo Alto and the Jewish Community High School of the Bay, as well

as three California summer camps: URJ Camp Newman, Camp Ramah in California and Camp Tawonga.

The local Jewish Family and Children’s Services and Jewish Community Relations Council, in addition to the Oshman Jewish Community Center in Palo Alto, received support, as did two national organizations — OneTable, which helps young Jews host Shabbat dinners, and PJ Library, which provides free Jewish books to families.

“Mark and Priscilla are proud to support the important work each of these organizations does in building communities, education, celebrating traditions and faith, and giving people a voice — especially in

fighting antisemitism,” the spokesperson said.

The couple’s public philanthropic vehicle is CZI, founded in 2015 with \$95 million in proceeds from a sale of Zuckerberg’s Facebook shares. CZI underwent a major overhaul in January when Zuckerberg and Chan launched a new, \$350 million group focused on criminal justice reform.

When the couple launched CZI, they also pledged 99% of their Facebook fortune to philanthropic causes, estimated to amount to \$45 billion over the span of their lifetimes.

The personal gifts to the Jewish community are all unrestricted, reflecting a broader trend among funders. MacKenzie Scott, the ex-wife of Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, is one of the highest-profile proponents of gifts that are not project-specific, but instead empower the recipient to decide how they should be used. In the Jewish community, the Jewish Funders Network (JFN), a service organization for philanthropists, and UpStart, an incubator and advisor of early stage nonprofits, have launched “GrantED,” an initiative that educates funders about the need for unrestricted grants.

OneTable will use its \$200,000 grant to

strengthen both its Bay Area operation and its national infrastructure, OneTable co-founder and CEO Aliza Kline said.

“Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan share our commitment to addressing the growing epidemic of loneliness through innovative, scalable and human-centered interventions,” she said.

The Oshman JCC also received \$200,000, which makes Zuckerberg and Chan one of the center’s most generous supporters, said Oshman’s CEO, Zack Bodner, adding that this grant is the first to the center from Zuckerberg and Chan that the couple has made public.

“Hopefully it will spark others of that generation of philanthropists to get involved,” he said. “We can’t become the architects of the Jewish future without this support.”

The center will use the grant to fund preschool and other scholarships to expand access to its services, and to broaden the mission of its fitness center to include meditation, mindfulness and other wellness activities.

Both Bodner and Tyler Gregory, executive director of the San Francisco-based Jewish

Community Relations Council, said their organizations’ ability to serve a wide swath of the Jewish community were part of their appeal to Zuckerberg and Chan.

“They were interested in the centralized areas of Jewish life in the Bay Area, and the JCRC is a great starting point for that because we’re a convener,” said Gregory. “We bring together synagogues and agencies to discuss the top external challenges facing our community.”

The JCRC, which serves the city of San Francisco, the San Francisco Peninsula and Marin, Sonoma, Alameda and Contra Costa counties, will use some of the funds to create, “Here I Am,” a social media campaign that aims to educate people outside the community about the existence of antisemitism.

“It’s exciting to see some of the Jewish leaders in the Silicon Valley area becoming more philanthropic,” said Gregory, noting that Eugene Fooksman and Jan Koum, co-founders of WhatsApp, are known for their Jewish philanthropy. “It’s important for them to step up, because there will be a domino effect.” ♦

OCTOBER 1, 2021

## Jon Lovett live — finally!

*The podcaster and progressive activist is leaving L.A. (and Zoom) and taking his pointed comedy show on the road*

By Matthew Kassel

Jon Lovett, the former Obama speechwriter, progressive podcast host and stand-up comedian, seemed eager to hone his act in an interview with *Jewish Insider* last week before returning to a live stage for the first time in 18 months.

“I’m really excited to go back to it because if I don’t get applause, my doctor says I could get very sick,” Lovett deadpanned, testing out a gag over the phone.

Before the pandemic, Lovett, 39, hosted a raucous weekly podcast, “Lovett or Leave It,” in front of a live audience, often in his home city of Los Angeles.

For the past year-and-half, he kept his show going remotely, as best he could, on Zoom, recording interviews with a wide assortment of comedians, journalists, politicians and other guests “in front of a needy golden-doodle,” as a facetiously updated tag line informed viewers tuning in from home — an allusion to Lovett’s beloved dog, Pundit.

Now, Lovett is stepping back onto the stage — no doubt Pundit could use the reprieve — as he embarks on a series of weekly outdoor shows, “Lovett or Leave It: Live or Else,” which began last Thursday at the Cinelounge in Hollywood and will

culminate in a performance at the Beacon Theater in Manhattan on Nov. 12, as part of the New York Comedy Festival. Lovett’s panelists have so far included Rep. Adam Schiff (D-CA) and B.J. Novak, the actor and comedian, with future guests yet to be confirmed.

“Doing jokes over Zoom, you know, we made it work,” Lovett said. “I’ll be glad to not do it for a while.”

Lovett, who is Jewish, has been regaling listeners with his charmingly anachronistic brand of Borscht Belt-inflected political commentary — he sometimes sounds as if he is channeling a Catskills tumbler à la

mid-20th-century Mel Brooks, his favorite comedian — for years.

He is credited with penning some of former President Barack Obama's funniest lines before leaving the administration to write a short-lived sitcom, "1600 Penn." Lovett began podcasting in 2016..

Though Lovett admits that he is "super rusty" after months of video interviews, he is looking forward to perfecting his on-stage approach as he takes his show on the road.

"There's going to be a lot of experimentation and trial and error," he said, off-handedly mentioning the possibility of interactive games with the audience whose details he did not disclose.

But it isn't all light-hearted. Lovett launched Crooked Media, the left-wing media company whose growing slate of podcasts includes "Lovett or Leave It" and "Pod Save America," its flagship show, four years ago in partnership with a duo of former Obama staffers and comrades in arms, Jon Favreau and Tommy Vietor.

Dismayed by the election of former President Donald Trump, the company's founders, aggressively activist from the start, soon established themselves as leading voices in the anti-Trump resistance.

"We didn't feel like there was a kind of media company with a progressive point of view that was about helping people feel engaged," Lovett recalled, "helping people feel like they had agency, that treated people like participants and not just observers."

The live podcasts "were a really good example of that," he said. "It wasn't just about hearing people laugh. It was saying, like, 'Hey, we're here, we're doing these shows across the country, we're going to where you are, we're trying to push people to get in the fight, to get involved, to be part of a community of people that want to fight back against Trump.'"

With President Joe Biden in the White House, that mission has mutated slightly as Crooked Media expands its podcast offerings to include some that Lovett says still "get at the core of what Crooked does," including a new show by Washington Post journalist Jason Rezaian about his experience being held hostage in an Iranian prison for 544 days.

Still, while the anti-Trump project may seem less urgent to some, Lovett insists that

complacency is not an option as the former president mulls another bid for the White House while continuing his effort to cast doubt on the 2020 election results.

"Let me say, I have not felt OK in a very long time," Lovett told JI. "I don't think feeling OK is the right way to feel. We have a Democratic president. You know, if history repeats itself, an incumbent president tends to lose seats in the midterms. Just with the power of redistricting, Republicans may be able to rack up enough seats to take back the House. So no, I don't think anybody should feel OK. People should feel really concerned and make sure that they're doing everything they can."

Though the 2022 midterm elections are still more than a year away, Lovett and his colleagues believe that early engagement is crucial if Democrats have any hope of maintaining their tenuous hold on the House and Senate. They recently launched a campaign called "No Off Years" via Crooked Media's political arm, Vote Save America, with a goal of assisting candidates in such crucial swing states as Arizona, Florida, North Carolina and Pennsylvania through early voter registration and targeted fundraising.

"I think we can help show people the way that they can make a difference even in the off years and show people where their effort and attention can be most useful," Lovett argued, "even when the nightmare daily Trump emergency is different."

With Trump not in office, "it might be easy to kind of say, like, 'See, we took care of it,'" Lovett added. "There's a kind of effort to forget just how bad things got, how much worse they could get, and I think keeping people engaged is really important — because that's one of the lessons of the years that led to Trump."

Lovett isn't exclusively focused on domestic politics. Last May, as violence intensified between Israel and Hamas, he joined his "Pod Save America" co-hosts for a wonky foreign policy discussion that took something of a personal turn when, early on in the exchange, Lovett described his own view of the conflict as a self-declared Zionist dismayed by Israel's military actions.

For Lovett, "Zionism means not just Israel's right to exist, but also comes with a set of values that Israel has to live up to," he

told JI, characterizing his previous remarks.

"This is what it means to me to have been raised in a Jewish household to believe in Zionism," said Lovett, who grew up on Long Island, "and to do so while trying to uphold, I think, the Jewish values that I was raised with, as well, that I view as core to being Jewish."

Lovett's perspective, no matter how heartfelt, irked some listeners during what was then a politically charged moment on the left.

"I think that there are some people that might hear just the part where I say 'Zionist,' and there are some people that might just hear the critique of Israel. Maybe there is some tension there for some people, but not for me," Lovett said. "That is my view, and as much as it is a kind of divisive and painful issue, I felt like even though maybe some people will hear it in one way or another, I should just say this is how I think about this issue."

Even amid so much heaviness, Lovett believes it is incumbent upon folks like him to carve out a space for humor.

"There's always jokes to be made," he said. "There's no shortage even in a dark time. And I do think one thing we could do to remind people is, like, 'Hey, this is going to be a long fight. We can't just be maudlin. Yeah, things are fucked up. This is a really hard time. The Trump era was a terrible time. Worse for a lot of people not listening to this podcast. Worse for a lot of people not on Twitter. Worse for a lot of people who face real and genuine hardship and bigotry and pain because of the administration.'"

"But we have to stay in the fight, and they want people to be exhausted and miserable, and if we are, they win," he said of Trump's supporters. "So it's important to find humor in things."

Doing it in front of an audience after a long absence only adds to the appeal, Lovett suggested.

"I really missed that connection to people," he said of his live podcast shows, "and I always felt really proud that this was a group of people that would come out every Thursday or come to shows across the country and feel like they were part of a community."

Lovett had more company than just

Pundit and his remote audience during the pandemic. He is engaged to investigative journalist Ronan Farrow, who proposed two years ago in a draft of his book *Catch and Kill: Lies, Spies, and a Conspiracy to Protect Predators*.

Asked if they were married yet, Lovett guffawed.

“Do you know what would happen if I told you that we were married and my mother saw a link to this piece that said we were married already?” he said. “I would hear the shouting from Boynton Beach, Florida. We are not married yet.” ♦