

## THE WEEKLY PRINT

*The Etihad exec with a lifelong love of Hebrew; George W. Bush paints a new chapter; The TikTok exec looking to spread Hasidic values; Known for his Jewish art, Michael Aram reflects on his Armenian roots; Hoboken's first Sikh mayor is on the front lines of fighting antisemitism; and Would Eleven Madison Park go all the way?*

MAY 3, 2021

## The Etihad exec with a lifelong love of Hebrew

*Amina Taher, a vice president at the UAE-based airline, made her first-ever trip to Israel last month — and is already planning her return*

By Amy Spiro

A month ago, Amina Taher stepped onto an airplane for the first time in 14 months. As the vice president of brand, marketing and partnerships at Etihad Airways, Taher was used to flying “four to five times a month” pre-COVID.

“Not being able to be in my home, in the skies, was difficult,” she told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview. Being able to get back on a plane, “I was like a little kid who’s traveled for the first time. It was very emotional, and it was very magical.”

That flight on April 6 marked a series of other firsts: The first commercial flight between Abu Dhabi and Tel Aviv for the UAE-based Etihad, and the first time Taher had ever visited Israel.

Inaugurating a new flight, “and for it to be [to] Tel Aviv, I couldn’t ask for a better reopening,” she told *Ji*. And while Taher only spent 26 hours on the ground in Israel last month, she was instantly hooked.

“I was only there for 26 hours, but I had 22 dishes that I wanted to try, food that I didn’t have time to experience,” she said, noting a jam-packed schedule with multiple events. But after her brief visit, “the only

one takeaway that I brought back... was the people, and how hospitable and warm and welcoming the Israelis were. It was unbelievable, and that was my key takeaway from my very short round trip.”

Taher also left a strong impression by giving a short speech at the flight launch in Hebrew, which went viral in certain corners of the internet.

“I’m very excited to be a part of this historic event and to inaugurate the new route between Abu Dhabi and Tel Aviv,” she said in accented but clear Hebrew. “The Abraham Accords are, first of all, about peace between nations, between the Emiratis and the Israelis.” The Accords, brokered last year by the Trump administration, normalized relations between Israel, the UAE and Bahrain.

Taher, who speaks six languages, told *Ji* that she has cultivated a lifelong interest in the Hebrew language, dating back to when she was a child.

“The relationship I have with Hebrew was very much established at a very young age, since I was 12,” she said. “When I was in third grade, I was in an international school in Dubai. And there was a girl in my class

called Tamar, and I really liked her name.”

When she asked her mother about the name and researched it online, she discovered that it had Hebrew origins. “That was the first time I realized that Hebrew existed,” she said. “I started to, as a kid, being curious, I love the language. I’m very much into the typography and... over the years I’ve started listening to Israeli music.”

But she never imagined that her few Hebrew sentences would gain so much traction online.

“I didn’t know that it would attract that much attention on social [media],” she said, noting that the positive reactions far outweighed any negative chatter. “The fact that people appreciated it — I was very grateful, it was overwhelming in a good way.”

Today, she said, she would characterize her Hebrew as being “kindergarten material,” but said each day she dedicates 30 minutes to reading the Sefaria app to improve her skills, as well as printing out her iPhone keyboard in Hebrew to study. She rattled off the names of her favorite Israeli musicians, including Evyatar Banai, Shlomo Artzi and Idan Raichel.

And her efforts in Hebrew, she said, were appreciated in Israel, even among those who suggested she sounded like she spoke with a French accent.

“People encouraged it,” she said, “they like it and they appreciate it, which makes me happy and want to make an effort.”

Taher has spent the past seven years at Etihad, working her way up through the ranks to serve on the airline’s executive leadership committee. After getting her bachelor’s degree in Abu Dhabi, she earned a master’s in public administration at Harvard and an MBA from the London Business School. She credits her drive for a top-tier education to her grandmother — who never learned how to read.

“She was illiterate, she didn’t read and write, but she was so pro-education, and she was my biggest supporter and fan,” she said. “She encouraged me always to continue my education, and I felt, especially as a young girl, if you want to be out of your box, and out of your world, the best thing to do is learn and be curious and inquisitive.”

Taher, who was featured on the cover of *Elle Arabia* in December as one of “the Emirati women shaping the UAE,” is the only

female senior executive at Etihad. But she stressed that the company is a welcoming place for women.

“I hope we get more females; it’s not something that I’m proud of,” she said. “I think it’s a good example to set, but I really hope we get more women in leadership roles, especially in aviation.” But Taher said she is largely “fed up” of being asked about being a woman in a male-dominated industry.

“For me it’s not about gender or religion or your background,” she said, “it’s what you bring to the table and your experience and your leadership qualities.” The UAE, she said, “is a big supporter when it comes to women in leadership; you’ve got a lot of UAE women as ministers, as ambassadors, and even company-wise, we’re very open to women in key positions.”

Taher said she plans to return to Israel in June for a slightly longer trip to strengthen tourism connections as well as position Etihad as a stopover airline for connecting flights. And she also has goals to see more museums and cultural sites — and eat more food.

“I just want to learn and embed myself more in the culture, not just the music,” she

said, noting that she has been embraced by the small but growing Jewish community in the UAE. “I feel welcomed. I feel part of the community and I want to learn and give.”

Taher said while there is occasional negative feedback from non-Emiratis, particularly on social media, about ties with Israel, she feels that overall there is excitement on the ground.

“People are very supportive; everyone that I’m exposed to, and I’m exposed to a lot of people, are happy,” she said. “There are a lot of Emiratis... who are excited and want to go to Israel.” In the UAE, she added, “part of our DNA is — you’ve got coexistence, you’ve got tolerance, you’ve got all these skills — everything that we say and you hear is embedded in the leadership, but also in the character of the country and the people.”

And she hopes the newly inaugurated flight path will serve as a boon to tourism in both directions.

“This is something exciting for us, not just for Etihad, but also for Emiratis as a nation, to be able to experience and come to Israel,” she said. “So obviously with launching the new route, this is incredibly exciting.” ♦

MAY 3, 2021

## George W. Bush paints a new chapter

*A look behind the scenes of the former president’s newly released collection of paintings highlighting immigrant contributions to America*

By **Matthew Kassel**

In his new collection of oil paintings, *Out of Many, One: Portraits of America’s Immigrants*, former President George W. Bush has assembled a deeply personal tribute to a long list of immigrant entrepreneurs, intellectuals, activists, athletes, public servants and other figures whose contributions to American society he admires.

“Throughout my life and career, I have had the privilege of seeing the profound and positive influence of newcomers,”

writes Bush, whose subjects include former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, professional baseball player Albert Pujols, former PepsiCo CEO Indra Nooyi and Chobani founder Hamdi Ulukaya. “I painted the portraits of people who, in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, never lost faith in their future.”

The portraits — 43 in all — make a compelling argument for the value of immigration, now a subject of intense debate in American politics. So intense, in

fact, that Bush admits he delayed publishing the book, which was released last month by Crown, until after the election. “I did not want the people I painted to become exploited politically,” he says. “While I recognize that immigration can be an emotional issue, I reject the premise that it is a partisan issue.”

“Today, Americans rightly worry about the consequences of a fast-changing world and a broken immigration system,” Bush acknowledges. “Unfortunately, as in the past,

fear seems to dominate the discourse. In the process, we tend to forget the contributions immigrants make to our nation's cultural richness, economic vitality, entrepreneurial spirit and renewed patriotism."

In making the case for a humane approach to immigration, Bush has put forth a series of expressive, colorful and creatively textured portraits that demonstrate his increasing maturity as a painter. He took up the pastime a few years after leaving office, and since then has trained his brush on a variety of world leaders and veterans, who are the subject of his 2017 collection, *Portraits of Courage: A Commander in Chief's Tribute to America's Warriors*.

But Bush makes clear that his newly developed painting chops shouldn't overshadow a more urgent message. "My hope," he concludes, "is that this book will help focus our collective attention on the positive impacts that immigrants are making on our country."

With that in mind, *Jewish Insider* spoke with four of the book's subjects about the president's message on immigration as well as the unique experience of being painted by a former president.

### **Henry Kissinger**

"I think he makes me look like a thinking person," Henry Kissinger, the 97-year-old author and former statesman, said approvingly of Bush's handiwork in an interview with JI. "I thought he did a terrific job, and if one considers that he had never had a paint brush in his hand until after he was president, that's quite an achievement that he could do it."

Kissinger, who is Jewish, arrived in the United States in 1938 as a refugee from Nazi Germany before ascending to the upper ranks of American government, most notably as President Richard Nixon's secretary of state and all-around éminence grise, where he exerted a powerful — and polarizing — grip on American foreign policy.

During Bush's two terms, Kissinger was often on call to lend his advice and input on any number of matters. "I was a good friend of Bush," he told JI, "and I saw him quite often when he was president."

"I think it was an important thing for the

president to paint people who came to this country and contributed to the country," Kissinger said, adding: "It is a tradition of this country to be receptive to immigrants." Kissinger said he was "honored" that Bush had decided to paint him. "I'm very pleased with it," he said of the portrait. "I'm going to hang a copy of it. Probably in my office, but in a very noticeable place."

### **Dina Powell McCormick**

Dina Powell McCormick, who served in the Bush administration as director of presidential personnel and then as assistant secretary of state for educational and cultural affairs, was born into a Coptic Christian family in Cairo and moved to the U.S. when she was five years old.

"We've often talked about the fact that another big reason people come to the United States is to practice their faith freely," Powell McCormick said of her conversations with the former president. "It's extremely humbling as an immigrant to be part of President Bush's new book," she added, "and particularly, featured among such incredible immigrants who really represent the very best in our country."

Powell McCormick, who now works as global head of sustainability and inclusive growth at Goldman Sachs, served as former President Donald Trump's deputy national security advisor between 2017 and 2018. "I am so incredibly proud to be a citizen of our country and so proud that our nation is a place that so many people from all around the world have such a strong desire to come to," she said. "I think that's the message in the book."

Powell McCormick said she has enjoyed reading the book with her daughters. "That's probably been the most fun for me, is having them read the stories about these incredible immigrants," she told JI, "and having them see that the common thread of all 43 is this intense desire to give back to a nation that's given us so much."

She and her husband, business executive David McCormick, have tried to convey to their children "just how lucky they are to be citizens of this country," Powell McCormick said. "And how lucky they are to be able to grow up and achieve anything that they hope to achieve, and that we really encourage

them to think about public service."

### **Mariam Memarsadeghi**

Mariam Memarsadeghi was born in Iran and came to the U.S. when she was seven years old, during the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Since then, she has become an outspoken advocate for democratic reform in her native country.

In 2010, she founded Tavaana, an educational initiative dedicated to empowering Iranian citizens, and now works as a senior fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, a think tank in Ottawa. In 2017, she was picked to serve in the Presidential Leadership Scholar program, a collaboration between several presidential centers, including Bush's.

"It's really constructive that President Bush has done this," Memarsadeghi said of the book. "Particularly for the Republican Party, it's important to recognize that we are a land of immigrants, and that the United States has historically gotten its hope, hard work, patriotism, optimism — and so much more, really — from immigrants, a source of constant renewal for democracy."

At the Bush Center four years ago, Memarsadeghi saw some of the former president's veteran portraits in person, and recalls being moved by them. "I had seen how he takes a very personal and passionate attachment to what he's painting," she told JI. "He tries to make other people feel the importance of these people's lives through the portraits and the biographies."

### **Lev Sviridov**

Growing up in Moscow under and after Soviet rule, Lev Sviridov was often beaten up for being Jewish. In 1993, he moved with his mother to the U.S. and endured further hardship while homeless on the streets of New York City. Through the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights — now Human Rights First — he met the businessman Tom Bernstein, now a mentor who helped Sviridov and his mother get back on track. Bernstein is a friend of Bush's, which is how Bush found out about him.

Sviridov, a chemist and Rhodes scholar who directs the Macaulay Honors College at City University of New York's Hunter College,

said he was flattered when the former president's chief of staff reached out to see if he would be interested in participating. "I thought, 'Why not?'" Sviridov said.

"I think it's great that he started by painting people who were political figures and allies of his and moved on to celebrating veterans and trying to bring awareness to veteran issues," Sviridov told JI. "But I think in many respects, especially now, to bring out the issue of immigration, and to try to highlight the issues that immigrants

face and the assets that they bring to this country, and to try to change the narrative, is quite important."

Right before the pandemic, Sviridov got the chance to spend time with Bush at an event in New York. "He showed me some of the drafts and sketches," Sviridov said. "The only thing I said was that my nose was coming in too sharp," he joked. "But he said that he thought he nailed it, so what are you gonna do?"

"What can I say? I'm a chemist," Sviridov

added. "I'm not an art critic." Still, Sviridov suggested that witnessing the former president's artistic process was ultimately profound. "There's nothing, frankly, more intimate than sitting down to paint someone," he said. "But I'm also cognizant that this is a great way for us to refocus a broader debate and a broader conversation on what it means to be an immigrant in America." ♦

MAY 4, 2021

## The TikTok exec looking to spread Hasidic values

*Israeli-born Michal Oshman, who now lives in London, has penned a new book exploring how Jewish principles can help with everyday struggles*

By Amy Spiro

When Michal Oshman walked into Facebook's London offices on her first day of work at the social media giant, she encountered a question emblazoned on the wall at the entrance: "What would you do if you weren't afraid?"

The question struck a deep chord with Oshman, 45, who felt that she had lived much of her life controlled by deep-seated fears and anxieties. And, while she didn't know it at the time, that prompt would set Oshman, an Israeli-born, secularly-raised Jew on a life-changing religious and spiritual journey.

"It was only when I was about 37-38 [years old], after trying every single thing I was aware that was possible to deal with anxiety and fear and despair and mental health challenges that many of us face, when I discovered Judaism more from the spiritual side," Oshman told *Jewish Insider* in a recent interview from London, where she lives with her husband, Yair, and four children. "Then I started slowly, slowly practicing, which is when I started healing my soul."

Oshman, who recently started a new job as TikTok's head of culture, is now publishing a book titled *What Would You Do If You Weren't Afraid?: Discover a Life Filled with Purpose and Joy Through the Secrets of Jewish Wisdom*. Part memoir, part self-help book, Oshman recounts her own upbringing as the daughter of Yehuda Hiss, Israel's former chief pathologist, and the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors — and her journey to self-healing through Jewish wisdom. Each chapter is based around a concept in Jewish thought and is followed by questions aimed at guiding the concepts' application to the reader's own life.

Once Oshman realized how much she personally gained from her experience, she set out to share her insights and discoveries with the world.

"I really got myself off of very, very bad thoughts and started to enjoy things that I just couldn't see before," she said. That realization, she said, prompted her to seek to share her discoveries with the larger world. "This book was written for universal readership, it's not

aimed just for the Jewish community," she added. "My hope is that the people that will show curiosity to read this book are people that are curious about developing themselves... anyone that's interested in spirituality... anyone that just is curious to learn something new."

Above all, Oshman urges readers to take actions to transform their lives and work toward becoming the person they want to be. "I invite you to be curious. Take that first step and explore something you would never have expected to explore," she suggests. "Step out of your comfort zone. Who knows where it could lead?"

At the end of each chapter — which have titles such as "Shvira: Grow Your Broken Heart" and "Teshuva: Return to Yourself" — is a section titled: "If you change nothing, nothing will change" (dubitably attributed to Albert Einstein). There Oshman suggests steps based in Jewish and Hasidic concepts to guide readers on a path to personal growth. "I invite you to think how you could replace fear with action and cross your internal and external life bridges.

Remember, crossing a ‘bridge,’ big or small, is taking action,” she writes in one section.

Oshman grew up in Tel Aviv, in a house that was more about “Israeliness than Judaism in any spiritual way,” she recalls. As a young newlywed, she moved to London with her husband and worked to start over and climb the career ladder in a new country. After a series of business and tech jobs, she arrived at Facebook seven years ago to join its leadership and development team.

It was during that time, she recalls, that she first began to explore spirituality, Jewish beliefs and her own journey to religious observance.

“It definitely wasn’t a one moment” of discovery, she told JI. “Slowly, slowly, I started lighting [Shabbat candles] but without expecting anything, really, just trying it.” But after a while, she said, there was “this moment when I realized that this lighting of the candle does open a door to something within myself... and I started playing around with the idea of keeping Shabbat.”

The Oshman family began by keeping two hours of Shabbat in the evening, “then it was four hours, then until the morning... every time we kind of took another step forward.” But while Michal was beginning her spiritual

exploration, she had to make sure her husband and her children were on the same page.

“Any moment when we had a bit of tension I reminded myself that the most important thing is ‘shalom bayit,’ or domestic harmony. She said while it wasn’t always easy, the couple had “a lot of honest conversations” about each other’s positions. “[Yair] was right, he didn’t marry a woman that keeps Shabbat or keeps kashrut, but we evolve in life and I think part of marriage is to try to go with each other on a journey.”

The news also came as “a little bit of a shock” to her parents and siblings back in Israel, but they were ultimately accepting.

Oshman said that her employers at Facebook were also welcoming of her new observance, even when it meant she stopped answering the phone or emails on Saturdays.

“Facebook has an amazing company culture,” she said. Oshman said that at past jobs in London, she experienced antisemitism and bigotry, and she always felt hesitant about sharing her heritage. But on her first meeting with her manager at Facebook, he asked, “Michal, what do you care about?” she recalled. The question, she said, took her by surprise, and prompted an unexpectedly real response about her

Jewish and Israeli roots.

“I was really annoyed with myself after because I was like, ‘Why did I even say that?’” Oshman recalled to JI. “But the reason I said it is because my manager’s... humility and his curiosity — which very much represents what it’s like to work for the company — just opened up something inside me that I was never even considering to open up.”

And her experience at Facebook, she said, “wasn’t any special treatment that I got,” but was indicative of a larger company policy to “help people bring themselves... their full selves, for whatever that is, if it’s faith, whether it’s sexuality, if it’s how you want to live your life — it’s very inclusive.”

At the beginning of this year, Oshman left Facebook and joined TikTok as its head of culture in the European branch of the popular social media app. The move, she said, was motivated by her desire to “move kind of to a startup” and have an “opportunity to shape something with them.”

And the company, she said, is equally welcoming of her faith and beliefs.

“TikTok has also very much embraced me and welcomed me with who I am,” she said. “The same way that we want our platform to welcome different voices and different opinions and have that diversity on the platform.”



# Known for his Jewish art, Michael Aram reflects on his Armenian roots

*The Palm Beach-based artist says a shared sense of trauma and tradition connects Jews and Armenians that lead many women to stay silent about their struggles*

By Gabby Deutch

Michael Aram, the artist whose metal jewelry and houseware designs are a staple at high-end department stores around the country, knows that his ethnic-sounding name presents a Rohrschach test to his diverse customer base.

"I have my Persian ladies who say, 'Of course, you're Persian,'" Aram told *Jewish Insider* last week. "My Armenian ladies just know, 'He's Armenian.' And then a lot of my Jewish customers are like, 'Oh, where in Israel are you from?'"

The "Armenian ladies" are right: Aram is an Armenian Christian, which might come as a surprise to anyone who knows him for his considerable Judaica collection. His passion for ritual objects is rooted in his Armenian faith, which he believes has a similar set of values — family, tradition, faith — as Judaism.

"There are tremendous similarities in our cultures, which are sort of uncanny not only in terms of family life and importance of religion, but just very strong cultural ties," said Aram, 58.

The connection he feels to Judaism is also rooted in a shared sense of trauma. "Certainly genocide, and the Holocaust, is something that has affected both our community as well as, of course, the Jewish community. The tie-ins are just uncanny," noted Aram, who is a descendant of Armenian Christians who fled the region after a massacre at the hands of the ruling Ottomans. "My great-grandfather, who lived in Constantinople, was rounded up on April 24th 1915, which was the equivalent of our Kristallnacht," said Aram, referring to the Nov. 9, 1938, "Night of Broken Glass," in which

Nazis destroyed Jewish businesses and sent thousands of Jewish men to concentration camps. President Joe Biden officially referred to the 1915-1916 Armenian atrocity as a "genocide" last weekend — becoming the first U.S. president to do so — a statement Aram called "long, long overdue."

Growing up in the heavily Jewish New York City suburb of Scarsdale, Aram also felt a personal kinship to Judaism from a young age: "I have been to more bar mitzvahs than I have been christenings," Aram said, laughing. He and his family moved to Palm Beach, Fla., during the pandemic; they are now regulars at an Armenian church in another Jewish mainstay, the nearby Boca Raton.

As a child, he knew few other Armenians in Westchester County. A growing Armenian community has popped up in White Plains, where his parents still live. Aram created the art for their church, St. Gregory the Enlightener. "I had the pleasure to design all the interiors for [that] Armenian church, everything from the cross on the top of the building to the baptismal font to the railings of the church, to all the candlesticks, and all the objects that are related to the Armenian church service," Aram explained. He has also created artworks for the pope.

So why is it that Jewish objects and themes — his extensive collection includes Seder plates, mezuzahs, menorahs, kiddush cups and tzedakah boxes — feature so prominently in the work Aram sells to the public?

To some extent, it's simple:

That's what people wanted to buy. "Bloomingdale's had been asking me for years and years to design Judaica for them," Aram recalled.

But Aram said he did not want to design Judaica only for commercial reasons. "Initially, I paused, because I thought, 'Everything I design has to be authentic to me, and how can I design a piece of Judaica? I'm not Jewish.' And then I dug deeper."

"I'm just so fascinated with religious imagery as a whole," Aram explained, noting that religious objects often have deep personal meanings. He finds inspiration in "the idea of objects as iconic for families, things that are passed down from generations, things that are used in celebration, things that are used in worship, heirlooms that are treasured and that become part of family history — whether it's a religious object, or whether it's something that your grandmother always used, or that you remember on your mother's table," Aram said. "For me to design into that world is just something very thrilling."

The first Jewish artwork he designed, in 2005, was a menorah, using the olive branch, which represents peace, as a motif. "It was an olive branch, which was a sculpture first and foremost, and then when you turned it upside down, it became a menorah."

Bloomingdale's liked the menorah, and Aram's speciality of creating Judaica took off from there. "Soon after," Aram said, the piece was featured in *The New York Times*, "which was shocking. That was the beginning of it with my partner Bloomingdale's, who then just kept saying, 'This is really something that's

so special, so different, really working, resonating with the Judaica market,' and I found my groove."

Aram's Jewish work is some of his best known, and his Judaica has appeared on recent gift guides curated by New York Magazine, The New York Times's Wirecutter, the Jewish Journal and Martha Stewart Living. A section on his website is devoted to Judaica; no other religion has a presence on the site.

Some of the objects appear under distinctly Jewish names, like the Matzah Plate or the Tree of Life Tzedakah Box. But many objects have generic names, perhaps allowing them to appeal to non-Jewish shoppers. The Wisteria Gold Square Plate is almost certainly intended to hold matzah during

Passover; the Pomegranate Celebration Cup is clearly a kiddush cup; the Twist Bread Board and Twist Bread Knife are surely meant to be used for challah on Shabbat.

This is not an accident or an oversight: many of the Jewish images and themes Aram uses also appear in other religions and cultures, including his own. "I grew up crawling on Armenian carpets with tree of life imagery made with pomegranate dyes," he said. "I never design things which don't have personal meaning for me, so for me to create objects of ritual is so potent, because growing up in the Armenian church, objects had power." Still, he believes artists should not be confined only to their own experiences. "I wonder if people ask Jonathan Adler why he does Christmas,"

Aram asked sarcastically, referring to the Jewish potter and interior decorator whose ubiquitous designs are sold in large retail stores like Target.

Aram has also seen that his Jewish objects transcend religious boundaries, with a diverse group of customers buying the Judaica.

"I was with an Indian friend this past weekend — she's a Hindu — she was asking to buy one of my menorahs, which I didn't think was strange at all from her, because I've been to her home and I've seen her home altar, where she has Christian idols, menorahs, Hindu gods," Aram explained. "She says, 'My God is every color and every creed,' which I thought was so beautiful." ♦

MAY 5, 2021

## Hoboken's first Sikh mayor is on the front lines of fighting antisemitism

*Growing up in a Sikh family, Ravi Singh Bhalla faced discrimination in his small town. Now he wants to make Hoboken a welcoming place for people of all faiths*

By Gabby Deutch

When Ravi Bhalla moved to Hoboken, N.J., he was a recent law school graduate thinking he'd stay for a few years and save on rent by not living across the river in New York City. "I was a bachelor," said Bhalla. "Hoboken checked all those boxes [for] a young, single person wanting to have access to Manhattan, but also being a Jersey boy like myself, wanting to stay in New Jersey."

Politics was not a consideration: "I found a nice space," Bhalla recalled, "and, you know, at 25 years old, I didn't know who the mayor was." Now, more than two decades later, Bhalla is still in Hoboken — and running for his second term as the city's mayor.

Bhalla, a Democrat and the first Sikh to hold elected office in New Jersey,

has made fighting discrimination a priority. "My first act as mayor, when I got sworn in on January 1, 2018, was to drive straight from my home to my office and sign an executive order declaring Hoboken a fair and welcoming community," he told Jewish Insider in a recent Zoom call. Bhalla has cultivated close ties with the city's Jewish community, including outreach in the aftermath of the 2018 mass shooting at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life synagogue and the more local shooting at a Jersey City kosher supermarket in 2019.

"Such public statements and appearances at times of crisis are of course only one tiny part of the role of a mayor, but such gestures are deeply appreciated and help to set the tone for the city as a whole," said Rabbi Robert

Scheinberg, the rabbi of the United Synagogue of Hoboken, who noted that he is grateful for Bhalla's "very warm and understanding relationship with our Jewish community."

Bhalla, who wears a turban, is easily identifiable as Sikh, making him a target for religious discrimination. "There were flyers a few days before I was elected that said, 'Don't let terrorists take over this town,' trying to equate my appearance with terrorism," Bhalla said. "I always teach my children to have pride in who they are, including their outward appearance. To equate our religious faith with that word was so offensive."

Early in his career as an attorney, Bhalla, 47, won a very personal — and very public — victory for religious

liberty: When visiting an incarcerated client, prison guards demanded that he remove his turban for a search, even though he had not set off the metal detector. He then brought a lawsuit against the Federal Bureau of Prisons for violating his civil rights. Soon after, the Bureau changed its policy: Religious garments would not be included in guards' routine searches of personal objects unless the person wearing them set off the metal detector.

"To a Sikh, removing his turban in public is the same as a strip-search and as intrusive as asking a woman to remove her blouse," Bhalla told *The New York Times* in 2003. The court ruling also clarified that yarmulkes and prayer shawls would not be subject to heightened security procedures.

Bhalla admits that being proud of his Sikh identity was not always an obvious conclusion for him, after a childhood in which he often felt like an outsider. "That accumulation of experiences, it can only go two ways," Bhalla explained. "People could be ashamed of who they are. They could want to really assimilate, be like everyone else. Or the other outcome is that it can build your character and make you realize the importance of your identity — and be a positive thing."

The child of Indian immigrants, he grew up in Montville Township in New Jersey's Morris County. They were the only Sikh family in the area, and Bhalla knew that made them different. But they never hid their identity.

When his father arrived in the U.S. for graduate studies at Penn State University, "the person he was with said, 'Before you go on campus, we have to stop at the barber shop, so you can remove your beard and your turban and really assimilate with the other kids on campus,'" Bhalla noted. "That's not the America he thought he was coming to. He thought he was coming to a country where articles of faith would be respected, not frowned upon, and that there was not a need to make a choice between your faith and your ability to achieve the American dream."

Growing up in a majority white town,

"I probably had the darkest complexion of anyone in my school," Bhalla stated. "I was called the N-word on a regular basis, because these kids had never seen anyone who wasn't just white."

Bhalla's parents taught him and his brother that they should not accept such treatment. His mother, he said, "gave me license, if anyone would touch my articles of faith, to physically defend myself." One time at school he got in trouble for a "scuffle" with another kid who touched his hair, and when the teacher told Bhalla's mother about the incident, she defended him. "My mother explained that, 'I gave him full permission to defend himself, because it's really to protect what we deem sacred in our faith community,'" Bhalla recalled.

"That really gave me a more heightened connection to not just the plight of my faith community, but really, to anyone who's treated unjustly for any reason at all," Bhalla said. "That's informed some of my public service as well — sensitivity towards the diversity of our community."

Attending college at the University of California, Berkeley was the first time Bhalla found a real Sikh community. "There were not many, but there were enough people for my faith community to form a student organization," which advocated for Punjabi language classes to be taught at the university, said Bhalla.

His studies continued to take him far from New Jersey, including a master's program at the London School of Economics and law school at Tulane University, which had a law-focused study abroad program. "One of them was in Israel, that gave students the opportunity to study comparative American and Israeli law," said Bhalla. He was also drawn to the country as a religious person — but one whose religion was not one of the three monotheistic faiths represented in Jerusalem.

"When you look at the Second Temple, the Western Wall, that area has the convergence of three major world faiths that have historical

significance. That one area for me was very interesting, especially not being from any of those three faiths," Bhalla observed. "I really almost got to see how these major world faiths got to interact with each other, from an outsider's perspective, from not being from any of those faiths. That generated my interest in studying in Jerusalem."

The experience left a strong impression on him. "Israel is just an amazing country, and the residents of Israel are extraordinarily resilient people," Bhalla said. "It's a tough environment in which the State of Israel operates, and that must, or at least as I observe it, that likely creates some form of strength and resilience."

He carried an interest in politics with him as Hoboken became his home and he started a family. When his law firm represented a city council member in a municipal matter, Bhalla began to realize that the issues that most affected him and his family were not big controversial topics being discussed at the national level, but more local-level policy issues like zoning, density and land use.

"I realized that the decisions that impact you most are made by people at the ground level, that all politics is local," Bhalla said. "I started to hone in not so much on trying to wrap my head around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for example, which I thought I could maybe solve. I was an utter failure in that ambition," he joked.

So Bhalla decided to run for a seat on the Hoboken City Council: "I realized that there was so much ineptitude and incompetence and patronage cronyism, and so much corruption, and that it was actually impacting my property taxes and my quality of life," he explained. "By that time I was married, I had a young child, and thought that it was time to get off the sidelines and try and make a difference by running for elected office."

He was elected to the council in 2009, a role he held until he won the 2017 mayoral race.

Steven Fulop, the Democratic mayor of nearby Jersey City, told JI that he



and Bhalla first connected when they ran for their respective city councils, each of them taking on entrenched interests in the region. “I ran an anti-establishment campaign, outside of the political machine in Hudson County particularly in Jersey City, and he was doing the same thing in Hoboken,” said Fulop. “I think Ravi does a terrific job, and he has a very diverse city over there and a lot of different interests. He’s a great ambassador for Hudson County and New Jersey.”

The issues Bhalla dealt with on the council were “very localized issues. We had a hospital that was in distress, and we had to create an economic turnaround,” he said, and “getting our finances in order was very important.” Now, he remarked, Hoboken is a popular place to live, particularly for people who want to be near Manhattan without the price tag — the same reason he first moved there. “At one point in time, nobody wanted to have anything to do with Hoboken. It was a very industrial, downtrodden city. With time, we have the opposite problem. Now, everyone wants to develop and grow Hoboken, but we’re only one square mile,” he pointed out. Keeping urban growth at manageable levels has been a goal, as well as making the city a place where people will want to settle and start families.

Bhalla has also tried to be mindful of the city’s diverse communities, including the Jewish community. Last year, he signed onto a campaign run by the American Jewish Committee and the U.S. Conference of Mayors called Mayors United Against Antisemitism.

“He was literally one of the first mayors in New Jersey to jump on board and he did it without hesitation,” said David Levy, regional director of AJC New Jersey. “It wasn’t even, ‘Can we talk about this, or what’s this all about?’ He read the statements and said ‘I’m on board. I’m there,’ and he signed up right away. And that was just really heartening.” The Anti-Defamation League reported that New Jersey saw a 73% increase in antisemitic incidents from 2018 to 2019.

The campaign now has more than 620 mayors from 49 states and Washington, D.C. “Being that he’s from another religious minority, he understands the special needs of the minority populations in a diverse community like that,” said Levy.

Bhalla has gotten to know the local Jewish community, meeting with members to celebrate holidays like Hanukkah and to confront challenges like antisemitism. His daughter attended a Jewish preschool in the city, and he has met with her classmates’ parents “that are just afraid about a replication of some sort of a massacre here in Hoboken,” he noted.

“Antisemitism is something that takes all forms,” he explained, “from seemingly innocuous things like verbal exchanges or remarks off the cuff, so to speak, where people might be engaging in unconscious bias, to some of the more obviously egregious forms of antisemitism — whether it’s bias-based criminal mischief through swastikas at synagogues, to, unfortunately, gun violence against the Jewish community.”

After the December 2019 shooting targeting a kosher grocery store in Jersey City, Hoboken sent police officers to help assist as first responders. Bhalla also met with Jewish leaders in the wake of the attack. “The community in Hoboken was, understandably, very afraid. We had to have heightened security patrols” at area synagogues, he said. “We had a community meeting with the Jewish community, and both the police chief as well as myself addressed the congregation, just to let them know that we have your back.”

Following the shooting, Bhalla signed up to participate in an AJC trip to Israel that connected U.S. mayors with their Israeli counterparts. But the trip was canceled because of the coronavirus pandemic, which Bhalla says has been the biggest challenge of his time in office. “When we only had one case of COVID, in mid-March [of 2020], I was the first mayor in the country to shut down bars and restaurants,” Bhalla told JI.

“I was highly advised against it by

people who are not political, but who cared about me, who said that, ‘You’re doing something that is political suicide.’ And my response to that was that my job is to protect the public,” Bhalla noted. “If this actually can save one life, but end my political career, it’s worth it.”

Luckily for Bhalla, the rest of the country soon followed his lead. “I think Hoboken probably is the model we all need to move towards now,” Ashish Jha, dean of the Brown University School of Public Health, said at the time.

Bhalla is up for reelection in November, but he doesn’t currently have any challengers. He is touting his leadership during the pandemic as a model of his successful leadership.

“Whenever we have a blizzard, there’s always a playbook or a handbook — the snow emergency plan, for example,” Bhalla noted. “There’s no playbook for this pandemic.” ♦

# Would Eleven Madison Park go all the way?

*Kosher-keeping New Yorkers dream of certification for the three-star Michelin hotspot*

By Matthew Kassel

The revered Manhattan restaurant Eleven Madison Park took the fine-dining world by surprise on Monday when it announced that it would no longer serve meat or seafood upon reopening in June. The restaurant, which frequently ranks among the best in the world, is well-known for its decadent offerings such as lavender honey-glazed duck and butter-poached lobster — dishes that chef and owner Daniel Humm acknowledged would be difficult to replace.

But having navigated the uncertainty of the pandemic, Humm emphasized that it was “time to redefine luxury as an experience that serves a higher purpose,” as he put it in a statement. “A restaurant experience is about more than what’s on the plate,” Humm said. “We are thrilled to share the incredible possibilities of plant-based cuisine while deepening our connection to our homes: both our city and our planet.”

In the Jewish community, the restaurant was applauded for its newfound commitment to sustainable cooking. “As a vegetarian I was just pleased to see the trend,” Rabbi David Wolpe of Sinai Temple, a Conservative synagogue in Los Angeles, told *Jewish Insider*. “May their kind increase!”

Though not everyone was excited that Eleven Madison Park would continue charging exorbitant prices for vegan food. “It’s sad to me that one of America’s true temples of gastronomy would succumb to the new era of wokeness and capitulate by removing meat and seafood from their menu,” lamented Matt Brooks, executive director of the Republican Jewish Coalition.

Still another group, however, saw room for Eleven Madison Park to go

a step further and make its kitchen kosher. The restaurant will continue serving milk and honey with tea and coffee, Humm has noted, but will otherwise be entirely vegan — obviating the possibility that meat and dairy will intermingle, which is forbidden by Jewish dietary law, and making it simpler to achieve kosher status.

“If 11 Madison Park wanted to go fully hechshered, that’d be AMAZING,” Seffi Kogen, global director of young leadership for the American Jewish Committee, wrote in an enthusiastic email, using a colloquialism for kosher. “But even if they’re not going all the way, they could become an option for Orthodox Jews like me by blow torching and boiling their ovens, appliances and utensils to kasher their kitchen back to a ‘neutral’ kosher status before switching to their plant-based menu.”

The restaurant did not respond to a request for comment about any plans for kosher certification — a process that includes “lots of requirements,” according to Rabbi Menachem Genack, CEO of the Orthodox Union’s kosher division.

Some vegan food establishments in New York have opted for kosher certification through the International Kosher Council overseen by Rabbi Zev Schwartz, including Blossom Du Jour and By Chloe. But if Eleven Madison Park were to go kosher it would represent a significant step for New York’s fine-dining scene.

“My immediate thought is that there is a robust tradition of kosher dairy restaurants and this place could become a new version of that because of the decision they’ve made,” said Roger Horowitz, the author of *Kosher USA: How Coke Became Kosher and Other Tales*

*of Modern Food*.

Kosher dairy restaurants, so named because they do not serve meat, were once an integral component of Jewish culinary life in New York, though they have since faded as the Jewish population has assimilated and new generations have sought other opportunities. B&H Dairy in the East Village, one of few remaining kosher dairy restaurants in the city, has struggled to survive the pandemic but is still hanging on.

While Eleven Madison Park is in a separate class of restaurants, thanks in part to its three Michelin stars and prohibitive price tag, kosher certification would likely attract a valuable and previously untapped clientele as it emerges from a pandemic that has devastated the restaurant industry.

“There’s a huge market in New York City for people who will only eat at a kosher restaurant,” Horowitz said. “They will increase their possible consumer base if they become kosher, no doubt about it.”

Stu Loeser, a modern Orthodox political consultant in New York, seemed to confirm that view when asked if he was holding out hope that Eleven Madison Park would opt to go kosher, though he appeared doubtful that it would happen.

“Since all the reservations for a month already sell out in a matter of hours, it’s not clear that Eleven Madison Park could even handle the same bump in business that Curry Hill vegetarian joints a block over get from being kosher,” he told JI. “But on the other hand, can you imagine how great the Shabbos specials takeout would be?” ♦