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**THE JEWISH FEDERATION OF GREATER WASHINGTON**

*Imagine Israel Podcast:*

**Interview with Joseph Gitler**

March 3, 2018

Robbie Gringras: Welcome to the Imagine Israel Podcast, brought to you by the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington. Imagine Israel is the initiative of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, connecting Washingtonians to Israel and Israelis, through the lens of social change. With every Imagine Israel podcast, we get to meet innovative Israeli influencers and changemakers, people addressing social and economic challenges in Israel. We'll hear from people whose lives and whose work intersect as they address issues in Israeli society. And I'm your host, Robbie Gringras, and I'm coming to you from Makom, the Israel Education Lab of The Jewish Agency for Israel.

So in this episode we're going to dig into the question of food insecurity in Israel. I doubt anyone would say that many people are starving in Israel, but there is a growing swathe of people in Israel who are not able to feed themselves or their families as any of us would wish. And this is also working families, people who are on the edge; maybe they're eating only one meal a day rather than three, and kids in particular. And all this is going on at the same time as overcatering, food waste, food surplus is rampant across Israel.

Now, of course it's not a uniquely Israeli issue. It happens across the world. And, for example, Greater Washington has its very own DC Central Kitchen to gather waste, food, and distribute it to those who need it. But just think about starting something like that up in Israel when your

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- Hebrew isn't great and you've only got one car and a family fridge. 1
- So that's the story I went off to Raanana to hear from Joseph Gitler and 2  
his organization, Leket. 3
- So, Joseph Gitler, very, very nice to meet you. 4
- Joseph Gitler: Nice to meet you as well. Thank you for coming out to my home to make 5  
this super easy for me. 6
- Robbie Gringras: With pleasure. We do anything for Greater Washington. 7
- So tell me, Joseph; it sounds like, whilst we're meeting you as an Israeli 8  
changemaker, you seem to have excellent English, albeit with an odd 9  
accent. 10
- Joseph Gitler: As I do love when people say to me, "You have a great accent for an 11  
Israeli," but I've been in Israel 18 years. I made aliyah in September 12  
2000. And the Washingtonians listening to this will of course recognize 13  
my New York accent, many of them, by the way, because they're 14  
actually from New York originally. 15
- Robbie Gringras: I don't think we're allowed -- I'm going to have to edit that out, 16  
but -- 17
- Joseph Gitler: No, no. It's okay. I don't want to make enemies but, I know when I go to 18  
sport events down there, sometimes there can be more Yankees fans than 19  
local fans of the games. So they know what I'm talking about. 20
- Robbie Gringras: Okay. So I'll leave that in and we'll wait for people to write it 21  
under the line afterwards. 22
- So you arrived about 19 years ago and you moved straight into working 23  
at this strange organization, Leket, or -- 24
- Joseph Gitler: No, I made -- I went to law school in New York. My wife Leelah is from 25  
Toronto. We made aliyah with one kid. And when we got here, I left the 26  
law behind and I went to work in a hi-tech company that we are families 27

fortunate to own here, and I worked there for about three years and then  
got really concerned, during the height of the Intifada, with tourism  
down and hi-tech investment down and the first-ever poverty report put  
out by our Social Security. That just got me down. It was a really hard  
time in early 2003. And I made a decision that I wanted to see could it be  
-- in the land of so many wonderful charities, could there be something  
missing.

And what I --

Robbie Gringras: So hang on.

Joseph Gitler: Yeah.

Robbie Gringras: You're telling me that, up until then, there had never been a report  
about poverty in Israel?

Joseph Gitler: Not like that. I mean, there was a lot of action in poverty but, as a  
national study from the government itself, nothing like that had ever (sic)  
put out.

Robbie Gringras: What was it saying?

Joseph Gitler: It was saying that --

Robbie Gringras: What shocked you?

Joseph Gitler: What shocked me was not the usual suspects, and I don't mean that in a  
bad way, but certain communities, Arab communities, ultra-Orthodox  
communities that are known for having high poverty rates, but for me it  
was the working poor, families where husband, wife often both were  
working and they were still struggling to make ends meet. And that was  
such a harsh thing for me to hear.

And certainly those listening in Washington -- this is no different in the  
U.S. People working full time and still needing help from the  
government or needing help from charities is such a damning --

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- Robbie Gringras: Um-hum. 1
- Joseph Gitler: -- thing to our societies. And for me it was too much to bear. 2
- And I announced to my cousin, who I was working with, "I'm going to 3  
take off a few months and I need to discover and look and see what's 4  
missing." And what I was shocked, to this day -- nearly 15 -- it's almost 5  
15 years to the day; what I'm still shocked at is there was no DC Central 6  
Kitchen, which listeners will understand; there was no Maryland Food 7  
Bank. There were a lot of smaller charities feeding the poor but no one 8  
saying, "Let's put the blinders on and just figure out how we deal with 9  
excess food, not taking care of the poor directly but saying, 'Well, what 10  
are all the farmers doing? What's the army doing? What are caterers 11  
doing? What are manufacturers doing? What are corporate cafeterias 12  
doing?'" 13
- Everyone was just out there on their own. World overproduction of food 14  
is estimated by the UN Food Programme at about 40%. So you're talking 15  
about crops that are rotting in the fields. You're talking about things that 16  
don't get sold in supermarkets. You're talking about a wedding where 17  
there's too much food that's been produced. They do that because they're 18  
scared. Right? 19
- The problem is you don't see my face, but in Washington those who see 20  
me will see my face when I came. 21
- Robbie Gringras: See, he's looking stressed. Yeah. 22
- Joseph Gitler: You know, it's -- everyone's scared of running out of food at an event. So 23  
they'd rather produce 20 to 30% more for that one event. And let's take it 24  
one step further. As a world, we have to produce excess food. We can't 25  
have a situation where one year there's some parasite in the wheat crop 26  
and now we really don't have enough food to feed the world. 27

So we're always going to produce 5, 10, 15% more than we need. The issue is in the West especially; we're producing 40, 50%. And that's where people like Leket or the DC Central Kitchen, which a super-famous organization in the U.S., etc., come into play.

Our job is to figure out how to make sure that that excess food which is safe, healthy, and nutritious doesn't end up in landfills, which is an environmental disaster, but gets to feed those who need it. And this genre of work is expanding day in, day out.

Robbie Gringras: So you went out on your fact-finding mission. You'd read the report. You saw that there was a problem with excess food. Then what happened?

Joseph Gitler: So I started to call caterers.

Robbie Gringras: What, you just --

Joseph Gitler: Well, I actually --

Robbie Gringras: decided, "I'm going to pick up the phone"?

Joseph Gitler: I went to Toronto for a week. I just picked Second Harvest -- that was my organization that I chose. And the nice thing about the world I'm in, it's a very sharing world. I went to Toronto, spent a week there, saw a little bit about how this world works, and came back with a head of steam.

And so first I visited agencies; that I did before I went. And they all told me the same story: "We're not getting donations of food. We're busy taking care of homeless people, battered women, Holocaust survivors. Our job is to help them get out of their situation. Food is part of what we do."

An afterschool club for kids -- food is an important component. It's a hook.

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- Robbie Gringras: Right. I see what you mean. 1
- Joseph Gitler: But they don't exist simply to feed. 2
- So I sat there; I said, "Okay, so my job is to figure out what they need, 3  
then go to the food companies and see what we can get from them." And 4  
so the first thing that they needed, I saw, was cooked food. If we can 5  
bring them cooked meals, high-quality, ready to go, we've taken a 6  
cooking burden off of them, we've taken a purchasing burden off of 7  
them. 8
- I started to call caterers. The response was overwhelmingly good. 9
- Robbie Gringras: So this is just you on your own -- 10
- Joseph Gitler: So it was in my office -- 11
- Robbie Gringras: You just -- 12
- Joseph Gitler: -- calling 100 caterers. My Hebrew was weak. I wrote down the words I 13  
needed, the words -- many of them were the same: "catering" is 14  
"catering", you know. So there's a lot of that sort of thing. 15  
You know, I just said, "I know you have extra food. I know you're 16  
throwing it away. Would you give it to me?" The response, well, wasn't, 17  
"What kind of deduction can I get? What about if there's the food 18  
poisoning?" It was, "We know there's need in Israel. When can you be 19  
here?" 20
- Robbie Gringras: Wow. 21
- Joseph Gitler: And so that -- you know, a lot of preconceived notions that I had about 22  
responses I would get. The responses were awesome. 23
- Robbie Gringras: Your preconceived notions, did they come from having spoken to 24  
the Toronto group and the Washington group as in -- in other countries, 25  
is it more difficult to get moving? 26
- Joseph Gitler: So, yes. And I grew up in New York. I have a law degree. Litigious 27

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- societies. I just -- you know, it wasn't even, "Are you really a registered agency? Can we see your refrigerated" -- nothing; "What kind of training do you give your volunteers?" It was, "We've been waiting for this." 1
- Robbie Gringras: Wow. 2
- Joseph Gitler: So it was just -- you know, this is the type of attitude that sometimes serves Israel well and sometimes serves Israel badly. In this case, if my first ten responses had been more American type of responses, I swear we would not be talking today. This never would have happened. 3
- Robbie Gringras: It would have knocked you down, knocked you down. 4
- Joseph Gitler: Yeah. I would have said, "Okay, this is irrelevant here. Maybe I'll go a different direction." But the direction, which was immediate, me out the door buying containers, taking my Subaru station wagon out at night at 10, 11, 12, 1 o'clock -- it was within the day, picking up food, putting it in my refrigerator at home, then my wife saying, "We need the refrigerator for our house," buying used refrigerators, putting them in my gara -- meaning, things took off, things that maybe elsewhere -- 5
- Robbie Gringras: You made the first phone call. 6
- Joseph Gitler: I made the calls. The caterers were into it, and then I -- 7
- Robbie Gringras: On that first day? 8
- Joseph Gitler: And I said to them, "Okay, I need to know your schedule." 9
- Robbie Gringras: Yeah, "When shall we start?" 10
- Joseph Gitler: "Where are you? Are you in-house? Are you cooking in one place and then catering in another? How can I connect with you?" I don't want to just come out and then get two pieces of schnitzel. I want it to be semi-substantial. 11
- Robbie Gringras: Okay. And they gave you the answers. 12
- Joseph Gitler: They gave me the answers. And some answered their phone at 11 at 13

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night. Some answered their phone at 1 in the morning. 1

Robbie Gringras: Okay. 2

Joseph Gitler: And I was just going out -- 3

Robbie Gringras: Saying, "So we got this crazy American guy." Just get into your 4  
car that day? 5

Joseph Gitler: That day, the next day, depending where they were working. 6

Robbie Gringras: So you stop at a few places. You just turn up and you say, "Hey, 7  
I'm the guy to pick up your spare food"? 8

Joseph Gitler: I brought my containers. "Where can I work? Are there any waiters who 9  
can help me?" "No." "Yes." "Am I in the way?" "No." "Yes." "Can I take 10  
this?" "No, we're saying that for the family. We haven't" -- you know, 11  
very much getting my feet wet, seeing -- and the waiters love it, because 12  
at the end of the day it's the waiters throwing away the food. No one 13  
really likes to throw away -- 14

Robbie Gringras: Right. 15

Joseph Gitler: -- their hard work. 16

I said, "I'll pick it up. I'll distribute it free of charge. Okay," and that was 17  
it. They just -- I made it easy for them. 18

Robbie Gringras: Right. "All of a sudden, it's easy for me to be generous with what 19  
I'm throwing away anyway. Just help me" -- 20

Joseph Gitler: Right. And that's how we really work -- 21

Robbie Gringras: And then you just drove around -- 22

Joseph Gitler: -- almost primarily till today. 23

Robbie Gringras: Wow. So were there not concerns from government whether it's 24  
healthy, whether it's fresh, whether it's -- 25

Joseph Gitler: The government was concerned once we started doing a lot of this and 26  
our name started getting out there. And they spent a lot of time with us, 27



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never giving me, you know, a letter of approbation -- 1

Robbie Gringras: Okay. 2

Joseph Gitler: -- but just saying, "We are comfortable with the way you work. Keep on 3  
doing it like this and we'll stay out of your hair." 4

It's a very, actually, nice and adult way of doing things -- 5

Robbie Gringras: Yeah. 6

Joseph Gitler: -- in my book. And that would never happen in most countries. The 7  
government would be in your gotchkas (ph.). 8

Robbie Gringras: Is that what you're hearing from other organizations? 9

Joseph Gitler: I've visited dozens over the years, and they're always amazed, especially 10  
in cooked food. 11

Robbie Gringras: Yeah. 12

Joseph Gitler: Forget everything else that we do. Cooked food especially, they're 13  
jealous. A lot of organizations around the world just don't get access to 14  
this kind of food. 15

Robbie Gringras: Wow. 16

Joseph Gitler: Everyone's nervous, even though there're laws. Let's take the States; 17  
Good Samaritan laws, which protect donors from legal liability -- 18

Robbie Gringras: Oh, boy. 19

Joseph Gitler: -- as long as they're not reckless. And despite that, because of the 20  
litigious culture -- you know, your lawyer advises you. 21

Robbie Gringras: Don't touch it. 22

Joseph Gitler: Who needs this? Who needs this. Stay away. 23  
A lot of agencies themselves tell well-meaning food donors, "No, no, no, 24  
I can't take this. That's too risky." 25

Robbie Gringras: Wow. 26

Joseph Gitler: So it's a bit of a Catch-22 in certain countries. I thought that's what I was 27

- going to run into here, but I didn't. 1
- Robbie Gringras: Strange name, "Leket". Where does that come from? 2
- Joseph Gitler: So interestingly, it's a strange name to non-Hebrew speakers. Hebrew 3  
speakers know "*leket*" is one of the biblical terms that explain to farmers 4  
how they had to behave towards the poor. Technically means "gleaning". 5  
So if people remember the Book of Ruth where she's collecting excess 6  
crops in the field and meets her husband, you had to leave a corner of 7  
your field, you had to leave things that fell off the wagon, for the poor; it 8  
had to be in an accessible place. So we've modernized it. 9
- Robbie Gringras: So, according to Jewish tradition, there are ways that farmers 10  
ought to behave so that the poor can eat the excess? 11
- Joseph Gitler: Right. I think it was farmers, because farmers were businesspeople in 12  
those days. 13
- Robbie Gringras: Right. 14
- Joseph Gitler: So it made sense that they were talking to them. So Leket is just a 15  
modern-day adaptation. 16
- Robbie Gringras: You started off, this guy driving around in your Subaru. What's 17  
the size of Leket now? 18
- Joseph Gitler: Ooh, it's big. So Leket today has about 110 employees. 19
- Robbie Gringras: Wow. 20
- Joseph Gitler: We have a budget -- cash budget this year of about \$15 million. On that 21  
budget of \$15 million, we should bring in - I'm doing math in my head 22  
now - about \$75 million worth of food. That means cooked -- about 3 23  
million cooked meals, about 45 to 50 million pounds -- sorry, you'll have 24  
to translate that; I'm talking to Americans now . 25
- Robbie Gringras: Oh, you're talking weight, not money. 26
- Joseph Gitler: Weight. 27

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- Robbie Gringras: Okay, right. 1
- Joseph Gitler: Okay. -- of fruits and vegetables. Yeah, not British pounds. That would - 2  
 - woo. About 45 to 50 million pounds of fruits and vegetables. Should do 3  
 about 80 different crops this year. Thousands of food donors. About 15 4  
 refrigerated trucks. About another 15 other pickup trucks, delivery 5  
 vehicles. 6  
 When you think about us, you have to think about us as a FedEx for food 7  
 rescue. We are a logistics organization finding food, getting it free of 8  
 charge. We spend our money on staff because -- 9
- Robbie Gringras: Um-hum. You need people. 10
- Joseph Gitler: -- that's who moves the food, drivers, forklift operators, food raisers, 11  
 volunteer coordinators. About 50,000 volunteers this year picking in the 12  
 fields. 13
- Robbie Gringras: Wow. 14
- Joseph Gitler: So people who are listening are welcome to the fields to come volunteer 15  
 in our warehouse, sorting fruits and vegetables for redistribution. 16  
 It's a mega operation run by a very committed staff, by a very committed 17  
 board. We have way more to do. We estimate we're doing less than 5% 18  
 of cooked meals or fruits and vegetables. That's a study we do; we have a 19  
 food-waste study we do every year; it's a major study. And so we want to 20  
 grow. I'd like to see us doubling in size within the next couple of years. 21  
 It's a challenge. I mean, the biggest challenge is financial, not because -- 22  
 I mean, we have almost no competition. It's the greatest business in the 23  
 world. I wish it was a business, sometimes. IPO. But -- 24
- Robbie Gringras: Why isn't the government doing it? I'd always seen, when I made 25  
 aliyah, that Israel was supposed to be the home of the Jewish people. 26  
 And in a home, people get fed. 27

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Joseph Gitler: I think it's no -- 1

Robbie Gringras: Do you -- 2

Joseph Gitler: I think we're no different than any other country. 3

Robbie Gringras: No, no, I appreciate that, but I know that part of my reason for 4  
coming to live in Israel was that I wanted Israel to be more special, more 5  
impressive than other countries. And do you sometimes think that it's -- 6  
not that you're not doing amazing work, but isn't it a shame that it needs 7  
a charity to do that? 8

Joseph Gitler: So, look, I'll say as follows: Certainly, Israel's followed the rest of the 9  
world with privatizing more social services - we've seen that over the 10  
years - and leaning on the private industry to take care of it. You know, 11  
sometimes I think about it and I get frustrated. And truth be told, we are 12  
getting more and more money from the government every year. So I 13  
don't think anyone thinks the government should be doing what Leket is 14  
doing, per se. I think what you really mean is shouldn't the government 15  
be taking care of feeding the poor in whatever way it is. So whether that 16  
be taxpayer dollars, outsourcing it, that's one way of doing things. And 17  
there is money flowing in, but it's still very, very small. 18

Governments have to make choices. And often I say to myself, while I'd 19  
love the money, because I'm as greedy as the next guy, there's tougher 20  
issues, especially to raise money for, where the government needs to 21  
maybe put its resources. And let's add to that. The State of Israel has 22  
financial issues that no one else has. 23

You know, I remember a couple years ago, we were supposed to get 24  
some significant government funding, about \$2 million a year. And our 25  
budget was much smaller then. You know, that's one day, and the next 26  
day the fighting started in Gaza and a budget surplus of 7 billion NIS 27

was gone in a week. We have issues that no one else has. 1

So we have to sometimes say - I'll say it in Hebrew - *rachmanus* (pity). 2

We sometimes have to take a little bit of pity on the government. I'm not 3

saying everything's peachy clean (sic) here and that there shouldn't be 4

more money flowing to welfare, but it's a complicated -- I have a 5

solution always for that question: We can raise our taxes. So when you're 6

ready, Robbie, you'll be the first guy to sign up. You're British. 7

I'm saying -- 8

You know, you should have seen his reaction, everyone. It was actually 9

better than I expected. 10

You know, we can go Scandinavia style and then we can -- the difference 11

will be Leket will be able to take care of everyone, but a lot more people 12

will need service from Leket, because they won't be able to pay their 13

bills. It's an issue. And frankly, outside of 60, 70% taxes, which is what 14

you see in some of those places, no one has figured it out. 15

The U.S. Department of Agriculture spends \$70 or \$80 billion a year on 16

feeding programs for the poor, and yet everything I've spoken about 17

today exists everywhere in the U.S. Okay? 18

More of the money and food that is powering the Maryland Food Bank 19

and DC Central Kitchen does come from your taxpayer dollars. The 20

flipside is we are a much hungrier organization. We get no food from the 21

government. We get very limited -- this year we'll get maybe 5% of our 22

budget from the government. So it's made us hungry to find our own 23

food sources. 24

So everything has its pros and cons. I'd love for -- more money from the 25

government. But on the other hand, it's -- there's no perfect solution. The 26

best solution is people earning a good wage. That's the best. And so I 27

pride ourselves on Leket paying a decent wage to our employees. I wish 1  
we could pay them more. They all deserve it. But everyone who comes 2  
to work for a charity knows what they're getting into, unfortunately. 3

Robbie Gringras: Tell me about it. And so tell me what's one of your best memories 4  
in the last 15 years of Leket? When was -- when did something happen 5  
that you said to yourself, you know, "That's what I'm in this for" or 6  
"That's something I'm going to tell my grandchildren"? 7

Joseph Gitler: Well, so I definitely remember one of the earliest pickups I ever did was 8  
with this -- a nice English gentleman from Raanana; Nigel. And we were 9  
maybe six weeks in, and he had come and volunteered. And he had one 10  
of those old Volvo station wagons. And we went to a big pickup in Tel 11  
Aviv and we're filling up the car and we're filling up the car and we're 12  
filling up the car, and now it's time to put the -- we had to put the food in 13  
the passenger seat. And he's -- Nigel, he's British; he said, "Joseph, it's 14  
either you or the bread." 15

Robbie Gringras: Wow. 16

Joseph Gitler: So it was the bread and he left me behind. So I remember that because I 17  
was, like -- I said to myself, "We've really arrived." It's not just the 18  
quality. Look, one event, hundreds of meals from one little event, one 19  
small -- "small" -- 500-person wedding. And we're feeding 200, 300 20  
people. 21

Robbie Gringras: Wow. 22

Joseph Gitler: To me, that was just gold. Okay? 23  
And of course, you know, the flipside is the people who are helping and, 24  
you know, seeing -- you know, one of the things I've been talking about a 25  
lot lately is this program we're helping very specific high-school, at-risk - 26  
- there's about 20 high schools in Israel that are for really at-risk kids; 27

and just seeing kids who never thought they'd go to the army, never  
would have thought of university. And now in partnership, Leket and the  
schools, where the schools are creating free afterschool clubs to keep the  
kids in later in the day. Leket provides the food, because you can't keep  
the kids in school if you don't give them a lunch. So it's a partnership. In  
fact, it's the only time in all our years where we actually went out and  
said, "Create programs." Right? If we had trouble giving away our feed,  
then maybe we'd try to create programs.

Robbie Gringras: If you build it, we will feed it.

Joseph Gitler: Right. So we've never really done that, because there's tremendous  
demand for the food we're distributing. But we saw what this program --  
it started in Ofakim -- how powerful it was for the kids, the kids staying  
in school, because if they get the lunch, they got to stay in school.

Robbie Gringras: Right. Right, right.

Joseph Gitler: Okay? And the food is primarily coming from the army. So it's just a  
beautiful circle. So it's coming from taxpayer dollars --

Robbie Gringras: Yes.

Joseph Gitler: -- something that every Israeli -- if you say to them, "Tell me something  
about the army," they'll all say, "Oh, we wasted so much food." So now  
something that everyone despises in this country has a solution; it's  
feeding the future, the at-risk future. Right? It's a win-win. It's not ending  
up in landfills. And now kids who maybe didn't have big dreams, they're  
dreaming a little bit more than they did. And some of them are  
succeeding.

And people who hear me speak in Washington -- you'll see some photos  
from that, maybe even some videos from that project. So these are things  
that spring to mind now. And there's a lot of successes. It's really been a

tremendous 15 years. 1

Robbie Gringras: Sounds like an incredible journey. So, Joseph Gitler, thank you 2  
very much for having us. 3

Joseph Gitler: Thank you for the opportunity of being on the show. And goodbye, 4  
Washington. 5

Robbie Gringras: And as Joseph said, you will have the opportunity to hear the 6  
story of Leket Israel live on Wednesday, April 25th. The Jewish 7  
Federation of Greater Washington invites you for an evening you're not 8  
going to want to miss. Not only will you have the opportunity to hear the 9  
story of Leket Israel from Joseph Gitler himself in person; the night is 10  
also going to include a fascinating discussion between Joseph and 11  
Andrew Finke, who is the COO of DC Central Kitchen, the organization 12  
that Joseph mentioned several times, which is a food-rescue organization 13  
based in the nation's capital. 14

So this fascinating discussion is going to focus on the common 15  
challenges that Israelis and Americans face with food insecurity, as well 16  
as the unique issues they each face, the Washington issues and the Israeli 17  
issues. And we'll also hear about the creative solutions that they've 18  
developed. And this whole discussion is going to be moderated by 19  
Jonathan Stahl, vice president of Ballpark Operations and Guest 20  
Experience for the Washington Nationals baseball team. 21

Program's going to take place at the Washington School of Law in 22  
Tenleytown, from 7:30 till 9 p.m. Remember, that's on Wednesday, April 23  
25th. And to learn more about this incredible event or to register, please 24  
visit [shalomdc.org/changemakers](http://shalomdc.org/changemakers). 25

And thank you for listening. This podcast, part of the Imagine Israel 26  
initiative, is brought to you by The Jewish Federation of Greater 27



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(End of podcast)	3