

## Minn Rep McCollum introduces bill to condition military aid to Israel

Hannah Davis, special to the WJN

On April 15, Minnesota Representative Betty McCollum introduced a bill in the House of Representatives (HR 2590), called the “Defending the Human Rights of Palestinian Children and Families Living Under Israeli Military Occupation Act.” The bill aims to “promote and protect the human rights of Palestinians living under Israeli military occupation and to ensure that United States taxpayer funds are not used by the government of Israel to support the military detention of Palestinian children, the unlawful seizure, appropriation, and destruction of Palestinian property and forcible transfer of civilians in the West Bank, or further annexation of Palestinian land in violation of international law.”

McCollum stated in a press release that “U.S. assistance intended for Israel’s security must never be used to violate the human rights of Palestinian children, demolish the homes of Palestinian families, or to permanently annex Palestinian lands ... Peace can only be achieved by respecting human rights, especially the rights of children, and this includes the U.S. taking responsibility for how taxpayer-funded aid is used by recipient countries, Israel included. Congress must stop ignoring the unjust and blatantly cruel mistreatment of Palestinian children and families living under Israeli military occupation.”

Representative McCollum and other Congress members have introduced similar legislation in the past: in August 2020, McCollum introduced the “Israeli Annexation Non-Recognition Act,” which would prevent the U.S. from recognizing or providing aid to any area of the West Bank annexed by the Israeli government; she introduced a similar bill in 2017. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.) introduced an amendment to the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act that would prohibit funds in the bill to be used toward

the annexation of the West Bank. None of the bills or amendments received any votes — McCollum’s bills haven’t made it out of committee. In addition, Democrats in Congress have written to past Secretaries of State as well as Israeli leaders expressing their concern over Israeli annexation of the West Bank and use of U.S. aid in the region.

The most recent bill has support from a number of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian organizations, and human rights organizations. A press release from J Street, “the political home of pro-Israel, pro-peace Americans,” asks for a “fundamental reset” of U.S. policy with restrictions on end uses of equipment bought with U.S. aid. IfNotNow, an American Jewish organization advocating for an end to the occupation in Palestine, has also endorsed the bill. Zak Witus, from IfNotNow Detroit, said in a statement, “The Palestinian Children and Families Act embodies the humanitarian Jewish values which Jews across Michigan share. ... We know from leading human rights organizations, including the Israeli NGO B’Tselem, that the Israeli military has in fact illegally detained and abused Palestinian children for years — indeed, decades. We know that the Israeli military routinely demolishes the homes of innocent Palestinian civilians ... I witnessed several Israeli home demolitions myself when I visited the occupied West Bank in January 2020. One day ... the Israeli military razed a shack while an elderly Palestinian man was still inside, sending him to the hospital. He survived, thank God ... [T]hese offenses are being financed in large part using U.S. tax dollars. We in IfNotNow think that supporting this bill is simply the decent thing to do. ... Be they Jewish or gentile, our representatives ought to do the decent thing ...” Other supporters include the National Lawyers Guild and the Movement for Black Lives.

AIPAC, the pro-Israel lobbying group, has opposed the bill, saying it is redundant — that U.S. aid to Israel is already reviewed to ensure the money is used for “legitimate self-defense” and internal security — and that adding conditions to the aid would weaken Israel’s ability to defend itself. Democratic Majority for Israel further states that the aid provided to Israel “cannot legally or practically be used for the rights violations McCollum alleges.”

This current round of legislative interest is an attempt to shift a long-standing policy pattern. Historically, the U.S. has used restrictions on aid to Israel as a diplomatic tool: presidents from Carter to Bush Sr. have blocked or delayed deliveries of military equipment or loans until Israel agreed to participate in peace talks or suspended building of settlements. Presidents since then have moved away from this policy and have separated aid discussions from other diplomatic concerns, but support for this approach may be waning — among voters, at least.

Gallup polling reports that as of this year, 53% of Democrat voters support putting more pressure on Israel to make necessary compromises in the conflict, up from 33% in 2008; only 17% of Republicans support it, however. In addition, the Arab American Institute reports that 51% of those polled support restricting aid to Israel if it continues to build settlements in the West Bank. Kira Berman, a community member in Ann Arbor, submitted a statement to WJN, saying she is “sickened ... over all the recent violence and especially the injustices perpetrated by the Israeli government ... U.S. taxpayers have funded Israel’s military, security, and missile defense systems in the amount of \$146 billion as of last year, without any real restrictions ... I support HR 2590, but it is only a tiny step and has no real chance to pass. ... Nicholas Kristof ... wrote that, ‘A basic

principle of peacebuilding is to stop committing war crimes.’ I would add that the U.S. should stop funding such war crimes immediately. ... I must ask if any country has a right to try to create an ethnically or religiously homogeneous nation state (the aim of settlements and evictions and occupation)? [T]he history of such attempts has been filled with tragedy and atrocity, for Jews and many, many others.”

While the idea of conditioning U.S. aid to Israel has growing support amongst voters, this change is not reflected in Congress. McCollum’s bill has only 25 cosponsors in the House, all Democrats. Community member Bernie Banet reflects on these hurdles, saying that, “Israel and the U.S. should be working to end the occupation of the West Bank rather than hardening it with de facto annexations. [S]ettlement expansion, demolitions, forcible transfer are not in Israel’s long-term security interest. Sincere efforts to share the space and to cooperate for mutual advantage are a better approach. Israel still has existential security challenges ... U.S. support of Israel’s military defenses should therefore continue. [This] bill is an attempt to send a message that the U.S. does not support a hostile and perpetual occupation of the West Bank ... [It] would ‘prohibit’ certain uses of U.S. military aid without defining consequences for violating the prohibitions. ... [It] will not be passed by Congress. I believe that without [a bill] the Biden administration and a new Israeli government can work with the Palestinians ... to end the occupation ...” While the introduction of such a bill is currently a dead-end, its supporters seem to be trying to spark conversation more than actual legislative change. HR 2590 has been referred to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and will likely, as its previous iterations experienced, never make it out of committee. ■

### Kol hakavod Rabbi Miriam Geronimus *Continued from page 1*

“help people be seen and figure out how to be seen in the messy world.” She did not make the decision to leave the sciences immediately but spent a year of hard discernment regarding her academic identity. But once she made the decision to make the change and become a rabbi, she didn’t doubt it or regret it.

Geronimus chose to pursue rabbinic studies at the Reconstructionist Rabbinic College because of its combined focus on Jewish history, culture, and spirituality. As a longtime spiritual seeker with an academic orientation, she found the rabbinic program that would work for her. She particularly appreciated the RRC’s emphasis on practical rabbinics.

In fulfilling the required internships each year, Geronimus served at several synagogues, a Jewish continuing care retirement community, a campus Hillel, as a hospital chaplain, and as a Hebrew school teacher. The relationships that developed from these experiences were particularly enriching and meaningful and allowed her to “journey with individuals in their Jewishness and their lives in general.” She also appreciated that in her internships she had the opportunity to work with people of all ages and in a variety of settings — with 4th graders, college students, elderly people, and people in all stages of life in congregational environments.

On her path as rabbi, Geronimus aims to continue to work with people of all ages and diverse backgrounds, a deep value that is behind the creation of her latest venture for ensuring inclusiveness in the Jewish world. During the pandemic, Geronimus became the founding rabbi of the Cleveland Jewish Collective, a new pro-

gressive Jewish community in Cleveland. CJC is committed to “growing a community that reflects and celebrates the diversity of the Jewish people and fellow travelers.” The choice of the word “collective” instead of “congregation” was very intentional as participants are building the community together and are drawn or “collected” from different parts of the Cleveland area.

Having lived in Cleveland three years before starting rabbinic school, Geronimus saw the need for something new and more progressive in the city. She recognized that although Cleveland enjoys a vibrant Jewish community with several amazing Jewish institutions, there are a number of groups of Jews whose needs are not being met and who feel left out, namely millennials, queers, people of color, interfaith families and those with very progressive political views. Such Jews don’t feel that they can fully be themselves when they show up at a synagogue.

Geronimus wants to create a community where people are appreciated for who they really are, where they have a safe space to wrestle with and figure out “how do I want to live in this world,” and given that, “how do I interact within the diversity of the community.” The people who participate in the Cleveland Jewish Collective “want to dig into Black Lives Matters” and “be involved in the larger conversations happening in this country” as a Jewish community. Geronimus wants to create a place that feels like home for people who didn’t feel like they had a Jewish home before, which “has to be done in conversation with all the perspectives in the mix. We are creating as we go.” ■

### For Rabbi Ben Freed, journalism and the rabbinate are two similar jobs *Continued from page 1*

stories.

His mother, Eileen Freed, executive director of the Jewish Federation of Greater Ann Arbor, and his father, Dr. Gary Freed, a professor of pediatrics (primarily health policy and services research) at the University of Michigan, also founded a day school when the family lived in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

But it was when the Freeds moved to Australia for three years, leaving their son, already on the staff of *The News*, and a roommate — another young Jewish journalist — to live in their house, that Freed’s love for Judaism evolved.

The roommates turned the dwelling into a “Moishe House” of sorts, holding Shabbat dinners and building sukkahs for Ann Arbor’s young Jewish adults.

One night, while the two were cleaning up after a Shabbat dinner, Freed’s friend reflected on how he grew up without much Jewish culture at home, though he did have a bar mitzvah.

Since moving in with Freed, he continued, he now wanted this type of life for himself and wanted to help others experience it.

Freed described that talk as a “light bulb event.” Thereafter, he thought seriously about becoming a rabbi.

Freed is aware that he starts his career at a time when organized religion is declining, and many Jews are finding their spiritual needs

fulfilled in other ways (“on a yoga mat ... in an ashram ... on a mountain”).

Yet he is convinced that Judaism remains equipped to give young and old Jews what they need to live full lives.

“We have this amazing Jewish spirituality that Jews can plug into, and that’s exciting,” he said. “I want people to be able to plug into their traditions — their ancestors’ technology — for what it means to be spiritual.”

But Judaism is not just what happens within the four walls of the synagogue, Freed added. He looks forward to meeting with his colleagues and learning how they can collaborate.

In fact, he said the top item on his “checklist” so far is to get to know the entire community.

It’s not like the soon-to-be cleric doesn’t know what to expect from the rabbinate. He’s already held several rabbinic internships during his years at JTS, in Jerusalem, on college campuses, in Riverdale, New York and Little Rock, Arkansas — that last stint a solo pulpit.

Freed described his time as student rabbi as being “a rabbi with training wheels.” He always had his mentors to fall back on and to bounce ideas off.

“Now,” he said, “I’m ready for the training wheels to come off.” ■