

## THE WEEKLY PRINT

*With 'Homanity,' dissident Iranian artists are making their voices heard; Oliver Sacks in full; The Kahn family's long, strange trip to the D.C. pot business; Andrew Garbarino, Long Island's heir to Pete King; and Leah Soibel is bridging the gap between Israel and the Spanish-speaking world.*

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## With 'Homanity,' dissident Iranian artists are making their voices heard

*The compilation album, organized by Iranian Jewish activist Marjan Greenblatt, will release original songs to highlight Iran's censorship of the arts*

By Gabby Deutch

Music runs in Marjan Greenblatt's blood. The Iranian Jewish human rights advocate plays the piano and her mother is a lifelong violinist; her paternal grandfather played the tar, an Iranian long-necked instrument that resembles a guitar. At various points in Iran's history, all non-liturgical music was forbidden to Muslims, while exceptions were made for the country's Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians.

The Jewish community has been preserving the musical traditions [in Iran], because it was permitted for the Jews, even though it was banned for the Muslims," Greenblatt, 49, told *Jewish Insider* in a Zoom interview this week.

Greenblatt's love of music was cultivated in Iran, but it stayed with her after she fled the country to France in the mid-1980s and later came to the U.S. Now, with the nonprofits Crowdsourcing Human Rights and Democracy Council, she is spearheading a project called "Homanity," a compilation of original music by Iranian artists, most of whom are living abroad as political refugees. The compilation album, which is meant to highlight the continued censorship of music

and culture in the Islamic Republic, will be released on May 7, with two singles coming out later this week. The title comes from the mythical phoenix Homa, which "promotes freedom and protects those who fight for freedom from oppression," according to its website.

The music represents a range of styles: hip-hop, pop, rock, traditional Persian music, even heavy metal. "Incredibly talented Iranian artists are adopting these Western styles of music, and they're also putting in something that is inherently very, very Persian — that is the power of Iranian poetry, which really dates back thousands of years in Iranian culture," said Greenblatt. Many of the songs included in the compilation are distinctly political, following in the footsteps of past efforts linking music and activism like the Human Rights Campaign's 2002 Being Out Rocks. Behrouz Ghaemi, a British-Iranian guitarist and singer, will have a song out this Friday about the upcoming Iranian elections scheduled for June. "The song is about the insignificance of the Iranian elections and the inconsequential nature of what they deem as a theatrical exercise, without any

tangible change," Greenblatt explained. "Yes, it will have a powerful statement, but it will also echo the sentiment that we are hearing from many people inside Iran, that they really do not know the purpose of this year's elections, because all the choices have already been made." The other single being released this week comes from Justina, an Iranian rapper who sings about women and women's rights. Her new song is about love, which in Iran "is not expressed publicly, especially not by women," Greenblatt told *Ji*.

The dissident artists participating in "Homanity" are not the only musicians using music to spread a political message: Music has been used as an instrument of state propaganda since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. "The biggest practitioner of using music for political messages is the Islamic government itself," Greenblatt noted. "They are commissioning Iranian artists [and] Iranian writers to write music that elevates their values, elevates their practices, elevates their political agenda, in order to influence the subliminal thinking of the Iranian people."

All but one of the musicians whose

music will appear in the “Homanity” compilation have fled Iran and now live in countries including the U.S., the U.K., Sweden and Austria. But artists living abroad still face risks — as do their family members who remain in Iran — from participating in the project. “The ones who have accepted our invitation,” Greenblatt said, “are those who have calculated the risk, and they understand that it is still important to spread the message about the persecution of artists inside Iran.”

Greenblatt has a personal understanding of the risk to Iranians who dare to express themselves freely or read literature not approved by the religious government. When she was 14, she brought a poem to school that expressed hostility toward Iran’s government. “It had profanity directed at leaders of the Islamic Republic. It was one of the most dangerous things that a 14-year-old could be caught with in the very highly charged Islamic atmosphere of my public school,” Greenblatt recalled. She kept the poem hidden in the pages of a textbook, but she dropped it on the floor, where it was picked up by a dean.

“It was not unheard of for teenagers — 14-, 15-, 16-year-old girls — to be put in jail, either because of bad hijabs or because of activism or because of stupid mistakes, like carrying an anti-government poem in their backpack,” said Greenblatt. The dean told Greenblatt she would likely be kicked out of school, but she didn’t stick around to find out: Her family smuggled her out of the country, alone, to live with her grandparents in France. She was a child when Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini came to power seven

years earlier, bringing with him strict religious requirements for everyone in the country. “I had to start wearing the hijab, even from a young age. I had to line up every morning and chant lots of slogans that did not necessarily represent what I believed, or I didn’t even understand what they meant, like, ‘death to America, death to Israel,’” she said. “For girls and women, there was extra pressure. We could not wear any makeup. We couldn’t even have nail polish.”

Music, movies and art were censored, but Greenblatt saw the beginnings of an underground resistance form. Now, “the musicians have found a community for themselves,” she said. “In an underground world, they are creating music. They’re having underground concerts, they are releasing albums, but none of this is on the surface. It remains a very clandestine, secret, almost dangerous operation to create [and] express themselves.” Iranian access censored music in a variety of ways: bypassing Internet filters, using VPNs (virtual private networks) to pretend to be accessing the Internet from abroad, passing around flash drives of music among trusted friends. If a taxi driver trusts a passenger, he might play unapproved music.

All of this comes at great personal risk. Most Iranian musicians use pseudonyms, or stage names, to try to stay anonymous. People who pass music around or attend concerts can face legal consequences.

“I’m hearing from people who have attended those concerts or organize those concerts that at least half the time, they would be raided and they would be arrested, and they would face terrible, terrible

consequences,” Greenblatt said, “but you cannot kill creative expression.”

Stories about Iran that appear in Western media often focus on the country’s government and military. “Iran has always been a big part of American policy and the American news cycle,” Greenblatt pointed out, but “a lot of it is being told from the perspective of people who are not from Iran. A lot of those policies are being decided by pundits in Washington who do not have the personal perspective of what Iran is really like.”

Iranians attempt to share their stories abroad when they can bypass the country’s Internet filters. One place where Iranians have been able to gather? Clubhouse, the app that hosts audio-only conversations that anyone can join, and that are not recorded. “Iranians are finding ways to bypass some of the filters that were so quickly imposed on Clubhouse,” Greenblatt noted. “Some rooms are open 24 hours in a row, and they’re having these very intense, very passionate, heartbreaking conversations about their lives.”

The hope is that “Homanity” will “shed some light that might enlighten both the policymakers [and] also my American peers, whose opinion about Iran is mainly shaped by one-sided media stories,” Greenblatt said.

What gets lost in the coverage of Iranian current events, she argued, is that many Iranians do not feel represented by the country’s government. “The Iranian people have beliefs, have desires, have traditions that are not necessarily honored by their government.” ♦

# Oliver Sacks in full

*A new documentary takes a painstakingly intimate look at the famously private British writer and neurologist, who died in 2015*

By Matthew Kassel

Shortly after the British writer and neurologist Oliver Sacks was diagnosed with terminal cancer in the winter of 2015, he summoned a small group of close friends and colleagues as well as a film crew to his West Village apartment for what was to become a kind of marathon seminar in deep personal reflection. Over five days, stretching 12 hours at a time, he reminisced, in painstakingly intimate detail, about his long career in science and journalism while musing on the nature of mortality.

Sacks, who died that summer at 82, was heralded for imbuing a sense of humanity in the curiously afflicted people and patients he wrote about in such popular books as *Awakenings*, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* and *An Anthropologist on Mars*. But in his final months — having just completed a highly personal memoir, *On the Move: A Life*, which was yet to be published — Sacks was at last ready to look inward and, in a sense, hold himself up as his final subject.

The filmmaker Ric Burns, who captured the week-long session — ultimately gathering 90 hours of footage he condensed into a documentary, *Oliver Sacks: His Own Life*, which airs tonight on PBS — immediately recognized that he was bearing witness to a rare and unusual event.

“It won’t happen again,” he told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview. “Not for me.”

For most of his life, Sacks led a monkish existence dedicated almost exclusively to writing, research and medical work. But privately, he struggled with crippling self-doubt, amphetamine addiction and discomfort with his own homosexuality compounded by his

Orthodox Jewish upbringing. Sacks largely concealed that he was gay until his mid-70s, when he met his partner, the writer and photographer Bill Hayes, who survives him.

By the time Burns, a seasoned documentarian, showed up with his camera, Sacks had managed to find a measure of personal stasis thanks to his late-in-life relationship. Despite the unwanted diagnosis, he was approaching death with an attitude that suggested he was at peace with himself.

“He had some kind of enormous grace and trust,” Burns observed.

The film bears the hallmarks of the Burns style, featuring talking heads, scenes with patients and depictions of Sacks speeding down the highway on his motorcycle after he left England and moved to California in the early 1960s.

Burns’s portrait presents Sacks in many modes. At one point, the typically reserved doctor smiles mischievously as he tucks into a Tupperware container of Jell-O, then launches into an unexpectedly raunchy anecdote that is revealing both for its eccentricity as well as the wry, almost clinical manner in which it is told.

“Time was — it doesn’t occur now, but it used to occur until a few years ago — when I would wake up at night with an erection,” Sacks tells his rapt audience, winding up for a personally embarrassing punchline. “It was sometimes irritatingly persistent, and I would sometimes cool my turgid penis in orange Jell-O.”

“He was painfully shy or explosively self-revelatory,” said Burns.

Though the documentary was filmed six years ago, Burns believes it has only become more relevant as the coronavirus pandemic has highlighted

many of the issues to which Sacks was attuned throughout his life.

“I would say the guiding insight of Oliver is that we’re all locked in,” Burns said. “We all have this unique, special access to our own perception and consciousness. Nobody else has access to that — only each of us does. So we’re kind of locked in, but we also have these means of communication. I think that moments like the pandemic — where we’re all locked in but have means of communicating — are accelerators of empathy.”

“In this moment,” he added, “the empathy that Oliver felt because of his sense of shared vulnerability somehow hits harder.”

Kate Edgar, an early editor of Sacks’s work who became his personal assistant, said she often discussed the looming prospect of a global pandemic with her longtime friend.

Sacks was perhaps hyper-attuned to such grim realities thanks to his experience, in the 1960s, tending to a group of catatonic patients at a Bronx hospital who had fallen victim to the encephalitis lethargica epidemic — the subject of his 1973 book, *Awakenings*, later adapted into a feature-length film starring Robin Williams and Robert DeNiro.

“The message that I picked up — and that he often spoke about — is this is coming again,” Edgar, who serves as the executive director of the Oliver Sacks Foundation, told *JL*. “I think he would have been outraged at some of the ways this was handled by our government and just shocked by how vulnerable we were, especially certain parts of the population.”

She suggested that his voice, particularly at this moment, would

likely have proved essential. “I feel sure,” she told JI, “he would have written some really interesting pieces about it.”

Burns seconded that view. “It would have been really interesting to know what Oliver made of this because he felt two things,” the filmmaker said. “We’re all irreducibly different, and we’re all linked to each other by dint of that uniqueness.”

Still, while he developed an intensely loyal fan base, Sacks didn’t reveal all that much about his own unique story as he published book after book of elegantly rendered case studies focusing on other people with rare conditions like visual agnosia and color blindness. Even when he inserted himself into his writing, as he often did, it was with a sense of cerebral detachment.

“It was kind of a persona that said, ‘No need to ask any other questions,’ and to a large degree, people didn’t,” Burns told JI, noting that he was unaware Sacks was gay until he began filming him.

But when Sacks found out that his life had a firm expiration date, he became more self-assured about his own identity and was even willing to revisit his traumatic childhood. Sacks, who was born in London, grew up in an Orthodox household that was

decidedly unaccepting of his homosexuality: at 18, his mother found out he was gay — and, devastated by this revelation, cursed the day he had been born.

“The matter was never mentioned again,” Sacks recounted in an essay shortly before his death, “but her harsh words made me hate religion’s capacity for bigotry and cruelty.”

Though he was raised observant, Sacks was a nonbeliever and rejected the possibility of an afterlife. He found great meaning, however, in his Jewish identity, which was something he “cherished,” according to Edgar.

“He might not have said it in so many words, but part of growing up as an Orthodox Jew is he had a huge, very close family, and he loved that,” she said. “He loved the ritual and he loved the family and he loved the food. The whole cultural part of being Jewish he did love. He certainly had ambivalences, and I think part of that revolved around his sexuality and his mother sort of laying down this biblical curse on him.”

Not that he rejected spirituality altogether. “He was constantly reading philosophy and thinking about these spiritual questions,” Edgar told JI. “The difference is he didn’t believe that there was a god. He believed that there was nature

— and nature was his god, in some way. So I think he follows a tradition of Jewish atheism, if you wish, in that sense — and that’s a noble tradition.”

Sacks was extremely productive in the lead-up to his death, and some of his pieces took on a wistful, elegiac tone as he delved into his Jewish past. He wrote movingly of observing the Sabbath as a child as well as his early fondness for gefilte fish, which he rediscovered in his 80s when cancer weakened him and restricted his diet. “Gefilte fish will usher me out of this life,” he wrote in a short but poignant essay, posthumously published in *The New Yorker*, “as it ushered me into it, eighty-two years ago.”

“He always loved his fish,” said Edgar, who is now working to assemble Sacks’s correspondence for a forthcoming volume of letters, adding to a growing list of books that have been released since his death.

Whatever subject he took on after his diagnosis — and there were many — Sacks wanted to leave behind a sense of who he was after years of neglecting that project. “This was his last opportunity to share his thoughts about his own life and all of his work,” Edgar said, “and he made use of every second of that time.” ♦

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## The Kahn family’s long, strange trip to the D.C. pot business

*The ‘Pot Rabbi’ views medical marijuana through a very Jewish lens*

By Gabby Deutch

**E**A rabbi, his wife and their son go into the drug business together: It sounds like the plot of a television show. For the Kahn family, it’s real life.

When Jeffrey Kahn left the rabbinate after three decades, he moved with his wife Stephanie, a nurse, to Israel, hoping to enjoy retirement in the Holy Land.

Yet Kahn is now back in the U.S. and serving as another kind of rabbi: the Pot Rabbi, as his ID badge from the Takoma Wellness Center — Washington, D.C.’s first and largest medical marijuana dispensary — reads.

When the Kahn family opened the Takoma Wellness Center in Washington’s Takoma Park neighborhood in 2013,

three years after medical marijuana was legalized in the city, it took up one small storefront in a building that Jeffrey admits is not pretty. “It wasn’t the most beautiful building. Probably to some folks not the ideal location. But nobody else would rent to us,” Jeffrey, 68, told *Jewish Insider* on a recent tour of the building.

The center has since expanded into the former Chinese restaurant next store and the church upstairs, filling between 200 and 300 orders of cannabis products daily. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Takoma Wellness hosted regular educational seminars in the upstairs space to teach people about the medical benefits of cannabis. “There’s definitely people that know what they want, or think they know what they want. Others have no idea,” said Josh Kahn, 36, who serves as operations manager for the business.

The business employs 45 people, most of whom are not Jewish, but the inside of the shop is decorated with Judaica. Takoma Wellness’s logo is a hamsa, and dozens of images of the hand-shaped symbol (thought to fend off the evil eye) dot the walls. Several Israeli flags appear throughout the building, including an Israeli flag bumper sticker that says, in Hebrew, “Peace Now,” referring to the Israeli anti-war advocacy group. A framed photo of former Israeli Prime Ministers David Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir is perched atop rows of different strains of “flower,” as the Kahns say — marijuana.

For the Kahns, operating a medical marijuana dispensary is more than just a business. Besides, they say, no one can make real money from it anyway; ever-evolving regulations, a persistent stigma against marijuana and a punishing tax code have made it hard to really profit at a mom-and-pop shop.

They view the business as the manifestation of their Jewish values, particularly tikkun olam, repairing the world. “Growing up as the son of a rabbi and a hospital administrator, and being part of a family that has always seen the good side of humanity and worked to make it better, it was an honor and also a privilege,” Josh explained. “Tikkun olam and all of that was the essence of who I was and what I wanted to do.”

Josh had made aliyah a few years before to serve in the Israel Defense Forces. He wanted to stay in Israel, but family beckoned. “To see my family in this position to be able to do such good, I knew I had to be a part of that. [Leaving Israel] was painful for me,” he explained.

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Jeffrey and his wife Stephanie had seen the medicinal benefits of marijuana decades before the drug was legal anywhere in the U.S. Stephanie’s father suffered from multiple sclerosis and struggled to relieve his constant pain. Stephanie’s “parents are really the reason why we started the dispensary,” Jeffrey told JI.

Jeffrey and Stephanie recently celebrated 45 years of marriage, and their wedding day is “the last time I can remember him walking — down the aisle,” Jeffrey recalled. “For the last 20, 30 years of his life, he was wheelchair- and bed-bound. But when he was still vibrant in the ‘70s, he traveled the world looking for a cure, looking for relief. He tried just about anything you can imagine: snake venom, all kinds of pharmaceuticals that he had to go to rehab to get off of.”

Someone suggested that he try marijuana. But it was the 1970s, and the drug was affiliated with hippies and the counterculture, and it was illegal; where was a respectable middle-aged man supposed to go to find it? Eventually, his caregiver was able to procure some. “It made a tremendous difference for him. It was almost instantaneous the first time,” Jeffrey said. But his father-in-law did not have regular access to marijuana, often leaving him in pain. “Now looking back, we know,” Jeffrey explained. “We see lots of people with MS, and we know how little can really be done pharmaceutically, and how much cannabis still is a lifesaver for so many people.”

His father-in-law’s marijuana use was no shameful secret. “My kids grew up knowing that grandpa had a bong in the basement,” Jeffrey remarked.

The lessons he learned about the drug through his father-in-law would later prove useful during the AIDS epidemic.

“Coincidentally, the day I was ordained in 1981 was the same day that [Dr.] Anthony Fauci shared the Morbidity and Mortality Report discussing the first three cases of AIDS,” Jeffrey said. That report would change the world, and Jeffrey’s career. “The first 15 to 20 years in my rabbinate in the ‘80s and ‘90s, really, was very much touched by and involved with people trying to cope with AIDS in their families.”

He spent 11 years as a rabbi in Rockford,

Ill., a conservative city about an hour outside Chicago. “There was so much poison in the air about AIDS and the people who had it, and why they had it, and whether or not that was just their deserved fate,” Jeffrey told JI. “In a conservative town, liberal clergy usually ended up on the side of helping people with AIDS when nobody else would see folks at the hospital, Jewish or not, or bury them or sit with their families.”

Many of the AIDS patients — and their families — whom Jeffrey got to know were curious about whether marijuana would alleviate the virus’s symptoms. “I was the right person for people to say, ‘Given this is against the law, do you think that God thinks it’s okay?’ And it’s not hard to figure out, whether you’re a rabbi or not, that God thinks it’s okay,” Jeffrey said. He pointed to Yom Kippur and the Jewish requirement to fast on that day — which can be avoided if, for health reasons, a person needs to eat. “There’s practically no law that stands between you and your health. It’s really a primary principle of Judaism,” he argued.

Years later, when his mother-in-law was diagnosed with cancer, Jeffrey immediately thought about medical marijuana. Her doctor even recommended it. “But this was in New Jersey in 2008. Now recreational [marijuana] is legal in New Jersey, but it was impossible for us to find anything for her [at the time], and she never had the chance to use it. It really would have really helped,” Jeffrey said. She died two months after her diagnosis, and Takoma Wellness Center is dedicated to her and her husband, Libby and Jules Reifkind.

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When the Kahns first considered opening a dispensary, Americans remained very skeptical of marijuana. Polling from the Pew Research Center found that, in 2010, just 41% of Americans wanted to legalize the drug; after all, it was illegal at the federal level, and people were serving life sentences for selling the drug. By 2019, more than two-thirds of Americans believed marijuana should be legal.

California became the first state to legalize medical marijuana, in 1996, and 36 states and Washington, D.C., followed. But legalizing medical marijuana in

Washington was more complicated because of the District of Columbia's non-state status: Residents of the city first voted to legalize medical marijuana in 1998, but congressional Republicans kept the city from implementing the policy. The Home Rule Act of 1973 requires Congress to approve or reject all legislation passed by Washington, D.C., and it was only in 2010, with a Democratic president and Democratic Congress, that the city could finally legalize medical marijuana. (Former Georgia Rep. Bob Barr, the Republican who sponsored the annual amendment to keep D.C. from legalizing marijuana, did a policy U-turn and joined a marijuana lobbying group when he left Congress.)

With Democrats in control of both chambers of Congress and the White House, Washington is now confronting a similar issue as it attempts to legalize recreational adult use of marijuana. The city voted in 2014 to allow recreational marijuana, but Congress prohibited the sale of the drug — adults in the District can possess small quantities of the drug, but they cannot legally purchase it. Washington Mayor Muriel Bowser introduced a bill in February to legalize sales of the drug, timed to coincide with another Democratic administration and Congress. (A "Statehood for the people of D.C." poster was taped to a window in the Takoma Wellness storefront, next to a Black Lives Matter sign.)

After going to the city for permission in 2011, it took until 2013 for Takoma Wellness to gain the necessary approvals to set up shop. Since then, Jeffrey, Josh and Stephanie have had to contend with a series of seemingly endless challenges: neighborhood hostility, evolving municipal regulations and changing presidential administrations. They also had to teach themselves the basics of cannabis, such as the differences among the nearly 100 strains they have on offer (with names like "Sour Diesel" and "Gelato") and the different forms they offer: edibles, topicals (like lotion), tinctures or straight-up "flower."

"There's some that keep you up and some that put you to sleep, and some that are great for pain and others that are great for anxiety," Jeffrey explained. Discovering which strains can treat which symptoms involves a significant amount of trial-and-

error; unlike Tylenol, for example, marijuana is not a chemical with the same properties in every batch. "The main part of how it all works is that it does work. There are people who come once and never come back, but they're few and far between. Most people do find some satisfaction," he noted.

Medical professionals do not prescribe a dose or form of cannabis. Patients discuss their symptoms with the Kahns and their colleagues at Takoma Wellness, who then make recommendations. Jeffrey likened it to the way prunes might be used to treat constipation. A doctor would urge a patient to first try one, and then two, and so on, until finding the right dose.

Takoma Wellness was the first dispensary in D.C., so the Kahns watched the city create regulations from scratch, a process they said was not smooth. So few doctors were willing to comply with the city's strict rules around the issuance of medical marijuana cards that at first, one stepped in, saying she would require patients to see her multiple times in a 90-day period only if they paid \$900, without a guarantee that she would recommend they receive a card. Now, any licensed medical professional — including nurses and even dentists — can recommend that a patient receive a card; patients must then pay \$100 and submit an application to the city, which still might deny them.

"Until two years ago, we didn't have a bank [willing to work with us]," Jeffrey said. Legally, banks could serve them — they were, after all, an established business — but many feared harassment from the federal government. The Kahns' dispensary also could not accept credit cards for a long time.

Marijuana cannot be carried across state lines, so everything sold at Takoma Wellness must be grown in D.C., "which is not the agricultural capital of the world," Jeffrey quipped. "There isn't a lot of room. There aren't a lot of warehouses. That's not what D.C. is about." They make do with the supply they have, although he fears that when the city does allow recreational marijuana, there won't be enough supply. "We already have some of the highest prices in the country," Josh added. Still, the Kahns see recreational adult use as a big opportunity: It can be difficult and expensive to get a medical marijuana card.

Some people — including federal employees — worry about the government having a list of people who are approved to use medical marijuana, even though they are protected by HIPAA privacy laws. The legalization of recreational marijuana "could allow them the opportunity to get access," Josh added.

Of course, these challenges all came after the business was created; before that, the Kahns had to win the support of Takoma's residents, many of whom were skeptical about having a marijuana business in the neighborhood. "A lot of people had negative experiences with cannabis, not because something bad happened to them from the cannabis, but because something bad happened to them as a result of using cannabis — like, they got arrested. There are a lot of grandmas here who have a grandson who was busted, and think cannabis is a terrible thing," Jeffrey noted.

The Kahns had to teach neighbors that their business would not be a headshop but a legitimate community institution, and it would actually help people. In the beginning, the whole family was "working with the neighbors and having tons of meetings," Jeffrey recalled. It didn't all go well, he said: "There were screaming matches."

One group that never gave his family a hard time? The Jewish community. "Jewish support has been tremendous," Jeffrey said. Women of Reform Judaism, the women's arm of the Reform movement, passed a policy statement in support of medical marijuana in 1999, long before it was widely popular in the U.S. Israel is known as a global cannabis research hub, and the country legalized medical marijuana in the early 1990s.

"This whole journey has been super scary," Josh admitted. But, he joked, "I'm sure it was scarier for my mom when I was in the [Israeli] army." ♦

# Andrew Garbarino, Long Island's heir to Pete King

*First-term Long Island Rep. Andrew Garbarino believes his party's 'big tent' accommodates new voices even as the former president maintains influence*

By Matthew Kassel

When former Rep. Peter King (R-NY) announced in November 2019 that he would retire at the end of his term, the 14-term congressman from Long Island confessed that his decision was driven in large part by what he described as a “toxic” political atmosphere in Washington.

His sentiment proved more prescient than perhaps he could have imagined as rioters stormed the Capitol building in an effort to overturn the election for former President Donald Trump just three days after King left office in early January.

King's successor, Rep. Andrew Garbarino (R-NY), was locked in his office in the Longworth House Office Building for eight hours that day, watching with growing alarm as the protests devolved into a violent siege. “You couldn't believe what you were seeing,” Garbarino, a 36-year-old former attorney, recalled in a recent interview with *Jewish Insider*.

But according to Garbarino, that tumultuous introduction to the Hill only strengthened his resolve to return that night to the House floor and certify the election results in favor of Joe Biden.

“The goal was to stop us and it didn't,” he said. “Whether people were for objection or for certification, the fact that we went back in that night and finished our job, I think, with all the broken glass and everything, that was the best part about that day.”

The freshman congressman's somewhat measured assessment of a deeply divisive moment in American politics — ultimately, 147 Republicans objected to the Electoral College count — underscores the tightrope moderate Republicans like Garbarino must navigate in a party still very much in thrall to Trump.

It also suggests a calculation tailored to the dynamics at play in Garbarino's

district, a traditionally conservative enclave including sections of Nassau and Suffolk Counties on Long Island's South Shore that have been trending blue in recent years. Garbarino defeated his Democratic opponent, Jackie Gordon, by nearly seven percentage points in the general election, but victory by no means seemed a sure bet, with one influential forecaster having deemed the race a toss-up.

“During the campaign, I didn't realize how terrible I was until I saw some of those commercials against me,” Garbarino quipped.

Defending the seat next cycle may prove even more vexing. “Garbarino's district is likely to be competitive going forward,” said Craig Burnett, an associate professor in the department of political science at Hofstra University. “To be successful in that district, I think you have to be a moderate Long Island Republican.”

Garbarino — who touts his membership in the Problem Solvers Caucus and says he has already co-sponsored bills with a Democratic member of New York's congressional delegation, Rep. Kathleen Rice — seems eager to present himself as one.

In conversation with JI, he emphasized his connections with a variety of lawmakers across the ideological spectrum, including Rep. Mondaire Jones (D-NY), the newly elected progressive congressman from Westchester. “I love Mondaire,” said Garbarino, adding that they met during freshman orientation and made plans to collaborate on restoring the state and local tax deduction, otherwise known as SALT, in New York. “We just hit it off.”

“He and I don't agree on a lot of stuff, but it doesn't stop us from trying to work together on stuff we do, and I think that's what's great,” Garbarino elaborated. “We'll

figure out what we can work together on and try to get it done, because getting something done is better than getting nothing done.”

Jones described Garbarino as a “friend” in a December interview with JI, but his office did not respond to a request for comment about the current status of their relationship.

“It seems like right now there's such hatred on both sides,” Garbarino said. “If we don't agree on this, we have to hate each other. You're my enemy. Too many people feel that way now, and it's not the case.”

Garbarino recalled the day of the Capitol attack, when his friend Rep. Lee Zeldin (R-NY), who presides over a deeply conservative district of Long Island, objected to the ballot certification in two contested states. Though they disagreed on that matter, “He gave up a lot of time to talk to me about my thoughts on the day,” Garbarino said of Zeldin, with whom he previously served in the New York State legislature. “He didn't push any agenda.”

In a statement to JI, Zeldin described Garbarino as “a fighter for his constituents and a stalwart advocate for the issues most important to them.”

Zeldin, a four-term congressman and former state senator who recently announced his bid for New York governor, “knows both Washington and Albany,” according to Garbarino. “Lee is a very smart person and a very thoughtful person, and I don't think he would be getting involved if he didn't see a pathway to victory.”

Asked to assess the Democratic candidates competing in New York City's crowded mayoral race, one of whom is likely to be the next mayor, Garbarino was more circumspect. “I don't know how many of them are saying what they're saying just to win the primary,” he said.

Still, he was willing to offer praise

for at least one contender. “McGuire is interesting,” Garbarino mused, referring to Ray McGuire, the former Citigroup executive who has earned the support of a number of prominent business leaders in New York. “I think he understands that you need certain industries in New York to keep New York going.”

Garbarino grew up in the Long Island hamlet of Sayville and worked in his family’s law firm until deciding to pursue elected office. He served in the State Assembly from 2013 to 2020 before ascending to Congress.

As a new member of the House, Garbarino, who has vowed to tackle crime and security issues in his district, sits on the Homeland Security Committee, an assignment he regards as a particularly important one for his constituents. “They just arrested an MS-13 gang leader at the border the other day,” he said of the violent Salvadoran street gang. “We have MS-13 in my district.”

“It was awful what they did here,” Garbarino added. “The concern is now, with the border, with the crisis there, with people coming across, you don’t want MS-13 bringing more members from South and Central America up.”

Garbarino has a number of other geopolitical concerns in mind as he enters his first term, and he offered a mixed evaluation

of President Joe Biden’s approach so far. He approves, for instance, of Biden’s faith in international aid as a meaningful foreign policy tool. “A lot of Republicans tend to go against foreign aid,” Garbarino said. “I’m not, because we’re not playing in a vacuum here. If we don’t get involved, China and Russia are, and we need to compete with that.”

But he also believes there is room for improvement, arguing that Biden should increase funding for cybersecurity protections while expressing concern with the president’s effort to bring back the Iran nuclear deal. “I think we need to keep the pressure up,” he said. “I think sanctions work.”

Garbarino was optimistic that Biden would expand on the Trump administration’s push to establish diplomatic relations between Israel and several Arab nations including the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. “I was just talking to somebody recently, it might have been an AIPAC call, but they were talking about, just between UAE and Israel now, the amount of travel and investment that’s happened since,” he said. “I hope it continues and more nations jump on.”

The first-term Republican said the Israelis and the Palestinians would have to work out their conflict among themselves if they have any hope of easing tensions.

“Listen, I’m an attorney by trade,” Garbarino said. “Anytime an outside group tries to force a settlement on somebody, it doesn’t work.”

“The U.S. shouldn’t be forcing terms,” he added. “No country should be forcing terms. Israel and the Palestinians need to figure it out because, unless they both come to terms, it’s not going to work. You can’t force it, can’t force a settlement on one or the other. If somebody feels like they’ve gotten screwed, if they’ve been bullied into something, they’re going to be very, very upset, and it’s not going to work. It’ll fall apart. The deal always falls apart.”

But Garbarino seems to have more immediate concerns amid growing tensions in his own party, particularly as Trump sets his sights on the small number of House Republicans who voted in favor of impeaching him just before he left the White House.

Garbarino, who isn’t among that group of vulnerable incumbents, acknowledged that Trump “is going to have an effect on the party” going forward, but said the GOP was a “big tent” and could make room for a wide range of voices.

“I think he’ll be around for a while,” Garbarino said of the former president. “But he’s not the only leader left.” ♦

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## Leah Soibel is bridging the gap between Israel and the Spanish-speaking world

*Her nonprofit, Fuente Latina, aims to bring information about Israel to the world’s Spanish speakers — all half billion of them*

By Gabby Deutch

Less than two months before the 2020 U.S. elections, the Spanish sister-publication of *The Miami Herald* published an advertising section sponsored by a Cuban American political activist. The 40-page insert in *El Nuevo Herald* had a full-length column called “American Jews and Israeli Jews,” which made deeply antisemitic and racist statements.

“What kind of people are these

Jews? They’re always talking about the Holocaust, but have they already forgotten Kristallnacht, when Nazi thugs rampaged through Jewish shops all over Germany? So do the BLM and antifa, only the Nazis didn’t steal; they only destroyed,” wrote the author of the insert.

For the readers of *El Nuevo Herald*’s print edition, this insert could easily have been confused for a normal section of the

paper, even though it was paid advertising. But because it was an advertisement, *El Nuevo Herald*’s editorial staff had not read it before it was published. In the aftermath, the paper’s managing editor resigned and its publisher was demoted.

This was one of many incidents of political misinformation, some of which were also antisemitic, targeting Latino voters last year.



For Leah Soibel, these falsehoods directed at the Latino community were nothing new; they were just finally reaching the mainstream media.

“It’s something that we see all the time. It just became much more apparent, because of its timing prior to the elections,” said Soibel, founder and CEO of Fuente Latina, a nonprofit organization created in 2012 that seeks to bring pro-Israel information to Spanish-language media. Fuente Latina organized virtual educational events for Latino media in the wake of the *El Nuevo Herald* incident.

Fuente Latina’s potential audience is enormous; nearly 600 million people worldwide speak Spanish. Yet many of them know little about Israel and the Jewish community — many don’t see an obvious reason to care about a country several thousand miles away and a religious group with very few adherents.

The enormity of the task does not deter Soibel, who lives in Miami. After studying public diplomacy and researching how the U.S. spreads its message to foreign nations, Soibel took what she learned about cultural messaging and applied it to Israel.

In a recent interview, Soibel spoke with *Jewish Insider* about what she views as the crucial project of bringing information about Israel to Spanish speakers, including the rapidly expanding Latino population in the U.S. “Hispanics, in general, don’t understand the importance of the U.S.-Israel relationship,” Soibel said. Part of the reason, she claimed, is that Jews and Latinos view each other as unrelated communities, with little in common: “The Hispanic media aren’t covering what is going on in the Jewish community and the Jewish community isn’t talking about what’s happening in the neighboring Hispanic community,” she argued, but “we have so much in common.”

In a promising sign for Soibel, many U.S. Latinos have not yet made up their mind on Israel. A 2017 survey found that 28% of Hispanic Christians in the U.S. had no opinion on the Jewish state. But that same survey found that a sizable number of Hispanic Christians harbor somewhat antisemitic beliefs, with 42% agreeing that “Jewish Americans have too much influence in American society.”

Soibel is a Latino Jew who grew up

in a Catholic neighborhood of St. Louis, and people were often confused about her identity. “At that time,” she recalled, “people just had no clue. They were like, ‘How can you be both?’ There’s no way.”

Soibel was born to Argentinian immigrants who had moved to St. Louis, which had a sizable Jewish community but very few other South American Jews. “I always asked the question as a kid, ‘Why did the boat stop in St. Louis?’ Every other Argentinian that I know went to Chicago, New York, Miami, even L.A. We stopped in St. Louis,” she said.

In Argentina, her mother had worked for the chevra kadisha, the group of people who care for the bodies of the deceased before they are buried. Her father was a police officer in Buenos Aires, where he at one point worked with officers who were monitoring Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi leader who was captured in Argentina and brought to Israel to stand trial for war crimes. “He wasn’t part of the capture, but he was involved in the monitoring of Eichmann,” Soibel explained. “He was tasked to monitor [Eichmann’s] home.”

Soibel grew up as a proud Zionist; she studied in Israel in high school and attended Camp Young Judaea. By the time she started at Dickinson College in Pennsylvania, she wanted to learn about the Middle East beyond Israel. But this was the 1990s. The September 11 terrorist attacks, which would spur a generation of young people to learn Arabic and enter the field of foreign policy, had not yet occurred. “At that time [people wondered], what is a Jew at a small liberal arts college in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, doing studying Arabic?” she asked. Her line of thinking, she said, was “if I’m going to be a Middle East expert, I can’t only know Hebrew. I obviously have to know Arabic. I have to understand both sides to this huge, complex story.”

After graduating, she spent a year studying Arabic at the American University in Cairo. It was a tumultuous time: “I saw protests on the campus there, and I saw animosity towards the United States in the type of video footage that you always see — of an angry mob in the Arab world, burning an American and Israeli flag, that type of stuff. But to see it as a Jew — and again, there were very few Jews on the campus at

that time — obviously, there was a sense of concern,” she recalled.

After leaving Egypt, her first week in Washington as a master’s student at The George Washington University coincided with the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

“The culmination of all of that left me with a deep and desperate yearning to get back to not only the Middle East, but Israel specifically,” Soibel said. For her master’s thesis, she visited several Arab countries to try to answer the question, “Why does the young generation in the Arab world dislike America so much?” It was 2002, a dangerous time to be an American woman traveling alone in the Middle East.

That project was her first foray into the world of “public diplomacy” — the way a nation or political entity gets its message across through cultural means, using informal educational methods to communicate with citizens of another country. At the time, the U.S. had launched the Arabic-language Radio Sawa in the Middle East, modeled on the Radio Martí network that broadcasted to Cuba and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty that brought American music and culture to the former Soviet Union. As Soibel recalls, “the modern-day public diplomacy was, ‘How do we win Arab hearts and minds?’”

She took that goal with her to Israel, where she enrolled in a public diplomacy doctoral program at Bar-Ilan University. While in grad school, she served in an intelligence unit. “I don’t like to be bored,” she offered as an explanation.

“I was really fascinated by the element of communication and how different countries were good at it, or how different countries were bad at it,” she noted. She was again studying the Arab world, but she began to ask the same questions of Israel: “How is Israel getting its message out amidst the sea of other countries that dominate the narrative?”

A couple years into her graduate studies, Soibel’s then-boyfriend, at the time a reporter with The Washington Post, attended the first press conference that The Israel Project (TIP), a U.S.-based Israel advocacy group, hosted in 2005, at Jerusalem’s King David Hotel. He came home and told her about the group, which was created during the second intifada to

educate people in America and Europe about the Jewish state. The organization was looking for a researcher; Soibel took the role and dropped the doctorate.

For her first few years with TIP, which ceased operations in 2019, Soibel's work did not focus on Spanish-language media. She was a generalist, and a good one, said Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, the organization's founder.

"She has a perspective: She's pro-Israel, but she doesn't pretend that Israel is perfect, which some people try to do, and it eliminates all credibility. And I do think she has a lot of empathy for people on all sides of the equation," Mizrahi told JI. In 2010, five years after joining TIP, Soibel launched the organization's Spanish media program.

Soibel would bring journalists on tours of Israel — something she now does at Fuente Latina — to try to show them, in real geographic terms, the nature of Israel's borders, relative to Gaza and Lebanon and Syria. When reporters were not in Israel, Soibel would bring the country to them by producing video segments during conflicts.

"You have to be pretty gutsy that when there's sirens and people are being told, you know, go into your bomb shelter, that you're going to leave your safe office in Jerusalem and go up north to where the rockets are, or when there's an issue going on with Gaza, go down to Sderot and be on the front lines, where the where the rockets are coming in," said Mizrahi, who said she made sure Soibel always took a flak jacket and a helmet.

Soibel noticed that unlike English-language publications, many Spanish-language news organizations did not have foreign correspondents stationed in Israel. She had to work to interest them in stories about Israel. "The first big one, when she was able to bring in Spanish-speaking journalists was when [Pope Benedict] came to Israel" in 2009, Mizrahi recalled. "The pope is always a big story in Spanish-speaking countries, because obviously the Catholic Church is the predominant religion."

In large part, the decision to launch TIP's Spanish division came from the reality that many people in Spanish-speaking countries are deeply religious, as Mizrahi noted. "This was at a time when Israel was starting to realize allies in the evangelical Christian world, and some of the largest numbers

of evangelical Christians we actually see within the global Hispanic population," Soibel explained. Among many Latino Catholics, she said there's a desire to visit the Holy Land. "They may not know much about Israel, but the Holy Land they know a lot about, and it speaks to them in a spiritual and an emotional way," she noted.

TIP's Spanish division was eliminated shortly after Mizrahi left the organization in 2012. Rather than staying on in a different role, Soibel took a couple of the project's donors and went out on her own, creating Fuente Latina. The organization has staff in Miami, Los Angeles, Spain and Mexico City, and consultants scattered through Latin America.

"We know exactly [how] each country and each outlet that we engage and work with covers Israel," Soibel said. As an example, she cited El Pais, "our equivalent of The New York Times, [which] is out of Spain. They have a correspondent in Israel." But, Soibel said, Spain is home to growing antisemitism. (At a neo-Nazi march in Madrid in February, one speaker said, "The Jew is the culprit.") And since Spain has a small Jewish population, Fuente Latina steps in to provide resources to the country's reporters.

Soibel insists that Fuente Latina's role is not to promote Israel unequivocally, or be an apologist for the country on an international stage. "We're not the spokespeople of Israel," she said. "We, in essence, are giving Israel a voice in the global Spanish-language media, which is distinct [from] us constantly promoting the Israeli side," she said.

During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic last spring, Soibel recalled, "Nobody was interested in international stories. Everybody was looking local." Fuente Latina's response was to create a network of Jewish medical professionals from around the world and give them media training to speak to Spanish-language media. Soibel and her team would also point to Israel and say, Israel "has overcome the same challenge you have in L.A., or you have in Mexico City." Fuente Latina would then make Israeli experts available to talk about technology they were using to fight the virus, or about how they handled COVID lockdowns.

Part of Fuente Latina's objective is

to counter foreign disinformation about Israel. HispanTV, a Spanish-language broadcasting network operated by the Iranian government, employs journalists across Latin America. HispanTV launched in 2011, during the Arab Spring. Soibel noted that the launch happened around the time that "the Spanish community was kind of waking up and getting more interested in what was happening in the Middle East," Soibel said. With the weight of an entire government propaganda apparatus behind it, HispanTV has a wide reach in Latin America.

For years, Fuente Latina has been conducting outreach to journalists, both proactively and in response to Iranian and other anti-Israel falsehoods. But come this summer, Fuente Latina will be launching its own digital media publication. "Think of a Latin Jewish AJ+ with a twist," she said, referring to Al Jazeera's digital media brand that targets young people. "We need to create a new digital brand, to engage Hispanics, because this is an incredible opportunity for us — and I think for the U.S. Jewish community in general — to now engage Hispanics that maybe we didn't have access to in the pre-pandemic era." ♦