

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 April 12, 2021



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. (The moniker is written in Hebrew: הרב של פוט.)

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.

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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.



Takoma Wellness Center (Hilary Eldridge for Jewish Insider)

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.

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.

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.



Takoma Wellness Center (Hilary Eldridge for Jewish Insider)

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.



Takoma Wellness Center (Gabby Deutch)

“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.”