

THE WEEKLY PRINT

After 100 days, Jewish leaders weigh in on Biden's domestic policy; Biden's recognition of the Armenian genocide welcomed by many in the Jewish community; Peeling back the 'Layers' of Jewish women; and Meet the CoronaCrush couples who got engaged in quarantine.

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After 100 days, Jewish leaders weigh in on Biden's domestic policy

Insiders and experts talk to JI about where things stand on antisemitism, Jewish outreach, pandemic relief and more

By Gabby Deutch

As President Joe Biden reaches his 100th day in office tomorrow, the president is touting his administration's achievements on vaccinations and the passage of a massive stimulus package.

While the White House is largely focused on the pandemic, the first 100 days also offer insight into how the administration will approach key issues of interest to the American Jewish community. A clearer picture is emerging of how Biden plans to address antisemitism and domestic extremism, and how the White House is engaging with Jewish organizations and other faith-based groups.

So how is Biden doing? *Jewish Insider* checked in with community leaders across the ideological spectrum to see where they think the president is doing well, and where there is room for improvement.

"The Biden administration is taking a go-slow approach to many things of strong interest and concern for American Jews," said James Loeffler, director of Jewish studies at the University of Virginia. "I think that that has frustrated Jewish progressives who want bigger, faster change. I think it's

also frustrated conservatives, who expected to see more telltale signs of radical change and were looking for ways to differentiate and say, 'Oh, the Biden administration doesn't take antisemitism seriously, or it doesn't take Israel seriously.' Centrist liberals are kind of calmed and content."

Parts of the American Rescue Plan — Biden's COVID-19 relief bill — received widespread praise throughout the Jewish nonprofit world. Jewish social service agencies lobbied for certain components of the legislation, such as the expanded Paycheck Protection Program, and additional aid for parochial schools, including Jewish day schools.

"It's very significant that we were able to expand eligibility for PPP loans. We also got the second round of a historic \$2.75 billion for a total of \$5.5 billion of aid to nonpublic K-12 schools, including Jewish day schools, to deal with their COVID costs," said Nathan Diament, executive director of the Orthodox Union Advocacy Center. "Other components of the Rescue Plan, whether it's the child tax credit, or various other pieces, are also going to significantly help people in the Jewish community that

are struggling economically." Halie Soifer, CEO of the Jewish Democratic Council of America, argued that the more than 200 million vaccine doses administered in Biden's first 100 days are good news for the Jewish community: "Not only does [vaccination] help save lives and livelihoods, but it also allows us all to get back to our life and return to camp this summer, which for Jewish parents like myself is a priority," Soifer explained.

Despite polling that showed strong bipartisan support for the legislation, it did not receive any support from congressional Republicans. "The American Rescue Plan IS a bipartisan plan — one that unifies this country," Biden chief of staff Ron Klain tweeted in February, with a link to a poll showing a majority of Americans supported the proposal.

Not everyone buys it.

"If you're going to unite the country, you've got to figure out how to do it. The first bill that passed through Congress of any note since he became president was this relief package. The prior relief packages have bipartisan support. This one didn't," said Richard Sandler, executive vice president

of the Milken Family Foundation and a self-described centrist who has donated to both Democrats and Republicans. “It would seem to me that every effort should have been made, even if concessions had to be made, to have bipartisan support.”

Biden’s “idea of bipartisanship is not having a meaningful dialogue and a negotiation and working together to come to a common goal,” said Republican Jewish Coalition executive director Matt Brooks. “They’re not really interested in collaboration with the Republicans. They’re interested in capitulation with the Republicans.” Brooks also expressed concern about “the incredible runaway spending and printing money that the administration is doing under the guise of COVID relief and infrastructure.”

Some Democrats have argued that bipartisanship is not an option in the wake of the January 6 insurrection at the Capitol and the many Republican members of Congress who voted to challenge the results of the presidential election.

“I view that as being derelict in your responsibilities as a representative, as a leader,” said Sandler. “If you don’t like what they did on a certain day, what they said, that doesn’t mean you don’t make an effort to work with them. You might not be able to work with them. Then you could make that decision after that.”

Biden took office on the heels of the January 6 attempted insurrection, at an unprecedented inauguration ceremony with just a few hundred spectators due to both the pandemic and the lingering threat of violence. “The shadow that was cast over these first 100 days was the assault on the Capitol. And as Jews, as we think about the first 100 days, the assault on the Capitol was white supremacy rearing its head in a very ugly, antisemitic, and anti-Black racist way,” said Jonah Pesner, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas and Attorney General Merrick Garland — both of whom mentioned their Jewish heritage in their confirmation hearings — have pledged to focus on domestic extremism, particularly in the wake of the events of January 6. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has ordered a review of domestic extremism in the military, while Mayorkas recently

announced a similar probe of staff at the Department of Homeland Security.

Rooting out domestic extremists, many of whom also harbor antisemitic sentiments, has long been a priority for the Anti-Defamation League, which in January wrote to the chair and ranking member of the Senate Homeland Security Committee that “confirming an extremely qualified secretary of Homeland Security is especially crucial in the wake of the domestic terrorist threat that has rocked our nation in recent years, including the deadly insurrection at the U.S. Capitol earlier this month.”

The Orthodox Union wrote to those senators praising Mayorkas, and Diament told JI that the OU has remained in contact with the administration on the issue. “We’ve been having a lot of discussions with the relevant offices about antisemitism in particular and domestic extremist violence in general,” he said. “Obviously, this administration is looking to combat domestic violent extremism in a very aggressive way.”

Biden is still naming appointees to prominent roles, though the White House has been notably slow in picking ambassadors. The Washington Post reported this week on an internal document that appears to name Biden’s first slate of political ambassador appointments, which are still unofficial and are coming at a later stage than in previous administrations. Former Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump both began naming their ambassador picks before their inaugurations.

“An administration faces an enormous number of problems. The president can’t handle them all himself, nor can the secretary state or the national security advisor,” said Elliott Abrams, who served as special envoy on Venezuela and Iran under Trump and deputy national security advisor under former President George W. Bush. “This administration has been extremely slow, I think, by historical standards, in getting its people in place. That’s a mistake.”

Two of Biden’s early picks, Colin Kahl for under secretary of defense for policy and Kristen Clarke for assistant attorney general for the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department, have been criticized for past comments and actions regarding Israel, Iran and the Jewish community.

Republican senators opposed Kahl’s nomination in part over his position on Iran and work on the nuclear deal during the Obama administration. During Senate debate before a vote on Kahl’s nomination, Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) said: “I have come to believe Colin Kahl’s judgment is irreparably marred by obsessive animosity towards Israel.” The Zionist Organization of America and Christians United for Israel urged senators to oppose Kahl’s nomination. He was confirmed this week in a party-line vote.

Clarke, who has yet to be confirmed by the Senate, apologized after facing condemnation for inviting an antisemitic speaker to Harvard when she was a student in 1994. “She is a friend of the Jewish community,” said Pesner, whose organization was one of a number of liberal Jewish groups that came to Clarke’s defense. “She has a long track record of fighting for religious freedom, including specifically Jewish religious freedom — the right to observe Shabbat, or the right to be free of white supremacy and the violent antisemitic form of white supremacy.”

The White House has not yet nominated an antisemitism envoy, an appointment that is expected after Biden begins naming ambassadors. Jarrod Bernstein, who served as director of Jewish outreach in the Obama administration and is a co-host of *Jewish Insider’s* Limited Liability Podcast, suggested that appointing a visibly Orthodox Jew as antisemitism envoy could send an important signal. “A lot of antisemitism these days tends to be focused at Jews who are visibly Jewish, usually yarmulke-wearing Jews,” Bernstein noted. “It would send a strong statement to that community and other communities that it’s okay to be visibly Jewish, and that antisemitism against that community won’t be tolerated.”

One of the administration’s early moves on antisemitism was affirming its support for the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism. In a letter sent to the American Zionist Movement last month, Secretary of State Tony Blinken wrote that the Biden administration “enthusiastically embraces” the IHRA definition, and the administration is “eager to work with allies and partners to counter Holocaust

distortion and combat anti-Semitism and other forms of intolerance abroad while we strengthen our efforts at home.”

“I think antisemitism is something that affects all of us. It has certainly raised its ugly head here in the last several years,” Sandler noted. “I’m very confident that the president and his administration will not tolerate that.”

Loeffler said Biden is making the right choice in not upending previous administrations’ positions on antisemitism. “I think that the Biden administration has correctly realized that antisemitism has the potential to become a terrific wedge issue for American Jews,” Loeffler noted. “This is a significant issue that conservatives and many liberals in the Jewish sphere are really, really focused on. I think it’s ripening as an issue. And the ‘go-slow’ approach by

the administration helps them not to avoid obvious missteps as they try and figure out how to handle it.”

The White House has also not yet announced whether it will appoint someone for the role of liaison to the Jewish community. Bernstein noted that for now, some current administration officials are solid liaisons themselves. “Tony Blinken being at every AIPAC and ADL event for the last 20 years as a staffer, national security advisor to the vice president and civilian — he knows this community really [well],” Bernstein explained. “It’s also very important not to understate how important having Ron Klain as chief of staff is. Ron is a member of this community.”

One new initiative, taken from the Obama years, is the creation of an Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood

Partnerships. “The White House is doing a very, very good job and a very, very proactive job in engaging with faith communities — not only the Jewish community, but faith communities across the board, and the nonprofit charitable sector across the board,” said Diamant.

Now, as Biden turns to the next phase of his administration and looks to pass marquee legislation including a trillion-dollar infrastructure bill, Brooks says Republicans won’t let him ram through bills that lack Republican support.

“Thankfully, we have Democratic senators like Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema who understand the value and the need for the continuity of institutions like the filibuster in the Senate, not to have a tyranny of the majority, which is what the Democrats want,” Brooks added. ♦

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Biden’s recognition of the Armenian genocide welcomed by many in the Jewish community

For decades, Jewish groups outside of California largely avoided weighing in, with Turkey urging Israel and its supporters to stay out of the debate

By Gabby Deutch

On Saturday, in a statement marking the mass murder of Armenian Christians in Ottoman Turkey, President Joe Biden became the first U.S. president to refer to the atrocity as a “genocide,” a symbolic move that nevertheless marks a major shift in U.S. policy. The move was lauded by portions of the Jewish community.

More than a century after the Ottomans murdered between 650,000 and 1.2 million Armenian Christians, the question of whether to use the word “genocide” to describe the atrocity has morphed into a global geopolitical controversy, with Turkey exerting its muscle to urge countries like

the U.S. and Israel to avoid using the term. Biden’s declaration marked the end of a years-long effort by activists to push the federal government to use the word.

The push for congressional recognition of the Armenian genocide, which culminated in a near-unanimous 2019 resolution recognizing the genocide, was led by Rep. Adam Schiff (D-CA), a Jewish member of Congress whose L.A.-area district includes a sizable Armenian population. “The word ‘genocide’ is significant because genocide is not a problem of the past — it is a problem of today,” Schiff told *Jewish Insider*. “By speaking the truth about this horrific period of history, refusing to be silent, and calling it a genocide, we can ensure that the United

States is never again complicit.”

The announcement was met with resounding praise from a number of Republicans as well — conservative commentator Ben Shapiro credited Biden and called the move “long overdue.”

Turkey has long claimed that both Armenians and Turks were killed at the time as part of the devastation of World War I, rather than any concerted ethnic cleansing by the Ottomans.

The issue remains a source of controversy. Although Turkey and Israel no longer enjoy particularly close relations, for many years Turkey was Israel’s closest Muslim ally, leading the Jewish state to refrain from referring to the massacre as

genocide. A statement Israel's Foreign Ministry released on Saturday mentioned the "terrible suffering and tragedy of the Armenian people" without using the term genocide.

In 2007, the Anti-Defamation League urged members of Congress to vote against a resolution recognizing the genocide. (Similar legislation passed for the first time in 2019.) Abe Foxman, the longtime former national director of the ADL, said at the time that "Israel's relationship with Turkey is the second most important, after its relationship with the United States. All this in a world that isolates Israel, and all this can't simply be waved away." Seven years later, in 2014, Foxman updated his position and referred to the massacre as genocide in a speech. By that point, Israel's relationship with Turkey soured, after the Israeli military raided a Turkish flotilla that intended to break Israel's blockade of Gaza.

More recently, as Armenia and Azerbaijan have clashed over the territory Nagorno-Karabakh, Turkey has come to the defense of Azerbaijan, a fellow Muslim nation. The Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced it was backing Turkey following Biden's declaration. Israel and Azerbaijan have cooperated in recent years, and Armenia recalled its ambassador from Tel Aviv after Israel went through with an arms sale to Azerbaijan in October 2020.

Some Jewish organizations lauded Biden's declaration. "We believe that remembrance of any genocide is imperative to preventing future tragedies, and that process begins with recognition," Jonathan Greenblatt, the current CEO of the ADL, told JI.

"Bravo to President Biden for being the first American leader to stand up to Turkey and say what was needed," David Harris, CEO of the American Jewish Committee, told JI. "AJC cannot sit idly by and allow that outrageous denial to take root. And next, by the way, it could be about the Holocaust."

Mark Weitzman, the director of government affairs at the Simon Wiesenthal Center, was one of 126 prominent Holocaust scholars who signed a statement two decades ago calling for official recognition of the genocide. He told JI, "President Biden's statement not only affirms historical truth but represents a moral commitment to the

repudiation of political support for genocide denial. It honors the memory of the victims by not distorting their fate and allows for the honest assessment of responsibility."

JI did not receive responses from the Jewish Federations of North America and the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, two prominent national Jewish organizations, seeking comment on whether they now support such a declaration.

In California, home to the country's largest Armenian population, local Jewish organizations were some of the first Jewish groups in the nation to publicly refer to the massacre in Armenia as a genocide.

"Nearly all nations have been victimized during the course of history. Yet being singled out for genocide is a horror that, fortunately, has been visited upon very few peoples," Ephraim Margolin, then the chairman of the San Francisco Jewish Community Relations Council, wrote in a 1990 letter to the Armenian bishop in San Francisco. "We applaud the efforts of the Armenian community to educate those in this country about 'the forgotten genocide.' Please convey to the leaders of the Armenian community our most sincere support for this measure."

Speaking to JI the day before Biden's announcement, Richard Hirschhaut, director of the AJC's Los Angeles office, said that "if President Biden indeed invokes the term genocide in his remarks on Saturday, that step surely will be met by a chorus of relief, exaltation, tears of joy and an affirmation of the fundamental goodness of America as a beacon of hope to the world."

"The relationship between the Armenian and Jewish communities in Los Angeles is strong [and] vibrant," said Hirschhaut. "We worked very closely together, just especially in the last two years with the introduction of a model ethnic studies curriculum in California, and its initial exclusion of the Jewish experience [and] the Armenian experience among other ethnic and minority groups."

Hirschhaut was referring to a years-long effort by activist groups in California to provide ethnic studies resources to the state's education system. A coalition of Jewish organizations in the state worked to amend the curriculum after earlier drafts

included material that was deemed by some to be antisemitic, while largely leaving out the experiences of Jewish Americans as well as an explanation of antisemitism. Armenians and some other ethnic minorities were also excluded from core sections of the curriculum.

Information about the state's Armenian and Jewish communities was included in the final version of the curriculum. (The final version of the ethnic studies curriculum does refer to both the mass killing of Armenians and the Holocaust as "genocide.")

"Certainly, the shared experience of genocide and trauma that our communities have been through is a point for people to bond around," California Assemblymember Jesse Gabriel, a Democrat who represents the San Fernando Valley, told JI. Gabriel, who serves as majority whip and chair of the California Legislative Jewish Caucus, said Biden's announcement "will be warmly applauded by a lot of folks in the Jewish community in Los Angeles."

When Armenians in California protested Azerbaijan's actions in Nagorno-Karabakh last year, members of the Jewish community came out in support. "When Azerbaijan was bombing [the region] and Turkey was supplying military weapons and artillery, Jewish World Watch took the lead and reached out to a number of Jewish elected officials and leaders" to get them to rally in support of Armenia, said Serena Oberstein, executive director of the Los Angeles-based anti-genocide organization.

Historians have long declared that what occurred in Armenia between 1915 and 1916 was, in fact, a genocide. The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum writes that the mass murder of Armenians by the Ottomans "aimed to solidify Muslim Turkish dominance in the regions of central and eastern Anatolia by eliminating the sizeable Armenian presence there."

"The Armenian genocide has been too long denied, diminished in importance or politicized," Deborah Lipstadt, the Dorot professor of modern Jewish history and Holocaust studies at Emory University, told JI. "This is a step in rectifying that. It comes too late for those who experienced this horror, but it will be a bit of a balm to their children, grandchildren and other descendants."

Historians acknowledge that the Armenian genocide served as a frame of reference for Raphael Lemkin, the Polish lawyer who coined the term genocide in the mid-1940s as a Jewish refugee living in Washington, D.C. He used the term in a book about the Nazis, but his definition was broad, referring to the “destruction of a nation or of an ethnic group.” Lemkin

stated on many occasions that learning about the Ottoman Empire’s persecution of Armenians from 1915 to 1916 influenced his thinking on the topic.

“Historians have long recognized the atrocities against Armenians of 1915-1916 as a genocide, as did Raphael Lemkin,” said Jeffrey Veidlinger, the Joseph Brodsky collegiate professor of history and Judaic

studies at the University of Michigan. “From a Jewish perspective, it provides a frame of reference for the Holocaust. We can better understand the Holocaust and the pogroms that preceded it when we contextualize them within the wider patterns of ethnic bloodshed that occurred as old empires collapsed and new nation-states emerged in their place.” ♦

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Peeling back the ‘Layers’ of Jewish women

In a new book, photographer Shira Lankin Sheps works to break the stigmas that lead many women to stay silent about their struggles

By Amy Spiro

Malka refused to let cerebral palsy limit her life ambitions. Shira battled bulimia and metastatic cancer to finally reach a place of self-acceptance. Aviva is working to break the stigma of bipolar disorder. Lucie struggled to find a support system after converting from Catholicism to Judaism in France. Zehava never felt like she fit in anywhere until she settled in Israel with her interracial Chabad family.

For four years, Shira Lankin Sheps, 33, has been telling the stories of Jewish women and their unique struggles and challenges via social media, through The Layers Project. Now, in a new book from Koren Publishers, titled *Layers: Personal Narratives of Struggle, Resilience, and Growth from Jewish Women*, Lankin Sheps spotlights 34 women from around the globe and tells their own unique, deeply personal and oftentimes painful stories. The book arrived on shelves in North America earlier this month, and will be released in Israel in the coming weeks.

“I think as women, there are just such unrealistic expectations that society places on us and such unrealistic expectations that we place

on ourselves,” Lankin Sheps told *Jewish Insider* during a recent interview at a cafe in north Jerusalem. Jewish women in particular, and observant Jewish women even more so, often feel an extra burden to be the perfect wife, mother, career woman, chef, chauffeur and everything in between, she said. And if any one of those layers shift out of place, it can upend your sense of self.

“Anything that prohibits you, or is a barrier to being all the things that are expected of you, or that you’ve been acculturated or raised to expect of yourself, is incredibly painful and can be shameful,” Lankin Sheps suggested.

The mom and trained social worker first set off on this journey after her own personal struggle — one she kept quiet for a long time. For an extended period, she suffered from an undiagnosed chronic illness that left her largely bed-bound, and unable to work or care for her family. But she hid her sickness from most of her friends.

“I was very ashamed, but it was so dumb,” she said. “I didn’t do anything wrong. I was just sick,” she recalled. “At a certain point, I realized that the shame was killing me faster than the illness.”

Lankin Sheps opened up about

her experience in a blog post, and the reactions came flooding in. “I got a really huge influx of support,” she said, “that was very surprising to me.”

While she wasn’t well enough to begin working as a social worker, Lankin Sheps started to pick up photography. But soon she felt a yearning to undertake a project imbued with greater meaning. She issued a call looking for women who were interested in opening up about their challenges, their struggles and the stigmas that come along with them.

“Twenty women messaged me in the first hour,” she recalled. At first she was shocked that so many women were willing to be so open and vulnerable on the internet. “And then I stopped being surprised. And I started to get it.”

For four years, Lankin Sheps has told the stories of women facing infertility, depression, anxiety, cancer, terrorism, racism, divorce, abuse, widowhood, eating disorders, grief and countless other challenges. In a series of photos accompanying Facebook and Instagram posts — and more recently on her online magazine — she delves into some of the most painful details of women’s lives, telling each story in a style reminiscent of that made famous by Humans of New

York creator Brandon Stanton.

And she chooses her subjects — who generally approach her — with great caution.

“The people who I choose to work with are people that want to be activists for their cause,” she said. “It is really very, very difficult to be so emotionally vulnerable online.”

Lankin Sheps works carefully with each woman to ensure they are ready to come forward and be fully public with their stories. She speaks with each woman often for hours, and travels to photograph them in their own spaces, where they feel most comfortable and free. Her photographs are intended to showcase the women at their most comfortable, at ease with themselves and their stories.

“It’s a very careful process to ensure that people are ready and healthy,” she said. While she is not currently a practicing social worker, “all my clinical skills are at play every single day,” she added. “This is clinical work. It’s communal work, it’s writing for social change. And it’s very intentional and specific.”

The book — and the magazine — was written in consultation with Rachel Hercman, a practicing psychotherapist based in Manhattan. “She carried the load with me,” said Lankin Sheps. “Her insights were integral to the process.”

In 2018, a year and a half into her Layers Project journey, Lankin Sheps and her family moved from New Jersey to Israel and settled in Jerusalem. Within a few days of her aliya, she was approached about turning the project into a book. After a few bumps along

the way, she signed a deal with Koren Publishers to photograph and tell the stories of dozens of women living in Israel.

And she selected each profile for the book with great care. Though she and Koren initially agreed on 25, she felt strongly that these 34 women all needed to be included. “I wanted to make sure that there were women from all over the world featured,” she said. “These women are immigrants and they’re refugees, very few of them are *sabras*. I really wanted to capture the immigrant experience.”

Photographing, writing and editing the book — which was delayed and updated due to COVID-19 — was an intense experience for Lankin Sheps. But she is immensely proud of the final product.

“It’s going to leave you feeling broken and whole and inspired and sad and joyful — and moved,” she said, noting that she dropped early copies off with friends along with a box of tissues.

When she first started out, Lankin Sheps said, a lot of the issues she chronicled were not nearly as common on social media as they are today.

“The landscape of social media is radically different today than when we first started,” she said. “Social media was a highlight reel. It was just the best of the best. It was just your perfect, filtered happy moments. That’s what it was back then; it was really toxic.”

But the posts she began sharing that talked about women’s fears, struggles and journeys received near-unanimous support from those who read them. The community that sprung up around

the Layers Project was supportive, empathetic and energized.

And while she doesn’t shy away from tough topics, Lankin Sheps says she is cautious and considered in her approach.

“I think that social justice writing or social change writing has to be done from the inside,” she said. “I know my community, and it requires a really slow moving of the dial; you have to just keep moving the line forward really slowly. You have to keep gaining trust, you have to keep having those really important conversations, you have to keep resonating with them. And you have to do it in a way that’s healthy for the community — that they’re ready for it.”

Lankin Sheps estimates that about 80% of her regular readers online are women. But she is optimistic that a greater number of men will take an interest in the stories and in the book.

“I really think it’s tremendously important for men to care about our issues,” she said, “and want us to come to the table and want to listen to what we have to say and what hurts us and what heals us.”

With the book finally out in the world, Lankin Sheps is thinking about her next project, and dabbling in writing fiction for the first time. After all, she said, the profiles in the book and in the Layers Project are not her own stories or told in her voice.

“These stories are not my own words,” she said. “It’s their voices, their words. I’m just there to shape it, to photograph it, to give it context and to put it out into the world.” ♦

Meet the CoronaCrush couples who got engaged in quarantine

The Facebook group has already resulted in at least seven engagements since its creation last spring.

By Matthew Kassel

Last year, at the beginning of the pandemic, a small group of friends in New York and Israel were hanging out on Zoom, discussing the daunting prospect of dating in lockdown.

The product of their conversation was CoronaCrush, a private Facebook group for Jewish singles looking to couple up in quarantine. It took off. Within a week or so, CoronaCrush had attracted some 2,600 members from around the globe, a digital repository of hopeful personal ads posted in an uncertain time. A month later, users saw the addition of a virtual speed-dating service and then a matchmaking component, seeded with funding from American donors.

Now a registered nonprofit, CoronaCrush boasts around 20,000 members, with a matchmaking database of nearly 8,000 users who are “looking to get married,” according to Ian Mark, a CoronaCrush co-founder who lives in Jerusalem. “We set it up because it was meant to be serious dating,” Mark told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview.

Maybe there would even be some engagements, the founders thought. “We thought three would be cool just because it’s a classic number,” said Ben Lang, another co-founder. “If you help three people get engaged you go to heaven, that whole thing.”

The current tally, however, has far exceeded his expectations. There are currently seven couples who first met on CoronaCrush and have since gotten engaged, according to Lang, who suspects the number may be even higher because some couples likely haven’t made their engagements public. “Seven is a lot more than we thought,”

Lang said.

“There have been sooooo many engagements!” Bracha Katsof, who helped create the group, added delightedly in a WhatsApp exchange from Tel Aviv. “It’s crazy to me that a year ago these people weren’t connected at all,” she said, “and they were willing to take a risk to put themselves out there online in order to meet someone. And it worked!”

JI spoke with three engaged couples about how they came to find love in an age of isolation. Here are their stories.

Anglos in Israel

Daniella Cohen, a 27-year-old grant writer at the Jewish Agency for Israel, wasn’t getting her hopes up about finding a partner when she began scrolling through CoronaCrush while confined to her Jerusalem apartment last year. But it was an amusing diversion nonetheless. “It was very humorous to read the posts,” she said recently. “It was something to entertain us.”

Until it was more than that. She happened upon a post from Betzalel Silver, a 34-year-old software developer living about an hour’s drive away in Givat Shmuel. “This group was really interesting,” said Silver, who grew up in Israel but whose parents made aliyah from New York. He felt like he could find, as he joked, “a good Anglo girl,” referring to a native English speaker in Israel.

Cohen, who made aliyah nine years ago from South Africa, was attracted to Silver’s humor, “liked” his post and sent him a private message, which went directly to his spam folder. Silver,

however, saw the “like,” and fired off a note of his own. “I didn’t realize that she’d messaged me first,” he recalled.

No matter. After messaging on Facebook, they talked on the phone and soon agreed to meet in a Jerusalem park in late May. The scene, in retrospect, was almost too auspicious. “There were like three other proposals happening there and a renewing of vows under this chuppa,” Cohen told JI. “It was very special.”

The couple had good chemistry and made each other laugh. It also helped that they had similar religious and cultural backgrounds. Though Silver was born in Israel, “he’s very much Anglo because of his family,” said Cohen. “It was really nice for me in that we have a common language.”

The hard part was maintaining the relationship as they navigated a series of lockdowns, but they made it work. “We had to keep seeing each other,” Silver said, “and we took a lot of risks just driving back and forth.”

“It was really a great time to have this relationship in our lives,” said Silver, who was unemployed for the first three months of the pandemic but found a reason to stay positive when he met Cohen. “We were so bummed out being in our apartments all day and all week.”

“We had to spend a lot of time indoors,” Cohen said. “We got to know each other more through that.”

They got engaged in February. “I wanted to keep it as much a secret as I could,” said Silver, who proposed at a winetasting and then ushered his new fiancée to a surprise engagement party at which some family members were waiting. “It was really beautiful,” Cohen said. “He wrote me a song.”

"I'm going to sing it also at the wedding in two months," said Silver.

Crossing the border

Sivan Bokobza, a 26-year-old phlebotomist in Cedarhurst, N.Y., likewise had relatively low expectations when she joined CoronaCrush. As an intermittent Facebook user, she had forgotten all about the group until a friend who was also on CoronaCrush drew her back in a couple of months into the pandemic. "She's like, 'Oh my God, this guy is so your type. Can I message him for you?'" Bokobza told JI. "I was like, 'Uh, sure, I guess.'"

Lior Ohayon, 28 and living in Toronto as an e-commerce professional, was the guy. "I just texted her and then ended up talking for around two months," he said. They bonded over their shared Sephardic heritage and had the same religious values. It also didn't hurt that they were both unintimidated by the pandemic, and Ohayon flew to New York last July so they could meet for the first time.

Whether they would connect as well in person as they did on the phone was a separate, though ultimately unfounded, concern. "I was definitely nervous about that," said Bokobza. "At the beginning, I was definitely way more shy than I am now. But there really wasn't a dramatic difference. It wasn't like, 'Whoa, this is not what it's like on the phone.' We were both pretty much ourselves the whole time."

"We connected instantly," said Ohayon, who spent three days in New York. "The first time we met I pretty much just asked her to be my girlfriend."

In doing so, Ohayon said, he was breaking a long-held pledge that he would never date someone from New York. "I don't like the city," he said. "It's funny how it turned that around."

Things progressed quickly from there. Ohayon went back to New York every few weeks or so from Toronto, or they would meet in Los Angeles and Miami, observing Shabbat at local Chabad houses. In November, Bokobza, who had been restricted from traveling to Canada because

of the pandemic, earned an exemption and flew to Toronto to meet Ohayon's family.

"When I met his friends and family it became more serious and real, and I got to see more of him and understand him more," Bokobza said, adding that it was a "pivotal moment" in their relationship when he met her family as well.

In January, Ohayon relocated to Tulum, Mexico, where he set up a temporary office and planned to propose, having secreted a ring from New York without Bokobza's notice. "I was throwing her off," he said.

In March, Bokobza flew to Tulum, where, after dinner one Sunday night, Ohayon ushered her up to a romantic lookout beside a pool, at the bottom of which were arrayed a series of stones asking her to marry him. Ohayon, who had hidden the ring in a tote bag stuffed with jeans, had arranged for a covert photographer to capture the moment. Their friends came later for a party.

"I did not expect to get engaged during this," Ohayon told JI, adding that they are planning to get married in August, likely in New York, and considering moving to Miami.

Bokobza agreed: "I could have never predicted that I would meet a stranger on Facebook during a pandemic in a group made to bring strangers together during a pandemic."

Tennessee for two

Drew Feldman, 30, and Danielle Lavey, 28, had been talking via Zoom for about a month after connecting on CoronaCrush when they decided to meet in person. Feldman, a filmmaker who was living in Dallas at the time, flew to Lavey's home in Knoxville, Tenn., got a COVID test and decided that he had made the right decision risking his health to meet the woman he now knew he would marry. After a few trips back and forth, he stayed put. "I moved here to date Danielle more seriously and then stuck around," Feldman said.

"It was pretty clear that this was something very serious from very early on," said Lavey, who works as a healthcare consultant and believes that the pandemic brought them closer together. "It just made time for us to really get to know each other."

"I was moving a lot and traveling a lot for

a variety of projects, which personally made it challenging to date, and the pandemic actually forced me to slow down and kind of stay put for a little bit," Feldman added. "It's been amazing. I've worked in one place for longer, in this pandemic, than I have in the last probably decade of my life, in terms of moving around. So I think it created a space and ability to have the time and opening to get to know Danielle more deeply."

Soon enough, they were discussing getting engaged, but Feldman surprised her with a backyard movie screening at which he aired a short film, now available on Facebook, about their relationship, and asked Lavey to marry him. "We had a mazel tov over Zoom afterwards," she said.

The wedding, which they described as a COVID-safe ceremony in the Smoky Mountains, is scheduled for May 6. It has been difficult to coordinate, not least because Knoxville has few kosher food options. They were forced to find catering in Atlanta.

"All the time we had to date, and the fun and the romance of our time before, has quickly been hidden by all the wedding planning," Feldman said. "Lately, it's just been work, work, work. I think we're both very excited to have the wedding and move past the wedding planning and get back to just getting to spend time with each other."

Not that the wedding won't be special. "We're having an Orthodox wedding with a bluegrass band that's from Dolly Parton's hometown," said Lavey. "We're probably going to be the first to do that." ♦