

## THE WEEKLY PRINT

*Meet the Chabad chief of staff in Congress; Irwin Cotler at 80 is busier than ever; Yiddish is coming to Duolingo; Emi Palmer, the Israeli lawyer on Facebook's Oversight Board; The women behind Avid Ventures; and an interview with Mark Gerson, author of a new book on Passover.*

MARCH 19, 2021

## The Chabad chief in the House

*As chief of staff for freshman Rep. Michelle Steel, Arie Dana makes history on Capitol Hill*

By Gabby Deutch

When Arie Dana walked up to a Capitol Hill coffee shop on a recent spring morning, I called him over to my table. “How’d you know it was me?” he asked. “Because I look like the Jewish guy?”

In a fitted blue suit, a navy sweater and light brown oxfords, Dana looked the part of a young, ambitious congressional staffer. He wore round tortoiseshell glasses; his combed-back graying hair appeared perfectly in place.

What gave Dana away as “the Jewish guy” — even more than the yarmulke on the back of his head — was his beard. In some places it extended more than a foot, the dark brown hair interspersed with gray. Dana has an identical twin brother, but “I’m the only bearded one of the family,” he told me, smiling. During our conversation, a young man with unkempt curly hair walked by and shouted “Nice beard, dude!” Dana thanked him.

Nine days after his December 2020 wedding to a woman he met at the University of Southern California Chabad house on Rosh Hashanah, Dana moved to Washington D.C. to serve as the chief of staff for newly elected freshman Rep. Michelle Steel (R-CA), for whom he has worked since

graduating college more than a decade ago.

Dana’s journey to this moment began during his freshman year at USC. “I was a College Republican, and one of my fellow College Republican friends was Michelle [Steel]’s daughter,” Dana said.

After graduating, he took an internship with a California state assemblyman, until he received a call from his College Republican friend. “Michelle’s daughter said to me, ‘Hey, I think my mom is looking for a communications director, are you interested in applying?’” Dana had previously volunteered on her 2006 campaign for the State Board of Equalization, the only elected tax commission in the country. He took the job.

Last November, Steel, then a member of the Orange County Board of Supervisors, beat incumbent first-term Democrat Harley Rouda (D-CA) to become one of the first three Korean-born members of Congress. (Young Kim (R-CA) also represents parts of Orange County, while Marilyn Strickland (D-WA) represents the area around Tacoma, Wash.)

“I was actually in Crown Heights” — the Brooklyn neighborhood home to the global headquarters of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement — “doing some pre-

wedding shopping with my fiancée, and I got an email: ‘Arie, book your flight to D.C. for orientation,’” he recounted. He got on a plane to Washington, and “by the end of the orientation, she asked me to be her chief of staff,” Dana recalled.

“Arie has been a dedicated member of my team for more than 10 years in three different elected positions,” Steel told JI. “Arie is the one who introduced me to Orange County’s Jewish community, and I’m grateful for his leadership, which is needed here in Washington.”

Dana is far from the first Orthodox Jew to work on the Hill. There was Peter Deutsch, a former member of Congress who now lives in Israel, and of course Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-CT), who went on to serve as Al Gore’s running mate on the 2000 Democratic ticket. Before Jack Lew served as Treasury secretary under Barack Obama, he was a staffer for House Speaker Tip O’Neill.

But according to Rabbi Levi Shemtov, executive vice president of American Friends of Lubavitch (Chabad) and Washington’s most prominent Chabad rabbi, “there has never before been a chief of staff to a member — which is the most senior position you get — who was Hasidic in appearance and in observance.” Put more

bluntly: “You’ve had many people who were shomer Shabbas, but they were not as outwardly recognizable as observant as Arie Dana,” Shemtov explained. “This speaks volumes about what it is possible to achieve in America without compromising religious principles.”

When Dana was a freshman at USC, he met Rabbi Dov Wagner, the school’s Chabad rabbi. “We always do, on Sukkot, a sukkah in the middle of campus, and offer students the opportunity to make a blessing over the lulav and etrog,” Wagner told JI. “He stopped by the sukkah at that time and made a little connection.” Dana would not reconnect with Wagner in a serious way until after he graduated.

Raised by Mexican parents in the Brentwood neighborhood of Los Angeles, Dana did not grow up Orthodox. “In Mexico, some of the different Jewish denominations that you see in [the U.S.] don’t really exist,” he explained. “There’s less religious and there’s more religious, but it’s a very traditional environment.”

Dana had his bar mitzvah at a Reform congregation. “We were the first people, I think, who put on tefillin, ever, in this temple for our bar mitzvah, and it was something that I kept up doing,” Dana said. In college, “I was looking for ways to be more religiously involved. But I also had my parents at home, and we had Shabbat dinner every Friday night,” which did not leave much time for him to get involved with Jewish groups on campus.

Both Dana and his twin brother started at USC as architecture majors, though Arie later changed his major to religion. (His brother and his sister-in-law, who is also an architect, are now working on an expansion for the USC Chabad house.)

Dana’s family was not politically active when he was growing up. He was a teenager on Sept. 11, 2001, “which was a very transformative thing to happen your freshman year of high school,” Dana noted. He started reading up on the Middle East, terrorism and foreign affairs, before expanding into other topics.

“I started reading a lot of libertarian thinkers and philosophers and got into the idea of the free market [as] a great way to help individuals from all backgrounds earn their own success,” Dana explained.

“Freedom — in that sense of letting people on their own choose how they want to create their own communities without external force — made me really interested in the political world.”

Apparently, it’s a value espoused by Steel as well: Years later, when she was elected to Congress, she joined the “Freedom Force,” a group of Republican members formed to counter Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s progressive “Squad.”

But first, at the State Board of Equalization, Dana received an education in big government. There’s “this big state agency,” Dana explained, that, in his view, could get in the way of “allow[ing] people to have the most freedom possible to live their lives the way they want to.”

At the same time, he was also receiving a new religious education. “I had this great idea that I was going to be an Orthodox Sephardic Jew,” Dana said. But there was no Sephardic community near where he was living, so he began learning again with Rabbi Wagner from USC. They had reconnected when Dana came to Chabad alumni events with a woman he was dating at the time.

“He had this incredible journey of really engaging in his Judaism very seriously and making it an important part of his life,” said Wagner, the USC rabbi. Dana and Wagner would study the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, together. “Learning those things drew me into starting to study chassidus more. And then over time, I was just like, ‘Oh, I think I think this is where I’m supposed to be,’” he noted.

He began to observe Shabbat and keep kosher, which is when people close to him noticed his new observance. “With friends, it was a little bit harder than it was at work,” Dana recounted. “The standard thing is to go out to dinner, or [hang out on] Friday nights, and you can’t do any of those things anymore.”

At work, “it started out with me just turning off my phone on Friday evenings. I didn’t really say so much about it,” he recalled. “Then [Steel] asked me, ‘Hey, why do you wait and not answer your phone until Saturday night?’” [I responded] ‘Oh, because I’m starting to keep the Sabbath.’”

Last winter, Dana and Steel “already had a general understanding of many years,” he

said. So when Orange County officials had to have an emergency press conference about the coronavirus, Steel knew not to call Dana. “It ended up being a Saturday morning press conference in Orange County, where they ended up announcing that there was going to be a state of emergency,” Dana explained. “I found out about it Saturday night. I was like, okay, it’s gonna be a busy week,” he said.

It ended up being not just a busy week but a busy year, as the virus spread and Steel’s campaign for Congress heated up. “It was a lot of work in those days. I was leaving barely enough time to get home, and I would just rush home and change quickly and go to synagogue — or not go to synagogue; I stayed at home because everything closed, which in a way makes it easier,” he said.

One silver lining of the pandemic was the Rosh Hashanah dinner where Dana met his soon-to-be wife. “Even during COVID,” said Wagner, “the right people come together.” Dana had been spending a lot of time with Wagner, with most other Jewish organizations not holding events. On Rosh Hashanah, his future wife Chana “just showed up at our door, looking for a place” to celebrate the holiday, Wagner recalled. “Of the very few guests there, two of them met and, thankfully, hit it off.”

They got married in December, and nine days later moved across the country to the first place Dana had ever lived outside of Los Angeles. About a week later, rioters stormed the Capitol.

Dana and his team were in Steel’s office, trying to get the congresswoman out of the Capitol complex — she had tested positive for the coronavirus that morning and did not want to infect her staffers. “We had doctor’s orders, of course, to get her out of the Capitol as fast as we could so that she could go isolate,” Dana said. But when he called the sergeant-at-arms’ office to ask for the best way out, the response was: “There is no safe way out at this time.” So Dana and the other staffers stayed in one wing of the office while Steel isolated in her personal office, keeping the door closed for the next 10 hours that they were trapped together. Her case ended up being mild, and no one else in the office got sick.

Insurrection aside, Dana has also missed the celebrations and events that typically mark the beginning of a new congressional

session. He had to hire an entirely new team, looking for people who “have experience on what the Hill is like” and understand things like “what the schedule for a day is like, what do the votes mean, the procedural rules.” Back in Orange County, “there aren’t 2 a.m. votes on Friday night,” Dana explained. “Official business was a lot more regimented and scheduled.” Amid all the new things to learn, he at least knew that his boss understood why he could not be present during those rare Friday night votes.

The new job brings new policy areas for Dana to learn about, but “we’re trying to be focused on local issues anyway,” he said. “The foreign policy side is probably the biggest single change,” he added, but “with the congresswoman being very involved in the Asian-American community,” she already had some experience in foreign affairs. Since

coming to Washington, Steel has joined with other Asian American members of Congress to call out violence against the Asian American Pacific Islander community, including after the mass shooting at a series of Asian-owned massage parlors in Atlanta this week. “What happened in Atlanta last night was senseless and tragic, and unfortunately only adds to a long list of recent violent crimes against our Asian American and Pacific Islander community,” Steel said in a statement, before testifying yesterday at a congressional hearing on anti-Asian American discrimination.

According to Dana, Steel also sees collaboration with Israel as a priority. “Water issues are something that’s a huge deal in California, and we have hi-tech and biomedical innovation,” said Dana. “She’s talked a lot about trying to find priorities

of places to work together with Israel and the United States to advance that type of innovative spirit and find solutions to those types of issues.”

Dana is excited to explore Washington’s Jewish community more as the weather improves and the pandemic subsides. “I’m really eager to see what the Jewish community is like,” Dana said. Capitol Hill is not known for having a large Orthodox community, but “we’ve had a very warm welcome from the community that there is.” On a typical Saturday, Dana normally walks across town to Chabad in Dupont Circle.

The lack of kosher restaurants in the District is also an adjustment, with the presence of just a single kosher meat restaurant, CharBar. But in some ways, that reminds Dana of home: “Orange County also had only one kosher restaurant.” ♦

MARCH 15, 2021

## At 80 years old, human rights lawyer Irwin Cotler is busier than ever

*Serving as Canada’s new antisemitism envoy is a pro bono gig for the former MP, who also defends dissidents via Zoom*

By Gabby Deutch

Irwin Cotler’s days start early and end late. He now spends most of his time working from home, but still oversees or contributes to the legal defense of dissidents around the world.

“It’s hard to sleep when you’re defending political prisoners who may be in a COVID-infested prison,” Cotler told Jewish Insider in a Zoom interview last week. “It keeps you up at night.”

At 80 years old, the international human rights lawyer — who formerly served as Canada’s minister of justice and attorney general, a member of Parliament representing Montreal and a law professor at McGill University — remains as busy as ever. Before he spoke to JI, he had been on a call with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Cotler is the chair of the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights, which he founded

in 2015, and in November, was appointed by Trudeau to serve as the country’s first special envoy on preserving Holocaust remembrance and combating antisemitism. “I sleep very little,” Cotler admitted.

Cotler remains actively involved in human rights cases around the world, the most recent being that of Raif Badawi, a Saudi writer who was arrested in 2012 for the crime of “insulting Islam.” After his arrest, Badawi’s wife and children fled to Canada, where they met Cotler. His wife “asked if I would serve as international legal counsel to her husband. That was just before he ended up getting 50 lashes,” Cotler said. Badawi has continued to speak out, and recently has advocated for Saudi normalization with Israel.

In Cotler’s view, the comments that got Badawi arrested several years ago reflect a sensibility that is now commonplace in Saudi

Arabia. Badawi was arrested “for saying then what [Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman] has been saying himself the last three years, calling for a more open Saudi Arabia, a more moderate Islam,” said Cotler. But Badawi remains imprisoned, and bin Salman has continued to take action against dissidents, including Saudi-American journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

Khashoggi’s 2018 killing occurred a mere two months after a diplomatic feud erupted between Saudi Arabia and Canada following calls from Canada’s foreign minister for Riyadh to release Badawi, leading Saudi Arabia to cut off diplomatic ties between the nations and recall more than 15,000 Saudi students studying in Canada. While Saudi Arabia was supported by several Arab states, Western democracies did not come to Canada’s defense. “The silence of the democracies, in fact, enabled [bin

Salman] to believe that he could act with impunity,” Cotler argued. “I always thought there was a straight line between the two,” he said, referring to the diplomatic rift and Khashoggi’s murder.

One of Cotler’s personal goals is to see more global leaders take a human rights approach to foreign policy. He suggested that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu might use a future meeting with bin Salman to raise the issue of Badawi’s imprisonment. “Israel’s got interests, but there’s also values involved,” Cotler said. If Netanyahu were to raise these points, “I think that it would serve everybody all around: It would be good for the cause of justice. It would be good for the relations between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. And it will be good to see Israel taking up the case of a political prisoner who, I might add, has been supportive of the Abraham Accords.”

Cotler has similar hopes for President Joe Biden, and already feels relieved by the administration’s early stance on human rights issues. In the previous administration, “Trump would treat adversaries as allies, and treat allies, like Trudeau of Canada, sometimes as adversaries,” Cotler noted. “We have now a president and an administration that has made the promotion and protection of human rights and democratic priorities both domestic and foreign policy.”

Still, Biden has been criticized for his recent response to a U.S. intelligence report connecting bin Salman to Khashoggi’s murder. Biden opted not to sanction bin Salman, despite the report’s finding that the crown prince personally approved the killing of Khashoggi. As an explanation, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said earlier this month that America’s “objective” with Saudi Arabia is “to recalibrate the relationship, prevent this from ever happening again and find ways... to work together with Saudi leadership.”

When asked about Biden’s response to the report, Cotler said that as a former lawmaker, he empathized with the government’s need to “calibrate values and

interests,” and the difficulties that arise when balancing a nation’s strategic goals with its political principles. “I happen to, at this point, believe that the Biden administration is moving in the right direction,” Cotler said.

Unlike most other activists, Cotler might be lucky enough to have a direct line to the person handling U.S. foreign policy. He had a decades-long friendship with U.S. Secretary of State Tony Blinken’s stepfather, Samuel Pizar, a Holocaust survivor. “When I was a law professor at McGill, we inaugurated the Raoul Wallenberg Lectureship in Human Rights,” Cotler recalled. The first person to give that lecture was Elie Wiesel; the second was Pizar, sparking a friendship in which Cotler visited him at his homes in New York and in France.

But human rights work is only half of Cotler’s portfolio — he also has another full-time job, as Canada’s antisemitism envoy. He took the job pro bono, he said, with practically no budget, to handle a huge portfolio that includes both domestic and global antisemitism, domestic and global Holocaust remembrance, and chairing Canada’s delegation to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. (Canada has adopted the IHRA working definition of antisemitism, which Trudeau says is part of the nation’s “anti-racism strategy.”)

Cotler sees a straightforward connection between his two passions: the Jewish community and international human rights. “I take a human rights approach to combating antisemitism,” he explained. “While [bigotry] begins with Jews, it doesn’t end with Jews. So for me, all these things converge, and there’s a universal resonance, both of the lessons of the Holocaust and the combating antisemitism today.”

Some on the political left might call this framework intersectionality. But Cotler is not trying to apply a political ideology to his fight against antisemitism, and he says he feels fortunate that Canadians by and large do not politicize the issue. “People are not weaponizing antisemitism. You don’t have the right weaponize it against the left, and

the left weaponizing it against the right,” he noted — unlike Canada’s neighbor to the south. “The big difference is Canada is not as polarized or as divided as the U.S.,” and “there still is a consensus.” His biggest concern is what he calls the “normalization” of antisemitism, where “it gets mainstream, and it doesn’t elicit the condemnation, or maybe the outrage, that it deserves.”

One of Cotler’s goals as Canada’s global antisemitism envoy is to address what he views as antisemitism at the United Nations, in the double standard he says the U.N. applies to Israel. “The rights of Israel deserve equal respect, not that human rights standards should not be applied to Israel. They must be. But these standards must be applied equally to everyone else,” Cotler said. He pointed out that Syria was recently appointed to a top position on the U.N.’s Special Committee on Decolonization, despite its well-documented history of brutal repression during the country’s civil war.

Cotler noted that some in the pro-Israel community who criticize the U.N.’s treatment of Israel simply oppose the institution entirely, but he is not among them. “If you’re Canadian, the United Nations is part of your DNA,” Cotler explained, noting that “human rights is a centerpiece of our foreign policy, [and] international law is part of my identity.”

His work truly is international: The cases currently in his docket include Badawi in Saudi Arabia, along with dissidents from China and Russia. During his conversation with JI, he received a call about a matter related to political persecution in Venezuela. “That’s another priority,” he said. For Cotler, every matter related to global injustice is a priority: “I get energized by the work.” ♦

# Duolingo is introducing its first Yiddish-language course next month

*Yiddish will become the 40th language offered on the popular app when it launches April 6*

By Matthew Kassel

Everyone knows a few stock Yiddish phrases — oy vey, meshugge, bupkes — but for those who want to expand their knowledge of the language, there are few convenient channels. Yiddish was once widely used before the Holocaust by a sizable population of Eastern European Jews, but has since become something of a novelty despite its rich history.

Now, Duolingo, the popular language-learning app, is introducing its first Yiddish-language course, scheduled to launch on April 6, according to a spokesperson.

“For Yiddish, we were getting a lot of interest,” said Myra Awodey, Duolingo’s lead community specialist, “mostly from people who were heritage learners or who wanted to pick up the connection.”

But the hope is that the course will appeal to a wide variety of users. “I always stress that our courses are for everyone and anyone who wants to improve their lives and learn a language,” Awodey told Jewish Insider. “We just think that there’s a lot of value in linguistic diversity.”

The course, which has been in the works for about five years, represents Duolingo’s effort to branch out into niche languages, including Hawaiian and Navajo, which launched in 2018. Yiddish, however, which is written using Hebrew characters and sounds similar to German, presented a new set of challenges.

“One of the things that we decided pretty early on really needed to happen was a new kind of lesson type that would allow us to teach pronunciation and the script,” said Awodey, who adds that the course includes listening as well as syllable selection lessons. “We kind of parceled out the unit of learning.”

The course is also unique, at least in Duolingo’s pedagogical universe, because

the company used real speakers to record the audio, in contrast to some of the courses for more widely used languages like English, Spanish and French.

“There are publicly available voices that you can use to generate audio,” Awodey said, “That makes things a lot easier when you’re creating a course, because you can just get a computer to record essentially all the audio that you need for the course. But for smaller languages, that’s not the case.”

The company enlisted a group of contributors to advise on the course, including Hasidic Jews as well as other native Yiddish speakers like Meena Viswanath, who comes from a family of well-known Yiddishists. Viswanath’s aunt is the editor of the Yiddish Forward, and her brother, Arun, recently translated the Harry Potter series into Yiddish. Mordkhe Schaechter, Viswanath’s grandfather, was a prominent Yiddish linguist.

“He was very, very adamant that people should be using it in their day-to-day life,” said Viswanath, a 32-year-old modern Orthodox Jew who was raised in Teaneck and now lives and works in Rockland, Md., as a civil engineer.

With that view in mind, Viswanath hopes that the course, which uses a standardized version of Yiddish developed in the 20th century, will help revive the language for any number of people who are interested in learning to use it.

“We had several target audiences in mind,” said Viswanath, including American Jews or Jews from other English-speaking countries whose parents, grandparents or great-grandparents spoke Yiddish.

“There isn’t really a place where you can go to be immersed in that traditional Ashkenazi Jewish culture in the way that you could have pre-World War II,” she said,

“and so immersing yourself in the language is as close as you can get.”

Viswanath also imagines that Hasidic Jews will be interested in the course, either because they want to improve their knowledge of standardized Yiddish or because they are hoping to enhance their understanding of English by retrofitting the app to work in a contrary fashion.

“Then,” Viswanath speculated, “there are the serial language learners that will just pick up a language because it looks interesting and just run with it.”

Yiddish-language experts are enthused by the new course. “Duolingo’s Yiddish course is a welcome development: anything that promotes Yiddish language study can only be a good thing, and the more people who avail themselves of the richness of Yiddish, the better,” said Eddy Portnoy, an academic advisor and exhibitions curator at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

“I haven’t seen the product yet, so I can’t comment on the quality, but if it compares to their other language modules, it should be a fine basic introduction to the language,” Portnoy added. “In coming years, it will be interesting to see students in the YIVO summer Yiddish program who got started by using an app.”

The Yiddish course represents the 40th language Duolingo has introduced since it was founded in 2011.

“I hope that what people come away from the course with is that Yiddish is part of a culture and has this fully formed language, grammar and spelling,” said Viswanath, “and is not just a language that you tell punch lines in or curse people out in.” ♦

# The Israeli lawyer on Facebook's independent Oversight Board

*Emi Palmor, former director-general of Israel's Justice Ministry, believes the world's only Jewish democracy has important lessons for the new content governing body*

By Gabby Deutch

At an introductory meeting of Facebook's Oversight Board — the independent body formed last spring to make decisions about when to take down or leave up controversial posts on the social media platform — members were asked to participate in show-and-tell. None of them had met in real life, and rather than diving straight into dicey issues like political misinformation, hate speech and religious discrimination, the global cohort of board members wanted a chance to learn more about one another. So they met on Zoom for a virtual ice-breaker.

The idea came from Emi Palmor, former director-general of Israel's Justice Ministry. "All the members were a bit embarrassed [to go first] and I was like, 'Okay, I'm Israeli. I'll be the first one,'" Palmor told Jewish Insider in a recent Zoom interview. She showed them a framed photo (which she keeps in her bathroom so she can see it while she puts on makeup) of her mother and her mother's sister as young children in Romania, weeks before they were sent to a concentration camp. Both survived the Holocaust. "The other board members were in shock," she recalled. "They were like, 'Oh, my God, what is this? This is too much information. This is so intimate and so open.' So, OK, this is me."

As the only Israeli and one of the few Jews on the Oversight Board, Palmor hopes to bring her mix of humor, chutzpah and Holocaust history to the body, which has been referred to as "Facebook's Supreme Court." According to the body's website, it was created to "promote free expression by making principled, independent decisions regarding content on Facebook and Instagram."

Reports that misinformation, violence and hate speech — including antisemitism

and Holocaust denial — flourish on Facebook continue to dog the social media giant. The creation of the board was meant to allow a group of outside experts to weigh in on controversial cases and make policy recommendations to Facebook that will govern its 2.5 billion users. Its first decisions, which were handed down in January, involved topics including Russian hate speech directed at Azerbaijanis, COVID-19 misinformation and whether using a quote from Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels automatically signals support for Nazis. (It did not, the board ruled.)

The average Facebook user likely hasn't heard about the Oversight Board or read its wonky case decisions. If they know anything about it, it's probably this: The biggest decision currently facing the 19-member body is whether to maintain Facebook's current ban on former President Donald Trump, who has been barred from the platform since the attempted insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6. Twitter banned the former president for good, so Facebook would immediately become the largest social media platform available to him if he is allowed to return.

The Oversight Board's decision is expected in the next few weeks, though the board's communications team made clear to both Palmor and Jewish Insider that she could not speak about Trump on the record. (On her call with JI, she briefly walked into the other room to get the framed photo of her mother and aunt as children during the Holocaust. Before she revealed the image, she joked, "It's not a picture of Donald Trump. I promised you I will not mention him.")

The former president aside, Palmor argues that everyone who uses the platform

has a vested interest in the board: "If you care about Facebook," Palmor argued, "you have to care about the Oversight Board, because I think that the Oversight Board is an honest experiment in trying to improve the platform. I think that the platform is like a baby, who grew up all of a sudden, and somebody has to educate it or somebody has to restrain it in certain ways."

The board is not intended to serve as an all-encompassing content moderator; its members only review a handful of cases. Its decisions are meant to offer guidance to Facebook in its future handling of similar posts, akin to how Supreme Court rulings serve as legal precedent — although there is no requirement that Facebook do what the Oversight Board suggests.

The board's members, comprising lawyers, journalists, academics and human rights activists representing 17 countries, face the unique challenge of building a legal institution from scratch. "Part of what attracted me to the board was the opportunity to create a legal institution," Palmor said, referring to the group as a "regulatory startup... It's very risky. It has a lot of chances to fail. But if it will work, it will be an amazing thing," she said.

Palmor was also intrigued by the global reach of the board: "Israel has 9 million people, and the Oversight Board could influence 2.5 billion users. So it's really a great honor. It's a great responsibility. And for me, it's also an opportunity to serve the citizens of the world. This is how I see it. I saw myself as a civil servant, so now I'm a civil servant of the world," she told JI.

With members coming from countries as diverse as Indonesia, Yemen, Cameroon and Hungary, cultural challenges are bound to emerge, particularly on such thorny issues

as freedom of expression. No one has said anything critical of Israel to Palmor, but she knows how Israel is perceived in many parts of the world. “Unfortunately, it used to be more popular to be Israeli in the past. Israeli politics are not, how should I say it, as acceptable as they used to be,” Palmor said. Members of Israel’s civil service “are really professional civil servants, and I feel uncomfortable with the fact that people might identify me with political figures, which is very common.” Her hope, she said, is “to feel comfortable to be myself and not to feel that I have to prove something.”

Since her appointment to the board last May, Palmor has found herself facing personal attacks from both the left and the right. When she was appointed to the body, several left-wing pro-Palestinian groups accused Palmor of censoring Palestinians in her tenure at the Justice Ministry, a claim she denies. “It’s a complete lie,” she told JI. The claims refer to the Israeli Cyber Unit, which can request that Facebook remove content that incites violence or expresses support for terrorism. “Whoever knows the Israeli judicial system knows that a director-general at the Ministry of Justice cannot interfere with the work of the prosecution, and the prosecution is the one who established the Cyber Unit,” she explained.

At the same time, Yair Netanyahu — the son of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and a conservative provocateur — has been “tweeting against me from the right wing, that I’m a representative of the Deep State and America, beware, because this is the new police of thought,” she observed. “If he is against me, and they’re against me, something is wrong with the picture, and the truth lies somewhere else completely.”

Palmor served as a civil servant for 24 years at Israel’s Justice Ministry under an ideological range of prime ministers. She worked as a prosecutor before running the Department of Pardons, and her

time in public service culminated as the ministry’s director-general, its top non-political post. Throughout her career, she sought to increase diversity in the ranks of Israel’s civil service, aiming to recruit more Arabs, women, ultra-Orthodox Jews and Ethiopian-Israelis. She is best known for what has been called the “Palmor Report,” a detailed report published by the Justice Ministry in 2016 that acknowledged that Israel had perpetuated systemic racism against Ethiopian-born Jews.

“The Netanyahu government in 2016 recognized institutional racism against this group, which is a huge achievement. I don’t know many democratic governments who would be willing to admit that there is institutional discrimination and institutional racism within them,” Palmor noted.

She hopes to bring her experience fighting racism to the Oversight Board, in addition to “my perspective as a Jew on issues of antisemitism or on issues of genocide,” she said. She and her brother — the spokesperson for the Jewish Agency — learned about the Holocaust from their parents, who lived through it as children. (Her name, Emi, is an amalgamation of the names of two family members who were killed in the Holocaust.) With her parents, Palmor talked about the moral lessons of the Holocaust — protecting minorities — and, sometimes, the practical ones. “My brother was this intellectual child, he knew how to read since he was 3, and everywhere we went, he had a book, and he read his books,” Palmor said, “and I would climb trees and jump into the ice water.” She noted that her mother often says, “[Emi] will survive. When the next Holocaust comes, I trust her.” Or, as Palmor puts it: “[My mother] prepared me to survive alone in the forest.”

“This is where all my activity about racism and minorities comes from,” Palmor explained. “I feel that my responsibility

as a Jew in Israel is to be different, to be a country where minorities can feel as equal as possible, as protected as possible, as not discriminated [against] as possible, whether it is a non-Jewish minority, or whether it is a Jewish minority of other color or other social status.”

The first question Israelis usually ask Palmor about the board is whether she has met Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg. “The answer is definitely not, and not planning to. We are an independent board,” she explained. “I really, really don’t take into consideration what it means, not for Mark Zuckerberg, not for Facebook.” The board is technically funded by Facebook, which put \$130 million into a blind trust to be managed by the body’s full-time staff. The New Yorker reported that board members earn six-figure salaries for 15 hours of work a week.

As a career civil servant, independence is crucial to Palmor. “I’m involved in so many other projects in order to make sure that I will never be dependent on this work with the Oversight Board,” she noted. “I am always ready to leave the board.”

Still, she believes in the group’s work, and thinks it has the capacity to make a difference at Facebook — if it has public buy-in. “The more the public will be the one to demand Facebook and expect Facebook to implement our recommendations, the more respected we will be as an institution, the more honest and transparent we will be in our decision-making, the more you will support our decisions and expect Facebook to implement them,” she explained.

Two-and-a-half billion people around the world use Facebook, “and many of them are frustrated with the platform. And soon enough, they will be frustrated with us,” she said. “I’m not naive.” ♦

# The women behind Avid Ventures, the VC fund looking for the next Israeli ‘unicorn’

*Addie Lerner and Tali Vogelstein raised \$72 million in their first round of funding, one of the largest sums for a first-time fund — woman-led or otherwise*

By Gabby Deutch

In February, Avid Ventures officially launched after bringing in a haul of \$72 million. To the fund’s founders, that number meant more than just an attention-grabbing sum they could use to launch their new venture capital fund.

“We love that it’s four times chai,” said Addie Lerner, the firm’s founder and managing partner, referring to the number 18, associated with the Hebrew word chai, which means “life.” The number’s significance extends beyond Judaism: “\$72 million is actually one of the largest [amounts to be raised by a] first-time fund, especially by female leaders,” Lerner explained.

Founding investors Lerner, 31, and Tali Vogelstein, 25, make up Avid’s two-person team. As a new fund, Avid is looking for a way to gain a strategic advantage in a crowded field of VC firms. And when investing in companies’ early Series A and Series B rounds, venture firms get competitive: “It leads to a lot of sharp elbows, and it leads to investors trying to get what’s best for their firm, and not necessarily what’s best for the founder and their company,” Lerner told Jewish Insider. Her goal is for Avid to become indispensable to company founders.

Avid’s proposition is simple: “Let’s write smaller checks into these large rounds, where we’re going to be disproportionately helpful,” said Lerner. In other words: Don’t try to compete with the bigger firms investing several million dollars, but rather make a smaller investment between \$500,000 and \$1 million, while cultivating an advisory role as “a strategic finance advisor or strategic outsourced chief financial officer.” Avid wants startup founders to learn to rely on Lerner and Vogelstein after the Series A

round, and then they’ll come back and write a much larger check in Series B, the next round of funding.

Both women grew up involved in their local Jewish communities: Newton, Mass., for Lerner, and Baltimore for Vogelstein, though both now live in New York.

“I grew up in a Reform Jewish family, where Israel was actually always part of the conversation,” Lerner recalled. As an undergraduate at Princeton, she studied Middle East policy and Arabic. “I thought I was going to go work at the State Department and solve Middle East peace, and then quickly got disillusioned with that career path. So I did a full 180 and I went to go work at Goldman Sachs after school.” She then worked at the investment firm General Atlantic and the venture firm General Catalyst, before deciding to start a firm of her own.

For a year, Avid was Lerner’s one-woman show, and she brought in the firm’s anchor investors before the COVID-19 pandemic began. Vogelstein, who graduated from the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania and then worked at Bessemer Venture Partners, joined Avid in August after a mutual friend put her in touch with Lerner. “I was just so impressed with [Lerner] and her strategy and vision for Avid, and I loved the thesis that she was building Avid around, which is that investing in a founder startup is really a privilege that should be earned,” Vogelstein said.

A connection to Israel is a key part of both partners’ identities, and Israel will be one of several countries in which they plan to invest. Vogelstein spent a year there before college, and Lerner has been to Israel on more than a dozen business trips.

“Israel has a very near and dear place in both of our hearts, and we also think we can get some really incredible returns by investing in Israeli companies,” said Vogelstein. She added that she spent a summer interning in Israel through the program Birthright Excel, which she believes has contributed to Israel’s startup culture — as has the Israeli Defense Forces: “We think the IDF certainly contributes to the mindset where founders are not afraid of failure.”

Vogelstein noted that some investors worry that Israeli companies don’t have the capacity to become a “unicorn,” a rare company that achieves a \$1 billion valuation, due to the limited size of the Israeli market. But this isn’t a concern for Avid, which looks for Israeli companies that have a global focus. “More and more, Israeli companies are built either entirely in Israel, but more frequently, internationally, like Rapyd,” Lerner added, referring to an alternative payments company in which Avid has invested. Rapyd, which was recently valued at \$2.5 billion, was founded in Tel Aviv but now has offices in San Francisco, Singapore and London.

As Jewish investors with an interest in Israel, Lerner and Vogelstein say people often make the assumption that Israel is their only focus. “Folks have had a bit of a misconception, like, ‘Oh, so you’re investing only in Israeli companies?’ No, we’re two Jewish women who have done a lot in Israel, and we hopefully will invest in someone in Israel, but it’s not all we do,” Lerner explained.

Still, even in the U.S., the Jewish community has been central to the firm’s launch. One of Avid’s anchor investors is Schusterman Family Investments, the



investment arm of the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies. “They’ve been just really fabulous partners to work with,” Lerner said, but noted that she couldn’t say much more because Schusterman, which is more widely known for its philanthropic giving than its investment arm, does not “disclose a lot about their investment activities.”

Avid has already made a number of early investments in startups — mostly in the fintech, or financial technology, sector — including Alloy, an identity management platform for financial institutions; Nova Credit, which is building a global credit bureau; and the women’s co-working space The Wing.

“We actually built Avid out of The Wing,” Lerner said, although the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered The Wing’s office spaces. The investment was centered around a digital platform The Wing was building out, to connect members around the world for mentorship opportunities and online events. The pandemic, as well as internal controversies, led to the co-working company taking a major financial hit. Although Lerner and Vogelstein celebrate the firm’s identity as woman-led, they aren’t

interested in exclusively backing woman-led companies — The Wing was just one piece of their portfolio.

Still, Lerner and Vogelstein have heard from people who assume that, as women, they invest only in women. “We’re a woman-led firm that is investing in really awesome founders and companies, and the fact that we’re woman-led is cool but unrelated,” she explained. “Occasionally, we’ll get in front of someone, and they’ll be like, ‘Oh, so you only invest in women, right?’ No, we are women, we don’t only invest in women.”

Some of the early news coverage Avid received in tech and finance publications centered on the extreme rarity of a woman-only venture firm. “As of 2019, the majority of venture firms — 65% — still did not have a single female partner or [general partner] at their firm, according to All Raise. So naturally, anytime we hear of a new female-led fund, our ears perk up,” TechCrunch wrote last month in an article about Avid. (All Raise is a nonprofit that seeks to help women succeed in VC; Lerner has been active in the organization’s New York chapter.)

“I’m pretty used to being the only woman in the room,” Lerner told JI. She was the only

woman on her teams at both Goldman Sachs and General Atlantic, but she believes those companies want to improve: “Diversity continues to be a big focus for those firms, and I’m glad to see diversity — and not just gender diversity, but diversity of all kinds — really evolve at those firms,” Lerner said. She added that in the early-stage venture capital world, she is seeing more women than she used to.

Diversity, broadly defined, is a value that Avid considers when making investments, and it’s something that the firm touts in its marketing. “We are really proud that 40% of the 50 individual [limited partners] who invested in Avid are women,” Lerner said, and having women involved at all stages of the investment process “creates a virtuous cycle.” But ultimately, the firm invests in companies it views as promising, independent of who runs them: “Our strong belief,” Lerner explained, “is that this can and should happen in a more organic way, versus any sort of intentional focus or quotas.” ♦

# Meet the ‘greatest hits of Jewish thought’ — the Haggadah

*In his new book, ‘The Telling,’ Mark Gerson explores the Haggadah, which he believes is the ‘best book ever written word for word’*

By Sam Zieve Cohen

Fifteen years ago, Mark Gerson, the co-founder and chairman of United Hatzalah and African Mission Healthcare, was invited by a friend for the unexpected combination of a cigar and Haggadah study session. Apprehensive to believe the Passover manual required more of his attention, Gerson agreed to join what seemed more an excuse for a cigar than an illuminating discussion.

To his surprise, the evening jumpstarted an obsession with the Haggadah. “It is nothing less than the greatest hits of Jewish thought,” Gerson told Jewish Insider in a recent interview wedged between virtual book tour appearances for his latest title, *The Telling: How Judaism’s Essential Book Reveals the Meaning of Life*.

The interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

**Jewish Insider:** *Passover is probably the most popular holiday in Judaism, why is that? Is it for the same reasons the Haggadah is the “greatest hits of Jewish thought”?*

**Mark Gerson:** I don’t know because I don’t think most people recognize the Haggadah as the greatest hits of Jewish thought. If people go through it quickly and basically treat it like a dinner program — literally, the book you get to before you can get to the meal — we’re not going to see this ‘greatest hits of Jewish thought,’ and we’re not going to get very much out of it. Just the fact that it is completely loaded with Jewish wisdom, perfectly oriented, to help us live happier, better and more meaningful lives in the year to come — it’s the best book ever written word for word, but if you treat it like a dinner program we’re not going to see it that way. Alternatively, if we think that the obligation of the Seder is to get through the entire

Haggadah, we’re going to have a similarly bad experience, because we’re not going to be able to really stop and contemplate the existential lessons and the life-altering meanings that come out of basically every passage.

**Jl:** *Why do you think it’s so significant that the Haggadah and the Seder are so full of questions?*

**Gerson:** That’s such a deep and fundamental question, and it gets to the essence of Judaism. The fundamental characteristic that all children share all over the world and all throughout history is curiosity, and every parent knows that when a child is two or three years old what that child will say about 20 to 25 times an hour... And so Moses — he’s a genius psychologist — identified the curiosity of children. He heard those 20 to 25 ‘whys,’ and he said, “That is what I will build the future of the Jewish people on, on the questioning of their children.” These are all basing education on the question. The idea of using education at all as a means for perpetuation is totally radical. Because if one generation takes it off, the whole previous chain is broken... So it’s paradoxically on the basis of questioning, which leads to unpredictable answers and unexpected responses that we’ve built the future of the Jewish people, and that’s the focal point of the Seder night.

**Jl:** *Does that make Judaism more liberal than most religions?*

**Gerson:** I think just the fact that we have no word for obedience is kind of astonishing. I mean you know other cultures and traditions command obedience, we don’t have a word for it. Even in the Bible, what’s

our great tradition related to obedience, for which we have no word? It’s arguing with God. It’s Abraham arguing with God at Sodom and Gomorrah. It’s Moses arguing with God after the golden calf. It’s the daughters of Zelophehad arguing with Moses, and ultimately with God. So, yeah, we love questioning and Moses invented the idea of perpetuating a tradition through questioning, and it’s done very well.

**Jl:** *What do you think is the most important question in the Seder?*

**Gerson:** I think they’re all important. The Haggadah, because it asks and answers all the great questions in life, it addresses each of us at any stage we’re at. Whatever anyone’s thinking about, aspiring towards or going through, the Haggadah is there to help in different passages. So it’ll be different for each person in each year.

**Jl:** *One of the passages you look closely at is perhaps the most perplexing and problematic of the whole Haggadah — the Wicked Son. What did end up finding so redeemable in that passage?*

**Gerson:** It’s a very interesting response because the phrase blunt your teeth, a lot of people think it means punch him in the face. I don’t know if people thought that in ancient times, but certainly now when we hear blunted teeth, we think punch him in the face but then we realized that same expression comes from Ezekiel and Jeremiah. So where was that used? Well, it was used twice, neither of which had anything to do with punching anybody in the face. It was that the father who ate sour grapes and his son’s teeth were blunted. [Ezekiel 18:12 and Jeremiah 31:29] It’s

clearly an expression of the father accepting the blame. This is why it's good to really consider this when one has small children, because then you could think, what might I be doing that will lead to a wayward child when the child is 15 or 16, and then not do it.

**Jl:** *After a full year of the COVID pandemic, what new understanding do you bring to the Seder?*

**Gerson:** Exodus 12 has this very strange but deeply instructive passage which says that there can be no leftovers at the Seder meal. Why are leftovers un-kosher for Passover? You can have leftovers any other time, but not after a Seder meal. It explains that if one household is too small to consume a lamb by itself, it must invite another household. Now we know from Josephus and modern science that it took approximately 15-20 to consume a lamb, meaning every household is too small to consume a lamb. So we begin this fundamental night of Jewish peoplehood — the great new year of the Jewish people — in the act of giving and sharing the spirit of hospitality. And that's why we set big Seders, because it tells us to in the Bible. We couldn't do that last year, and we really can't do that this year.

**Jl:** *You write about how the Egyptians don't seem to learn from the plagues. After letting the Israelites go, Pharaoh decides "Actually, we're going to go after them," and of course we know what happens then. How do you see that as a warning to us now?*

**Gerson:** Everything in the Haggadah exists to teach us a lesson to be implemented today... and if we don't see it in the passage, we've just got to keep interpreting. The purpose of the plagues was obviously not just to free the Jews, because if God wanted to free the Jews, as my daughter said when she was five years old, well, why don't you just use a magic carpet or a big waterslide which starts in Egypt and ends in the Promised Land? (I would pick the waterslide.) But that wasn't his purpose, that was one of his purposes, but his purpose was to educate the world that he is the one true God and that people should turn towards ethical monotheism. That's the purpose. He wants to win an argument.

**Jl:** *Any special plans for this year's Seder? Anything new or different?*

**Gerson:** Well the difference is it's the second year of just family, and, God-willing, it looks like the last year of just family. Normally we have 50 people or so — Jews, gentiles, people who have never been to a Seder before. It's often a gentile at the Seder who is coming with such newness, freshness and appreciation who are the ones who most enhance and enrich the evening.

**Jl:** *Who are the Seder guests past or present you would most like to invite?*

**Gerson:** No one's ever asked that. Number one is Martin Luther King Jr., because he was living the Exodus story. Exodus is

the great freedom story for the world and he was magnificently applying it to the struggles of his day... You know who else I'd like to have? I don't even know who this person is, but in the Capitol there is a relief of 23 lawmakers with 11 facing one way, 11 facing the other, and Moses in the middle. I want to know who designed that, because the greatest Seder of them all is American history. I would say Harriet Tubman, who was nicknamed Grandma Moses. This story massively inspired her as well. It's the quintessentially Jewish event with quintessentially universal implications and applications so I would want to have Maimonides — the quintessential rationalist whose approach I so deeply admire. I'd love to have some of the early rabbis. I talked in the book about how the early rabbis all had professions. If they weren't working hard enough at their profession, whether it was a shoemaker or a carpenter or whatever it was, they were criticized by saying people say that you're not going to be a great rabbi unless you work hard at your profession. I'd love to have that discipline. ♦