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JULY 10, 2025

Jewish students forge ahead in attending Ivy League universities, despite fears of antisemitism

Columbia's Hillel director said that the university is on track for a large incoming class of Jewish freshmen next year

By Haley Cohen

Earlier this year at a symposium in New York City, Jewish scholars gathered to analyze the recent surge of antisemitism on college campuses and debate whether Jewish students still belong at the country's elite bastions of higher education.

"I certainly don't think that we should abandon great citadels of learning or be chased out of them, although to be there takes fortitude that I don't think should be asked of every student," Rabbi David Wolpe, a former visiting scholar at Harvard University Divinity School, said during the event's opening address. "So I'm going to give a selective answer: it depends who."

Over the next two months, college freshmen will embark on new chapters at universities around the country. Many Jewish students have found appeal in other top schools, such as Vanderbilt in Nashville, Tenn., and Washington University in St. Louis, where administrators were quick to enforce university rules amid rising antisemitism in the aftermath of the Oct. 7, 2023, terrorist attacks, and therefore avoided much of the chaos that played out on other campuses.

But some Jewish students are still seeking admission to the country's most prestigious schools.

Who are these students making the choice to display the fortitude that Wolpe referenced by attending Columbia and Harvard —- two Ivy League campuses that have been beset by nearly two years of controversy over anti-Israel encampments and classroom disruptions, physical assaults of Jewish students and battles with the federal government, including potential loss of accreditation — over an alleged failure to address antisemitism?

Leah Kreisler, a recent graduate of Winston Churchill High School in Potomac, Md., decided in ninth grade that she wanted to attend Columbia. Kreisler plans to enroll in Columbia's dual-degree program with the Jewish Theological Seminary and will begin next year, following a gap year in Israel.

Recent events have only reinforced Kreisler's dream of attending the storied institution. "Columbia has always had a politically charged environment and I honestly think that fits a part of who I am," she told *Jewish Insider*. "I like having those kinds of discussions and engaging with people I disagree with. That spirit drew me to the school."

She's also hopeful that by the time she arrives at Columbia for the 2026-27 school year, "things will get figured out." The university is in talks with the federal government to restore the institution's federal funding, which was slashed in March due to the antisemitic demonstrations that have roiled the campus since Oct. 7.

Still, Kreisler admitted she's "a little bit scared" to face antisemitism, which she hasn't directly encountered in her tight-knit D.C. suburb with a sizable Jewish community. "There will probably be people in the streets doing antisemitic things," she said, noting that she often gets "weird looks from Jewish members of the community" when she shares her plans to attend Columbia.

Laura Hosid runs a private business in Potomac guiding high school students through the college admissions process. She works with many students like Kreisler who are "often willing to overlook [antisemitism] at schools like Harvard and Columbia, if they can get in," Hosid, who is Jewish, told JI.

"At slightly less selective schools, though, it's more of a factor," she said. "Students are willing to look away if there's too much anti-Israel stuff."

"Jewish life at Columbia is Dickens-esque: the best of times and the worst of times," said a Jewish Columbia alum who requested to remain anonymous. "There are real challenges, but at the same time, you can go to Columbia Hillel, the Kraft Center for Jewish Life, and access the most interesting people in the world. Bob Kraft shows up for events," he said, referencing the billionaire owner of the New England Patriots for whom the center is named.

"I'm certainly not discouraging students if they are interested in schools like Columbia and Harvard," Hosid continued. "I'm just making sure that they are well aware of what's going on there and how it compares to what the climate is like at other schools."

A Jewish Columbia alum who requested to remain anonymous told JI that he still sees his alma mater as "an amazing New York City school with an incredible alumni network." So he was supportive when his daughter, an incoming Columbia freshman, committed to the university.

"Jewish life at Columbia is Dickens-esque: the best of times and the worst of times," he said. "There are real challenges, but at the same time, you can go to Columbia Hillel, the Kraft Center for Jewish Life, and access the most interesting people in the world. Bob Kraft shows up for events," he said, referencing the billionaire owner of the New England Patriots for whom the center is named.

In 1967, Columbia's student body was 40% Jewish, according to a *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* report at the time. But even as Jewish enrollment at Columbia has declined since then, it still has one of the highest percentages of Jewish undergraduates in the Ivy League, at an estimated 22%. "The numbers for this year's incoming class are quite strong," Brian Cohen, executive director of Columbia Hillel, told JI.

Cohen said that the center's "top priority is to make sure that every Jewish student feels seen and supported and part of a vibrant Jewish community from the moment they arrive at Columbia University."

"Everything we hear anecdotally is that the number of applications of Jewishly involved students to Harvard were stable — if not increased — from last year to this year," said Rabbi Jason Rubenstein, the director of Harvard Hillel.

That's been Hillel's goal for years — even before antisemitism reached record highs on campus. But Cohen noted that for the past two academic years, "everything is ramped up."

"We want to make sure that when we meet students and families face-to-face they already have some idea of who we are and the relationship isn't starting from square one," he said, outlining two priorities. "One is that students understand that they are entering into this thriving, diverse Jewish community on campus. [The second is] that, should any problems arise during their time at Columbia, they have trusted resources to go to that are easily accessible and can help support them in navigating the various university processes."

Rabbi Jason Rubenstein, the director of Harvard Hillel, is similarly spending the summer preparing for a new class of Jewish students. He's hearing less concern around antisemitism from incoming students and their parents compared to last year. "I think that's a combination of all of us adjusting our baselines and knowing what we're getting into, and that last year was calmer on campus than the year before."

Like Columbia, Harvard has had billions of dollars in federal grants and contracts frozen by the Trump administration. The university filed suit against the government in April, claiming that the cuts violate the First Amendment. A 300-page antisemitism report released by the university in April described "severe problems" that Harvard's Jewish students have faced in the classroom, on social media and through campus protests.

"Everything we hear anecdotally is that the number of applications of Jewishly involved students to Harvard were stable — if not increased — from last year to this year," Rubenstein said. Ramaz, a Modern Orthodox Jewish day school in Manhattan, for instance, admitted five students to Harvard the past admissions cycle, with four planning to attend. "That's the highest in living memory," Rubenstein said.

One of the Ramaz graduates starting at Harvard this fall is Stella Hiltzik, who grew up hearing "incredible stories" from her mother's time on the Boston campus. "But it wasn't until I visited Harvard last year that I decided that was the place I wanted to be," Hiltzik, whose major is undecided, told JI. She was drawn to Harvard "even despite all of the crazy things happening on campus" after seeing "how supportive, warm and comforting Jewish life on campus is — especially the Chabad. It feels like a sense of home," Hiltzik said.

"Despite everything going on, when I say I'm going to Harvard, most people are proud of me and supportive," Hiltzik continued. "But there are some people who ask me, 'What are you thinking?' For me, it's honestly a cool conversation to have, because I get to tell them how I'm excited to be a Jewish voice on campus during these hard times."

"Despite everything that has happened at Columbia," Leah Kreisler, a recent graduate of Winston Churchill High School in Potomac, Md., said, "I don't think that the solution to antisemitism is to remove ourselves from these institutions. That's been my mentality throughout the college [application] process."

"Jewish students are not being dissuaded," Rubenstein said. "Which is a great thing because some people are chanting 'Zionists are not welcome here' and the one thing they most want is Jewish students to not come here."

Students like Hiltzik and Kreisler offer a quiet rebuke to the billionaire alums of the Ivies who have begun to withhold their considerable donations. One Israeli venture capitalist went as far as to try to lure Jewish students attending Ivy League schools to transfer to universities in Israel.

"Despite everything that has happened at Columbia," Kreisler said, "I don't think that the solution to antisemitism is to remove ourselves from these institutions. That's been my mentality throughout the college [application] process."

"People shouldn't be afraid to go to any of these schools," echoed Hiltzik. "At the end of the day, you're going to get a good education and you're going to show everyone how cool it is to be a proud Jew. I feel, in a sense, that this is my version of fighting for my people."♦

JULY 10, 2025

As FIDF reels from leaked memo detailing abuses, sources say group's leaders engaging in deceptive fundraising practices, wasteful spending

Former employees, lay leaders tell eJP that the board chair has effectively taken over the organization since the Oct. 7 attacks, creating a 'poisonous' work environment

By Judah Ari Gross

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

The Friends of the Israel Defense Forces has gone into crisis management mode following the leak of an internal investigative report to the Israeli news outlet Ynet last week that detailed serious allegations against the organization's top leadership, particularly its board chair, Morey Levovitz, of mismanagement, wasteful spending and creating a toxic work environment.

The organization's board has scheduled a meeting on Thursday to discuss the issues and consider removing Levovitz from his position, sources inside the organization told *eJewishPhilanthropy*.

This would be the board's second vote on the matter. Earlier this year, as the allegations first emerged, a vote was held by the board's executive committee to determine if Levovitz should continue as chair — including Levovitz himself, a departure from the common practice of board members recusing themselves in such cases. The 10 board members who participated were split evenly on the vote, and Levovitz retained his position. Levovitz's term ends in September, though he has expressed an interest in extending it.

In response to the leak, the organization has hired a crisis communications outfit — on top of its existing public relations firm — and brought on additional legal assistance. It has also issued strict orders to employees and lay leaders not to speak publicly about the situation.

Since the 18-page report was leaked last week, eJP has spoken with several current and former FIDF employees and lay leaders across the United States and Israel to assess its veracity, finding that in addition to the allegations that were included in the report, current and former employees have also raised credible concerns within the organization about dishonest fundraising tactics and the improper handling of sexual harassment claims.

FIDF did not respond to eJP's questions on the subject, instead issuing a statement in support of Levovitz and CEO Rabbi Steven Weil and stressing the organization's fundraising efforts on behalf of Israeli soldiers and bereaved military families.

"When you have 60-80 employees saying the same thing, at some point, it can't not be true," one former employee told eJP.

In an email to employees earlier this week, the FIDF's executive committee said it was considering next steps. "Our Board Executive Committee, and the full Board of Directors, are also working to evaluate the findings of the Investigative Committee they created, to make our organization more effective and efficient. We intend to act promptly and swiftly and we will keep you updated as those conversations progress," the committee wrote.

Multiple sources told eJP that after a significant rise in donations to the organization in the wake of the Oct. 7 terror attacks, contributions have decreased sharply in the past year, with multiple donors explicitly telling FIDF that they were withholding funds because of the situation with upper management.

"They are substantially below their target [for 2025]," one donor source told eJP. "We know of many donors who are holding donations and explaining that it's until actions are taken to address the problems," the source said, adding "many, many donors."

In the Bay Area FIDF chapter, for instance, donations dropped from more than $7 million annually to well below $1 million this year after its popular executive

director was fired following a disagreement between her and Levovitz, according to two sources connected to the chapter.

The report, which remains closely guarded by the organization, was prepared this spring by an investigative committee led by board members Garry Sobel, Fred Distenfeld and the organization's counsel, Steve Rubin. The committee spoke to more than 30 people, the majority of whom were current and former employees.

The committee found that for roughly the past two years — particularly since the Oct. 7 terror attacks — Levovitz has served as the de facto CEO of FIDF, while Weil, the organization's actual CEO, has served in a lesser administrative capacity, while still drawing one of the highest chief executive salaries in the Jewish world.

According to multiple sources, Levovitz has repeatedly declared to FIDF staff and lay leadership that he is the true head of the organization, including in meetings where Weil was present. Weil has also regularly stated that Levovitz was helping run the organization.

"It has just been accepted that that's the way it is," one source said. "He was never elected officially [to serve as CEO]."

The investigative committee detailed a number of irregularities in its report, which was presented to select board members last month, including a highly irregular exclusive agreement between FIDF and the Israeli travel company Ortra, which is run by a close acquaintance of Levovitz, requiring that all of the organization's missions and other travel be purchased through the firm. This arrangement was allegedly reached unilaterally by Levovitz, without going through a standard tender process. A former senior FIDF employee, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told eJP that when individual FIDF chapters tried to use cheaper alternatives for their missions to Israel, Levovitz intervened and canceled their visits to military bases as a form of punishment for not using Ortra.

The report also found that Levovitz has demanded reimbursement for his travel expenses to Israel, which often include business and first-class seats, amounting to more than $53,000 — in contrast to previous chairs who paid for their own travel and accommodations, in addition to making six-figure donations to the organization, which Levovitz has also reportedly not made.

Though figures within FIDF have been concerned about the direction that the organization was heading for more than a year, they sought to address the issues internally to avoid embroiling FIDF in a public dispute that could damage its reputation and harm its ability to raise money for Israeli soldiers, sources said.

"It's a beautiful organization for what they do for the IDF, but it's the wrong people running it," one source said.

Another source said that they first became alarmed after Levovitz removed Rubin, the organization's counsel, from FIDF's executive committee, meaning decisions were being made without the same level of legal oversight. After being pushed out, Rubin eventually left the organization, but was brought back once the national board heard about the matter.

Nearly all of the sources who spoke to eJP requested to speak on condition of anonymity for fear of retribution from FIDF's upper management. "I'm afraid they will destroy my donor base," said one former employee, who has since become CEO of another Jewish nonprofit. "These are dangerous, dangerous people."

Two former employees, from different FIDF regions, told eJP that they had seen cases of the organization "double-selling" projects to donors. "Steve double-sold an amphitheater to another donor," said the former employee who now leads another nonprofit, whose family also donates to FIDF. "A Florida donor bought the same amphitheater for the same base as us. They told us that we can get a garden instead."

In another case, she said, her mother-in-law visited an IDF base where they had contributed to a project for which FIDF had raised $40 million. When she mentioned it to the base commander, he was confused, telling her, "Our base only received $12 million."

"If you sold a project for $40 million, and the base received $12 million, where's the rest of the money?" she said.

Multiple sources also accused the organization of wasteful spending, both in terms of luxury travel for staff — business-class seats and pricier hotels than those used in the past — and in additional conferences and retreats, including one for staff members in Cyprus.

"Donors think that they are helping soldiers, but Morey created a conference," one source said. "I would like to see where you have donor consent to create an executive conference."

All of the sources — coming from three different regions of the United States and Israel, most of whom had been involved with FIDF for many years, some for more than 20 — described a severe deterioration in the work environment at the organization in recent years, using terms like "cutthroat," "poisonous," "bullying" and "mafia-like."

"Everyone thinks they are the next one to be fired," one said.

Another source, a former employee, told eJP that she had been sexually harassed by her former supervisor at FIDF, which she reported to human resources.

"It was never addressed," she said. "He eventually left the organization [on his own], but he would still come back to FIDF offices and make threatening comments."

When she reported that to HR as well, "I was told, 'He doesn't work here anymore, so he's not our problem,'" she said.

The former employee said that she related this to the investigative committee, which did not include it in its report to the board because the focus was on "business" issues. She added that she was aware of several other women who also experienced sexual harassment at FIDF, but whose testimonies were not included in the final report.

Multiple sources told eJP that over the past two years, there has been a growing rift between FIDF's upper management and the organization's Israeli-born staff and lay leadership. One source estimated that of the more than two dozen FIDF employees who have been fired over the past two years, "80% of [them] happen to speak Hebrew very well."

"I can only suspect that Israelis maybe ask more questions than Americans when it comes to identifying things that are not kosher, and Morey didn't like that. He doesn't like to be challenged," the source said.

Ofer Mazuz, who served as an Israel-based contractor for FIDF, overseeing its infrastructure projects, told eJP that his

contract was terminated after he discovered that the organization had made a mistake in a filing.

"I had been there for 12 years," Mazuz said. "I found a mistake. A big mistake, but a mistake that could be fixed. They said you are out, so I left. They fired me without saying a word." (Mazuz stressed that while he is aware of allegations of impropriety at FIDF, the issue that he found was not illicit or an intentional deception.)

"The first 10 years that I was there were pleasant," he said. "The organization was amazing. What is happening there now is crazy; they're firing people left and right without any logic."

This internal turmoil comes as FIDF faces wider criticism over the limitations of what it does and — more importantly — does not provide funding for, namely tactical equipment directly to soldiers. This has come up regularly since the Oct. 7 terror attacks, with the call-up of hundreds of thousands of reserve troops, many of whom complained of equipment shortages and addressed them through crowdfunding and grassroots campaigns.

Multiple sources tied the current turmoil in the organization to a 2020 decision spearheaded by then-board Chair Peter Weintraub to split the professional leadership of the organization into two. FIDF had historically been led by a former Israeli general, but then the board decided to hire Weil, a former pulpit rabbi and executive vice president from the Orthodox Union, to serve as CEO, while also bringing on board a former general to serve as national director. (The organization recently created an executive vice president position as well.)

"Why do we need so many executives?" an FIDF regional board member said. "There are just way too many people at high levels."

During his interviews with the board, Weil noted that he did not have experience as a CEO, and after he was hired, he brought Levovitz onto the board to assist him. The two had known each other for nearly 20 years at that point through the Beth Jacob synagogue in Beverly Hills, Calif., and various local Jewish organizations.

In 2023, Levovitz was named board chair. A regional FIDF board member said that Levovitz began acting as the CEO soon after the Oct. 7 terror attacks, declaring in a meeting a few days later, "I am the one in charge; Steve is not really capable."

"We were all heartbroken and shocked by what happened in Israel, so our focus was not on who is joining the organization or not," she said. "We did argue and didn't quite understand where it was coming from. But in normal circumstances, this would not have passed."

A former FIDF employee told eJP that the influx of funding in the wake of the attacks — in 2023, the organizations raised $282 million, more than three times what it did the year before — was used by Levovitz and Weil to fend off criticism.

"It was because of the war, not because of their leadership," she said. ♦

JULY 10, 2025

Israel shifts approach to Syria's new government as apprehension wanes

Israel used Syrian airspace for its strikes on Iran last month, and the two countries are discussing a non-aggression pact that would lead to a return to pre-2025 borders

By Lahav Harkov

The goodwill gestures toward Israel from Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa began modestly.

In a surprise move that came only months after he and his Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group toppled the brutal regime of Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian president — "a jihadi in a suit," as Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar called him over past ties to Al-Qaida — gave Israel Syria's archive of documents relating to captured Israeli spy Eli Cohen, who was captured and executed in Syria in 1965, and the remains of soldier Zvi Feldman, who was killed in battle in 1982.

Then, al-Sharaa pressured the terrorist groups Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine to disarm, leading some of the groups' leaders to flee the country.

And when Israel sent its bombers streaking toward Iran's nuclear sites last month, Syria did not intervene with or publicly oppose Israel's use of its airspace.

Taken together, these steps and others are leading to a warming of relations between Israel and its northern neighbor, a reality that seemed almost unthinkable just a few months ago. While officials and analysts are stopping short of calling the rapprochement peace talks, there is a new optimism — albeit cautious — following the strikes.

While at the White House on Monday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke positively about an "opportunity for stability, security and eventually peace" with Syria. He said that prospect stems from "the fact that [President Trump] has opened up a channel ... and the change of security situation brought about by the collapse of the Assad regime."

Last week, Sa'ar said in a press conference that Israel "would like to have all our neighbors ... in the camp of normalization and peace in the region. That includes Syria, as much as it includes Saudi Arabia ... It is too early to prejudge what will happen in the future. We have certain security needs and interests, which we must take into account."

A senior official in Netanyahu's delegation to Washington emphasized this week that talk of peace between Israel and Syria is premature, saying that "agreements

with Lebanon and Syria are not a matter of the short term, but they're possible."

"There are a lot of challenges," the official said. "It would be irresponsible to talk about Syria entering the Abraham Accords or normalization at this time. We aren't there."

Still, the official said that opportunities opened up after the successful Israeli and American strikes on Iran, among them an agreement with Syria.

One way the 12-day Israeli operation against Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs may have contributed to Israel's cautious optimism about reaching understandings with Syria is that its airspace played an important role in Israel's strikes and defense during that time — and Damascus did not get in the way.

Carmit Valensi, head of the Syria program at the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University, told *Jewish Insider* that "there was intensive Israeli activity in Syria's airspace on the way to attack Iran, and Israel shot down [Iranian] drones and missiles over Syrian territory."

While al-Sharaa's view of Iran as a "strategic threat to the entire region" is not unique among leaders in the Middle East, Valensi pointed out, "unlike other Arab countries that condemned Israel [for the strikes on Iran], al-Sharaa was totally quiet."

Israel and Syria "have a shared goal to weaken Iran and its influence," Valensi said. "I think that gave another push for the interests to bring relations closer."

Ronni Shaked, a research fellow at the Harry S. Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace at Hebrew University, views Syria's willingness to allow Israel use of its airspace to strike Iran as the most significant of a number of "goodwill gestures" from Damascus to Jerusalem that may be contributing to Israel's shifting approach to Syria.

Letting Israel use Syrian airspace during its war with Iran "gave Israel unusual freedom of action to easily reach the Iraqi border and then Iran, which took a great weight off of Israel," Shaked said.

"He [Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa] is showing signs that he knows he has to change to get help from the West and so the world will recognize him as the legitimate leader," said IDF Maj.-Gen. (res.) Ya'acov Amidror, a former Israeli national security advisor. "It's also clear that Arab leaders are not willing to live next to a Taliban state."

Other gestures in the months since al-Sharaa's rise included giving Israel Syria's archive of documents relating to Israeli spy Eli Cohen, who was captured and executed in Syria in 1965, and the remains of soldier Zvi Feldman, who was killed in battle in 1982.

In addition, Shaked noted that al-Sharaa pressured the terror groups Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine to disarm, leading some of the groups' leaders to flee the country.

IDF Maj.-Gen. (res.) Ya'acov Amidror, a former Israeli national security advisor, told JI that the main reason for the shift was that "time passed, that's all."

"In the beginning, he was a mystery. No one knew who [al-Sharaa] was, only that he came from Al-Qaida, and we only saw Al-Qaida-type people around him," Amidror said.

Since assuming leadership of Syria in December, however, Israel has seen that al-Sharaa "is trying to build something else in Syria," Amidror said. "He is showing signs that he knows he has to change to get help from the West and so the world will recognize him as the legitimate leader. It's also clear that Arab leaders are not willing to live next to a Taliban state."

"Taking all of that together, Israel is willing to talk," he added.

Trump's May meeting with al-Sharaa in Saudi Arabia also motivated Jerusalem and Damascus to enter talks.

Shaked said that Syria "jumped on [the opportunity] ... and said, 'If Trump is willing to recognize us, then we can get rid of the sanctions and receive grants'" to help rebuild the country.

The meeting between Trump and al-Shaara "was the breakthrough that set the path we are on," he added.

Valensi concurred, saying that "the direct motivation for Israel to change its approach is the Americans' embrace of al-Sharaa."

After Assad's fall in December, Israel struck Syria's air defenses, missile stockpiles and other military capabilities, and moved into the buffer zone between the countries. Valensi said that the "hawkish approach to al-Sharaa came from ... the trauma of Oct. 7 [2023 terror attacks]. Israel is much more determined to stop threats that may develop on its border. And paradoxically, Israel had a feeling of increased self-confidence, strength and power after its significant military achievements against the axis of resistance and Hezbollah, including the beeper operation and killing [Hezbollah leader Hassan] Nasrallah."

Even before the May meeting in Riyadh, Valensi said, Israel had begun to soften its approach, with indirect talks between the countries, fewer military strikes and talks about deconfliction with Turkey, mediated by Azerbaijan.

"I think Israel started to understand that there were risks to its approach, and was starting to create a hostile dynamic to Israel" within Syria, Valensi said.

Amidror stopped short of describing the current situation as a shift in Israel's approach: "There isn't a change yet. We aren't giving anything up, but we are in talks ... We're not withdrawing [from the Syrian Golan] so fast."

That could change in the future, however, Amidror added, saying that if al-Sharaa "really distances himself from where he came from and goes to a less extreme and more normal place, there is no reason for Israel to ignore it."

Syrian media describes the talks as a "non-aggression pact," Valensi said. Damascus has said it is looking to return to the 1974 ceasefire agreement that went into effect after the Yom Kippur War, which would entail Israel withdrawing from the Syrian side of the Golan Heights to where it was before the fall of former President Bashar al-Assad last year, and for there to be a buffer zone with U.N. forces between the countries.

Valensi was skeptical that Israel would be willing to withdraw from the peak of Mount Hermon, a point in Syria which the IDF deployed troops to shortly after the fall of Assad, after so many senior Israeli security figures have called it a strategic achievement.

"Peace with Syria removes the entire threat from the eastern front, which is Israel's longest front and a strategic one. We have peace with Jordan, and if we had peace with Syria, it would be the greatest gift to Israel," said Ronni Shaked, a research fellow at the Harry S. Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace at Hebrew University.

"Israel may want a more gradual formula, a withdrawal in stages. I don't know if al-Sharaa will accept that, and [withdrawal] is his basic condition," she said.

Shaked argued that "Israel has no need for the Syrian Golan. I don't know what we're doing there. It's nonsense, it's a symbol. If we want peace, we need to stop conquering territory."

"Peace with Syria removes the entire threat from the eastern front, which is Israel's longest front and a strategic one. We have peace with Jordan, and if we had peace with Syria, it would be the greatest gift to Israel," he said.

While talks are not focused on a comprehensive peace treaty yet, Shaked said anything is possible: "It was a great surprise when [former Egyptian President Anwar] Sadat came to Israel. We pinched ourselves and asked when we're dreaming. New realities are created by brave leaders. If Netanyahu will be brave enough, he can give a little attention to this issue and make advances towards peace."

Valensi, however, argued that "the conversation about expanding the Abraham Accords or normalization is not relevant now." She noted that al-Sharaa has said that public opinion in Syria would not support normalization with Israel, and it would be too drastic of a shift. "Al-Sharaa is a new leader with very limited legitimacy. It's a fragile situation ... It's unclear that al-Sharaa would want to take on that political risk," she said.

Johnnie Moore, an evangelical leader and director of the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation who met with al-Sharaa last month, told the "Misgav Mideast Horizons" podcast last week that he "absolutely believe[s] that there will be peace between Syria and Israel. No question. It's just a matter of time."

As to an unconfirmed report that Netanyahu and al-Sharaa will meet in September before the U.N. General Assembly, Valensi said that "so many things can change in two months ... Reality is so dynamic so I would not go that far. But if things continue on this trajectory, then it is possible."

Still, al-Sharaa would have to do a lot of work on Syrian public opinion before being photographed with Netanyahu, she added.

Johnnie Moore, an evangelical leader and director of the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation who met with al-Sharaa last month, told the "Misgav Mideast Horizons" podcast last week that he "absolutely believe[s] that there will be peace between Syria and Israel. No question. It's just a matter of time." *(The writer is a co-host of the podcast.)*

Al-Sharaa, Moore said, is part of a new generation of Middle Eastern leaders who are "future-oriented" and focused on solving problems, in contrast with "older leaders who think only about the past."

To get there, however, Moore said "there are practical things that have to be done, and there are things that will make the Syrians uncomfortable and things that will make Israel uncomfortable. And yet, I think it will be done."

"I'm not sure it's going to be done as quickly as everybody wants it, but I am certain it's not going to take as long as people think it might," he added. ♦

JULY 10, 2025

'Identity crises' grip U.S. Jews, the field of Israel studies, Jewish People Policy Institute fellows find

JPPI presents the two studies in a webinar on Sunday

By Judah Ari Gross

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

Young American Jews and the field of Israel studies are facing dual "identity crises": That's the key takeaway from two recent studies by the Jewish People Policy Institute think tank, whose findings were presented in a webinar this week.

"The main focus was more on what people are feeling," Shlomo Fisher, a JPPI researcher and one of the two authors of the former study, said at the event on Sunday evening. "The ADL records how many swastikas are drawn on synagogues in a year, and that's very important. We thought we wanted to concentrate on the inner experiences of American Jews, and especially of young people, and especially in connection with university campuses. And what we discovered was that there was — this is a sort of hackneyed phrase — something of a crisis in identity, or at least an issue, a dilemma of identity among these people."

The first study found that this centered around the tensions between the respondents' commitments to Israel and the Jewish People, which are seemingly putting them at odds with their fellow progressives, who reject American Jews' core understanding of their place in the world.

"I view myself as a persecuted minority who has the moral authority to critique and to promote social justice concerns," Fisher said, relating the views of the respondents. "And I'm being told that I'm part of a privileged oppressor class that is the very paradigm of colonialism and genocide. So my own self-definition is being contradicted by the outside world, by the other. That's unprecedented. That's very unusual."

The study, which was conducted by Fisher and fellow JPPI researcher Rachel Fish, involved in-depth interviews with 106 participants, 58% of whom were under 35. The respondents were also more involved in the Jewish community than average, Fisher and Fish noted. The interviews, which were conducted in groups of five or six, were conducted over the course of 13 sessions.

Much of this is tied to the rising anti-Israel activism and antisemitism at American universities and colleges, whose influence, the report's authors said, extends far beyond the campus borders.

"We know that antisemitism doesn't exist only within the ivory towers," Fish said."However, we do understand that the world of ideas deeply matters, and what happens in those ivory towers impacts not only the time that students spend in the campus community, but extends well beyond into social justice movements, politics, media consumption, and the way in which our culture is developing."

Yossi Klein Halevi, a fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute, who spoke at the event, noted that the rise in campus antisemitism is particularly shocking to American Jews, who have long viewed higher education as a refuge. "The universities were the portal for many American Jews into the American dream," he said.

Halevi tied the issues on American campuses to what he described as the weaponization of the Holocaust against the Jewish People by universalizing it and stripping it of the uniqueness of antisemitism.

"The Holocaust has now become one of the great weapons against Israel and against the Diaspora," Halevi said. "And the irony here is that this generation... was raised with Holocaust education, went on field trips to the Holocaust Museum in Washington. And so the question is, what went wrong? How did the Holocaust go from being an educational tool that was supposed to protect the Jewish People to itself being one of the principal threats against Jewish welfare? And it's a question that I would urge you all to take up. What went wrong in Holocaust education? And how do we begin the very slow process of turning that around."

Fish, who also co-founded the Israel education nonprofit Boundless Israel, noted that respondents "consistently" said that they had not been taught about Israel in a serious, critical way. "I would make the argument that that work of serious Israel education must happen in a deeper and more sophisticated way at a younger age and allow for really critical thinking and the asking of hard questions in those spaces, not just when they go onto a college campus," she said.

The second report presented at the event, however, indicated that there are also significant issues in the field of Israel studies on college level as well.

The study, written by JPPI researcher Sara Hirschhorn, examined the Israel studies field, finding that it too is going through an "identity crisis."

Hirschhorn explored the history of the field, which developed "organically" in the 1980s as independent researchers began studying modern Israeli history, society and culture.

"Its open-tent philosophy allowed many different fields of academia, different disciplines to create a new shared sense of community around the understanding of Israel studies and also different pedagogical approaches to how to teach Israel studies in the classroom," she said at the event. "But what began as a kind of open-ended experiment has led to an identity crisis in the field of Israel studies, in which today it doesn't methodologically know who or what it is."

Hirschhorn noted that Israel studies has increasingly taken a turn "towards self-criticism and even self-excoriation," unlike other university ethnic studies programs that are explicitly aimed at instilling pride.

"The belief it could be politically disinterested was always a fiction," Cary Nelson, a professor at the University of Illinois, who has written extensively against academic boycotts of Israel, said at the event. "[The field of Israel studies] was not originally neutral on Israel's right to exist, and of course it isn't neutral any longer. It is simply reversed. As all of us likely know, the field itself, along with Jewish studies, is not now merely politically split, but potentially substantially polarized. In some settings, it is thoroughly anti-Zionist. But the objectivity ideal for Israel studies also meant that Israel studies kept its distance from any mission of identity reinforcement for Jewish students."

In her report, Hirschhorn called for Israel studies programs to reconsider this nominal "apolitical" stance — noting that the field anyway embraces post-Zionism or anti-Zionist attitudes already — and to "undertake a meaningful exchange on whether Israel Studies can and should continue to be unconcerned and unresponsive to ideological challenges within and beyond the university."

Addressing potential donors, Hirschhorn also called for further support to strengthen and expand the field as part of a broader effort to create "more balanced narratives and healthier discourse" about Israel and Jews on campus. ♦

JULY 8, 2025

Harris overlooked advice to more strongly tout support for Israel, according to new book

Memos from former Christie and Cuomo aide Maria Comella urged the former VP to more vocally call out the far-left elements of her party to win the election

By Marc Rod

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) finds himself in an awkward bind: The self-dubbed "Shomer Yisrael" — "guardian of the people of Israel" — is now the "Shomer of the Democratic Party" — guardian of a caucus that has drifted increasingly leftward, especially when it comes to its support for Israel and aggressive action to deter Iran's nuclear ambitions.

When he had the opportunity earlier this month to take a clean shot at President Donald Trump for not being tough enough against Iran — over reports the administration was working on a deal allowing Iran to maintain enrichment — he played to his history of hawkishness on Iran, taunting Trump for "folding" and "let[ting] Iran get away with everything," facing backlash from some on the left in the process.

But when Trump made the decision to bomb Iran's nuclear sites last weekend, Schumer sided against a handful of pro-Israel stalwarts in his party and leading Jewish communal organizations, who praised the move as advancing peace in the region. Instead, he joined the majority of congressional Democrats, who blasted the administration for not seeking congressional authorization.

"No president should be allowed to unilaterally march this nation into something as consequential as war with erratic threats and no strategy," Schumer said Saturday. "Confronting Iran's ruthless campaign of terror, nuclear ambitions, and regional aggression demands strength, resolve, and strategic clarity. The danger of wider, longer, and more devastating war has now dramatically increased."

Schumer's turnaround is raising eyebrows among Jewish and pro-Israel leaders, and his focus on congressional procedure is frustrating some in the pro-Israel community who wanted to see him support Trump's efforts to eliminate Iran's nuclear program.

"If your argument is leading with a technicality over war powers, you know you're losing the broader debate," a former Biden administration official told JI. "This wasn't an open-ended military campaign — these were limited U.S. airstrikes. Every president in modern times has done it this way for limited airstrikes, and this isn't any different."

"I would like it to be that whoever does the right thing, no matter who they are or how much you otherwise dislike them, that at least certain truths can be recognized by everyone," Democratic Georgia state Rep. Esther Panitch said. "One of those being that Iran's nuclear program needed to stop. ... We all need to take a step back and acknowledge that Trump did a good thing, even if we can't stand him otherwise."

Former Israeli Ambassador to the United Nations Gilad Erdan wrote on X, "When President Trump strikes Iran's nuclear sites to stop a regime openly calling for Israel's destruction (and responsible for the [murder] of many many Americans), Schumer's only reaction is... complaining about congressional procedure? Seriously, Chuck? Don't you have anything positive to say about removing an existential threat from Israel and the free world?"

Democratic Georgia state Rep. Esther Panitch, who has been outspoken in criticizing members of her own party over lukewarm support for, or criticism of, Israel, said that Schumer's position would appear to be one of "blind partisanship," if he hadn't expressed the same criticisms of Democratic presidents' own unilateral military actions.

"I would like it to be that whoever does the right thing, no matter who they are or how much you otherwise dislike them, that at least certain truths can be recognized by everyone," Panitch said. "One of those being that Iran's nuclear program needed to stop. ... We all need to take a step back and acknowledge that Trump did a good thing, even if we can't stand him otherwise."

Panitch was the only Democrat in the Georgia House to join a letter with Republicans backing the Iran strikes.

Schumer's spokesperson, Angelo Roefaro, told JI, "Senator Schumer has long said Iran cannot obtain a nuclear weapon and he voted against his own party when he didn't think President Obama's Iran deal went far enough."

"He's also long said that the executive branch cannot ignore the role of Congress when it comes to taking military action(s), yet that is exactly what is happening right now, and that is unacceptable when the stakes are so high and when key questions, including how the administration will prevent Iran in the long-term from obtaining a nuclear weapon, remain unanswered," Roefaro continued.

"He has got tremendous pressures facing him," Hank Sheinkopf, a New York-based Democratic consultant told JI. "There are people in New York who would want him to be much more vociferous in support of the attack on Iran ... but his party isn't in that place."

Publicly, Schumer has also been critical of the administration for failing to brief him and other lawmakers to show the necessity of the strikes, or that they accomplished the administration's intended goal. He's suggested that's a sign that the strikes were not successful, as one leaked intelligence report has indicated.

"This last-minute postponement is outrageous, evasive, and derelict. Senators deserve full transparency, and the administration has a legal obligation to inform Congress precisely about what is happening. What is the administration so afraid of?" Schumer said in a new statement Tuesday. "Such obstruction undermines the very principles of accountability and oversight that safeguard our democracy."

One analyst argued that Schumer's position as Democratic leader places him in a politically difficult bind.

"He has got tremendous pressures facing him," Hank Sheinkopf, a New York-based Democratic consultant told JI. "There are people in New York who would want him to be much more vociferous in support of the attack on Iran ... but his party isn't in that place."

He argued that Schumer, as the leader of a minority party, needs to focus on attracting younger voters back to the party, and in protecting the coalition he does have — both groups that largely oppose the strikes.

Sheinkopf also said Schumer's stance is "absolutely a product of internal caucus politics. ... The minority party's job is to be on the other side of the president and the leadership, and that's what they're doing. So it should not be surprising, and Sen. Schumer's positioning should not be surprising at all."

Schumer's comments over the weekend echo the stance he took in 2020 on potential military action against Iran, when he backed similar legislation following the strike that killed Quds Force head Gen. Qassem Soleimani. He also backed a bill that would withhold funding for war with Iran.

"Congress, unequivocally, must hold the president accountable and assert our authority over matters of war and peace," Schumer said at the time, remarks to which Schumer's office referred JI. He also criticized the administration for failing to provide "a clear picture ... about our strategy in the region."

Schumer has said he regretted his vote to authorize the Iraq War and has pushed, including during the Biden administration, for repeal of the 2001 and 2002 Authorizations for Use of Military Force undergirding the war on terrorism, arguing that Congress needed to reassert war powers and prevent another inadvertent war in the Middle East.

But he didn't publicly offer the same direct and pointed opposition to strikes undertaken by previous Democratic administrations without congressional authorization in places such as Libya and Yemen.

Schumer's office also referred JI to his past opposition to Iran's nuclear program and opposition to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, as well as his support for the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act, which requires the administration to submit for congressional review any nuclear agreement with Iran. ♦

JULY 8, 2025

As teachers unions target ADL and oppose antisemitism bill, Jewish educators sound the alarm

The ADL accused the nation's largest teachers union of pushing a 'radical, antisemitic agenda on students'

By Gabby Deutch

A grassroots campaign urging educators to stop using teaching materials from the Anti-Defamation League reached the highest levels of K-12 education over the weekend.

Inside a packed conference hall in Portland, Ore., the thousands of delegates who make up the governing body of the National Education Association — the largest teachers union in the country — passed a measure that bars the union from using, endorsing or publicizing any materials from the ADL.

In the moments before the vote, several Jewish delegates spoke passionately in opposition of the measure.

"I stand here and ask you to oppose [the measure] to show that all are truly welcome here," a teacher from New Jersey said, according to audio of the closed-door meeting obtained by *Jewish Insider*.

Another Jewish teacher quoted NEA Executive Director Kim Anderson from her keynote address earlier in the weekend. "This union has your back," Anderson told the more than 6,000 assembled delegates.

"Does that include stopping Jewish hate, antisemitism? Some of our members don't feel they are safe," the Jewish teacher said during Sunday's debate.

The vote occurred by voice. The margin was so close that delegates had to vote three times as the chair considered whether the loudest cheers were in support of the measure or in opposition, but, ultimately, it still received the backing of more than half the delegates. It now heads to the NEA's nine-member executive committee, which gets the final word on whether the measure will be put into effect. (The passage of the anti-ADL measure was first reported by the North American Values Institute.)

The episode garnered criticism from Jewish teachers and allies. NEA's national leadership has not yet weighed in on the measure.

"At a time when incidents of hate and bias are on the rise across the country, this action

sends a troubling message of exclusion and undermines our shared goal of ensuring every student feels safe and supported," a spokesperson for the NEA's Jewish affairs caucus said in a statement to JI. The caucus said its members plan to continue using ADL materials in their classrooms.

The ADL slammed the vote, calling it "profoundly disturbing that a group of NEA activists would brazenly attempt to further isolate their Jewish colleagues and push a radical, antisemitic agenda on students," according to an ADL spokesperson.

Staci Maiers, an NEA spokesperson, declined to comment on the specific measure. "NEA members will continue to educate and organize against antisemitism, anti-Muslim bigotry and all forms of hate and discrimination," Maiers told JI in a statement. "We will not shy away from difficult or controversial issues that affect our members, our students or our schools." (The NEA assembly also adopted a measure pledging to highlight Jewish American Heritage Month each May.)

The NEA's adoption of a measure targeting the leading Jewish civil rights organization may be an escalation, but it is only the most recent example of antisemitism — and divisive politics surrounding the war in Gaza — spilling into K-12 education, and teachers unions in particular.

Since the 2023 Hamas attacks, Jewish parents have raised concerns about discrimination against Jewish students and about the increasingly frequent use of anti-Israel materials in classrooms. Last week, for instance, the parents of an 11-year-old sued their child's Virginia private school, alleging school administrators ignored antisemitic harassment directed against her for months.

The NEA's vote on the anti-ADL measure grew out of a campaign called #DropTheADLFromSchools, which began with an online open letter and gradually garnered the support of some of the country's most powerful local unions, including United Teachers Los Angeles, which represents 35,000 LA teachers.

In March, UTLA president Cecily Myart-Cruz wrote a letter asking the superintendent of the LA Unified School District and the LAUSD school board to stop using ADL materials and "refuse to contract or partner" with the ADL, because of its "focus on indoctrination rather than education." (An LAUSD spokesperson said no action had been taken in reference to the letter.)

Last year, the NEA joined a campaign to pressure then-President Joe Biden to halt all U.S. military aid to Israel. The Massachusetts Teachers Association, an NEA affiliate, has encouraged members to introduce anti-Israel materials into classrooms.

Last week, the largest teachers union in California published a letter urging state senators to vote against a bill focused on fighting and preventing antisemitism.

"While we share the same overarching goal of the AB 715 author and sponsors of combating antisemitism, we have serious reservations about the proposed methods for achieving it," wrote Seth Bramble, legislative relations manager of the California Teachers Association, a 300,000-member affiliate of the NEA. "We are also concerned with academic freedom and the ability of educators to ensure that instruction include perspectives and materials that reflect the cultural and ethnic diversity of all of California's students."

In May, the state assembly voted unanimously to approve the bill, which was co-sponsored by the Jewish, Black, Latino, Native American and Asian American and Pacific Islander legislative caucuses. The legislation would create a statewide antisemitism coordinator in the state's Education Department and strengthen anti-discrimination protections, while providing additional guidelines to keep antisemitism out of teaching materials.

But the bill's fate is now in jeopardy as senators face pressure from one of the state's most powerful unions to reject it. The California Senate's education committee is set to vote on the bill on Wednesday. State Sen. Sasha Renée Pérez, the Los Angeles-area Democrat who chairs the committee, did not respond to a request for comment about whether she plans to vote for the bill.

State Sen. Scott Wiener, a Democrat from San Francisco and the co-chair of the legislative Jewish caucus, said it is "frustrating" seeing the CTA oppose the bill instead of collaborating with its authors.

"We need, as a matter of state policy, to be very, very clear that antisemitism will not be tolerated in California public schools," Wiener told JI. "I was really disappointed to see CTA's letter which basically says, 'Oh, we hate antisemitism, but we can't possibly do anything meaningful about it.'" (A CTA spokesperson did not respond to a request for comment.)

More than two dozen California Jewish groups released a statement on Monday slamming the CTA, saying that advocates for the bill have already put its passage on hold for more than a year to try to negotiate with the union. The sponsors pivoted from an earlier version of the bill — which was intended to root out antisemitism in the state's ethnic studies curriculum — at the urging of the CTA.

"We call on the legislature to stand firmly in support of California's Jewish students and move the bill forward," wrote the Jewish organizations, including the ADL, StandWithUs, American Jewish Committee and the Jewish federations in Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco and several other communities.

Jewish community activists plan to spend the next two days lobbying for passage of the bill. Jay Goldfischer, a teacher in Los Angeles County, is traveling to Sacramento to urge lawmakers to vote for it.

"Jewish students across California are being silenced. Many are afraid to walk into their schools, unsure if they'll be targeted for who they are," Goldfischer told JI. "As a CTA member, I am personally disappointed that CTA doesn't feel Jewish students are worth protecting." ♦

JULY 11, 2025

‘Prophets didn’t campaign for kings’: IRS ruling opens rabbis to pressure to endorse candidates

New change removes 'fig leaf' that helped rabbis abstain from supporting candidates; some denominations say they'll discourage political endorsements, others say they're still considering

By Jay Deitcher

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

For over seven decades, rabbis have had an excuse to not endorse politicians, no matter how much pressure was heaped upon them, but this changed Monday when the IRS reversed a decade-old ban on clergy supporting candidates from the pulpit. Prior to this, congregations would lose tax-exempt status if religious leaders openly stumped for politicians.

“This may have taken away a fig leaf from certain religious leaders whose congregations might have wanted them to speak more directly in these issues, but who could say, ‘Because of this rule, I can’t endorse,’” Jerome Copulsky, a Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs research fellow who specializes in church-state issues, told *eJewishPhilanthropy*.

The decision was made in a court filing after two churches and an association of Christian broadcasters sued the IRS to reverse the 1954 Johnson Amendment, named for then-Sen. Lyndon B. Johnson, who introduced the amendment, which set nonprofit tax laws connected to politics. The filing said that campaigning within houses of worship is now seen as “a family discussion.” Rabbis across denominations agree that endorsing candidates from the pulpit will only bring problems to the family.

“If you look at the recent announcements from President Trump and from the Trump administration, there has been an attempt to be more assertive in speaking about religion in political spaces,” Copulsky said. For years, the president has called to revoke the amendment with support from many within the religious right. In 2017, evangelical leader Rev. Jerry Falwell Jr. said the shift would “create a huge revolution for conservative Christians and for free speech.”

“The idea [is] that somehow Trump and the Trump administration is bringing religion back into American public life,” Copulsky said. “Religion was always a part of public life, but they’re bringing a certain kind of conservative religion as part of the [Trump] brand.”

This shift may open congregations and denominations up to overwhelming pressure from politicians. “A pastor or a rabbi’s support can become a leverage point [for] the way a candidate treats a certain community, especially the Jewish community,” Rabbi Oren Steinitz, the rabbi at Conservative Congregation Beth Sholom-Chevra Shas in Syracuse, N.Y., told eJP.

Politicians could then say, “I’ll give you the budgets you need for security if you endorse me,” he said. “It’s pretty obvious that it’s going to be used as a divisive mechanism. That’s probably the reason they’re doing it, to find out who’s with them, who’s against them.”

For many rabbis, endorsing politicians could be attractive, especially if they are concerned about “the structural changes in American democracy that we are witnessing,” Rabbi David Saperstein, director emeritus of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, told eJP. He fought to protect the Johnson Amendment for over 40 years as a lawyer.

On Tuesday, the Reform movement was the first major denomination to issue a statement about the IRS decision, saying the move “weakens the principle of church-state separation that has protected both government and religion” and calling on Congress to reverse the change. (Both the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and Reconstructing Judaism declined to discuss the ruling, saying that they were still contemplating how to respond to the changes.)

The Reform movement is “urging” rabbis not to endorse politicians if they are connected to congregations, Saperstein said.

Although the Orthodox Union has not released a statement, it is creating guidance for its synagogues, asking leaders not to endorse politicians.

“A valuable and applicable component of the IRS position is its description of the congregation as family, equating its internal discussions to those at the family table,” Rabbi Moshe Hauer, executive vice president at the Orthodox Union, told eJP. “Synagogues should always convey the feeling of home and family to all who enter and avoid introducing the current divisive political discourse into our congregations.”

If congregations begin endorsing politicians, it is going to further surge polarization, which is already “through the roof, religiously, politically, due to the Gaza war, on all levels,” Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz, the president and dean of the Valley Beit Midrash, a national Jewish pluralistic adult learning and leadership center, told eJP.

It could lead to non-Jewish communities further tokenizing Jews, deeming who they feel is a “good” or “bad” Jew, Yanklowitz said. It can also lead to those within Jewish communities forming more of a litmus test for who is accepted. “It’s not just that rabbis are going to be at the front of pushing [political candidates]. It’s going to be that boards or donors are going to push their rabbi to do it.”

For many congregations, the political diversity of congregants will keep rabbis in check, Rabbi Daniel Aronson, of Reconstructionist Congregation Ahavas Achim in Keene, N.H., told eJP.

“As the rabbi of one of only two non-Orthodox synagogues within a 26-mile radius of my small New England town, I go out of my way to show respect for political views that are different from my own,” he

said. "The possibility of losing full dues-paying members over a political rift is more of a check on campaigning from the *bimah* than any legislation could ever be."

Still, many leaders may believe it's beneficial to market themselves based on their politics, he said. "In cities where people have lots of options, some synagogues not only feel they have less incentive to remain politically neutral, their political views differentiate themselves from their 'competition.' They build their 'brands' around their politics." Doing this will leave political outliers in the congregation "ostracized," he said, adding that they could "suffer other serious consequences for thinking independently."

To have a rabbi endorse a politician is a "foolish" move, Motti Seligson, director of media for the Chabad-Lubavitch movement, told eJP.

"The synagogue is a holy place, and it's above the political moment," he said. "We're seeing politically how things shift and swing increasingly quickly... One thing that's consistent about every trend is it ends, so why hitch the congregation's wagon to a trend?"

In reality, politicking from the pews is nothing new, though. The Johnson Amendment has rarely been enforced, and "the nation's churches and synagogues and mosques [have] never been this pure space of being above the fray," Copulsky said. "Whether or not there's been direct endorsements, endorsements have been pretty close to direct." Even congregational rabbis have outright endorsed politicians, such as in the case of many who were connected to Rabbis for Obama.

There need to be lines for rabbis, and endorsements are beyond the pale, Yanklowitz said. "Everything is political. All language choices are political, and even silence is political, but there's different layers of political life."

Rabbis should take stances on societal ethics and values, but with nuance, rooted in Torah, he said. "What's so beautiful about Torah is that it is about dialectical tensions. For every value, there is a competing value. That doesn't mean we're just relativists. There's still morally robust positions to take, but you always hold that competing value. Once you endorse a candidate, what you're doing is removing those tensions and removing the ideals and just pretending that the richness of Torah can be squeezed into a tiny, neat partisan box."

By not explicitly endorsing politicians, religious leaders can be morally engaged and discuss issue-based advocacy, such as refugee support and climate action, across party lines, Armin Langer, a Reconstructionist rabbi who has held teaching and pulpit positions in Jewish communities in the U.S., Mexico, Sweden, Germany, Austria and Hungary, told eJP.

"The prophets didn't campaign for kings," he said. "They held them accountable." ♦

JULY 7, 2025

Vanderbilt, WashU leaders pitch Jewish students on a winning post-Oct. 7 strategy

The two university chancellors have been speaking out against 'creeping politicization' on college campuses

By Gabby Deutch

By the time a group of activists attempted to erect an encampment at Washington University in St. Louis in late April 2024, Andrew D. Martin, the chancellor of the university, had already carefully considered how he would respond. It was a benefit, he said recently, of being "in the middle of the country," far from the national media that ceaselessly covered the anti-Israel encampments at Columbia University and other high-profile campuses.

Campus police arrested more than 100 people, the vast majority of whom had no ties to the university, and the encampment was shut down. Faculty, staff and student leaders all spoke out against university leadership for bringing in the police. But Martin saw it as an opportunity to enforce university rules and avoid the chaos playing out elsewhere.

"We take a very strong pro-free speech approach," Martin, a political scientist, told *Jewish Insider* in an interview last month. "But we also have restrictions which are based on time, place and manner. And for us, it was really clear, and we made it very clear to the campus community. Look, you can protest all you want. ... But you can't take over our buildings, you can't deface our property and you also can't set up an encampment."

Since then, Martin has teamed up with Daniel Diermeier, the chancellor of Vanderbilt University, in something of an informal pact — a joint effort to promote principled leadership in higher education, presenting their two schools as a refreshing counterweight to the dysfunction plaguing higher-ranked competitors like Harvard and Columbia. Both campuses largely steered clear of major antisemitic incidents in that intense spring semester in 2024. (The period has not been without criticism for Diermeier, either; he faced pushback from some faculty and students after canceling a vote on an anti-Israel boycott resolution.)

This February, Diermeier and Martin wrote a joint op-ed in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* calling on other universities to reject "creeping politicization."

"The universities we oversee have drawn

a line against politicization so that we can continue contributing to the nation's competitiveness and strength abroad, and to stability and prosperity here at home. All American research universities should do the same," Diermeier and Martin wrote.

Published just days after President Donald Trump took office with the promise of scrutinizing elite liberal universities, the article was an attempt at setting out a marker, signaling to Trump and potential applicants that Vanderbilt and WashU haven't lost focus like so many other universities who have found themselves in crisis mode since the Oct. 7 attacks in 2023.

Both schools were committed to institutional neutrality — a position that has now been adopted by more than 100 American universities, including Harvard, Stanford, Columbia and Syracuse — well before Oct. 7 and its aftermath led other university administrators to conclude it is in their interests to not weigh in on complex political and social causes.

"Whether it's fossil fuel divestment or Ukraine or other things, we're just not going to engage. Our faculty have strong views on those issues, as do our students. It's their job to be advocates. It's our job to create a playing field, if you will, for them to have those views," said Martin.

Diermeier said universities that had not adopted a stance of principled neutrality were susceptible to "competitive lobbying," where students demand a response on one side or another.

"We saw this in gory detail after Oct. 7, where you had one group who wanted to say, 'Well, you need to denounce Israel of genocide,' and the other one said, 'No, you have to support Israel,'" Diermeier told JI in June. "It ripped many university campuses apart. And we were very, very clear from the beginning that we are committed to institutional neutrality. We will not divest from companies that have ties to Israel. We will not denounce Israel's 'genocide.' We will not boycott products that are associated with Israel in any way, shape or form."

It comes down to the role of a university — and whether it is up to university administrators to pick a side. Doing so, the chancellors argued, undermines trust in their institutions. (Others take a different position, like Ora Pescovitz, president of Oakland University, a small public university in Michigan: "A president's voice is precious," she told JI last year.)

"There's a certain arrogance for us, that we think that if, like, Harvard speaks, that somehow an issue is settled," said Diermeier, a political scientist and management scholar. "What is the purpose of the university? What we're very clear on is that universities are about the creation and dissemination of knowledge through research and education and related activities. They are not in the business of becoming partisans in any type of political or ideological battle."

Many universities are still navigating the post-Oct. 7 maelstrom, trying to handle competing concerns from students, parents, alumni and faculty — all while facing civil rights investigations by the federal government. In March, Education Secretary Linda McMahon wrote a letter to 60 schools under investigation for antisemitic discrimination, including Harvard, Yale, Northwestern, Stanford and Princeton.

"I think people that visit us see the difference, and they say this is a great place for Jewish families and for Jewish students to thrive, and we're very proud of that," said Diermeier. "We want to be a place where every member of our community can thrive. And right now, in the current environment, I think the contrast between what's happening at other universities and what's happening at Vanderbilt is visible for people."

Vanderbilt and WashU were not on the list. That presents an opening for them to reach Jewish students with concerns about what they're seeing elsewhere, particularly as the Jewish student populations at many top universities have shrunk. According to Hillel International, just 7% of Harvard's undergraduates are Jewish, compared to 14% at Vanderbilt and 22% at WashU.

"The Jewish community at Washington University is very robust. Our students are comfortable and proud living out their Jewish identity on our campus, and have been able to do so for generations. And we'll make sure that they're able to do this over generations to come," said Martin. WashU implemented a new transfer program soon after Oct. 7 to allow students to transfer for the spring semester, rather than waiting until the following fall. Several Jewish students took advantage of it after facing antisemitism on their old campuses.

WashU's appeal to Jewish students is not new; it has for years been tagged with the nickname "WashJew." And more than two decades ago, Vanderbilt's former chancellor said that targeting Jewish students was an explicit part of the university's bid to better compete with Ivy League schools. Diermeier seeks to continue that push.

"I think people that visit us see the difference, and they say this is a great place for Jewish families and for Jewish students to thrive, and we're very proud of that," said Diermeier. "We want to be a place where every member of our community can thrive. And right now, in the current environment, I think the contrast between what's happening at other universities and what's happening at Vanderbilt is visible for people."

"It became clear to Daniel [Diermeier] and me that we're never going to be able to have the sustained federal support or, for that matter, state support of our institutions, without broad support of the American people, and that the American people, in some respect, lost faith in us because of places where we have diverged from those important core principles," said Martin. "That was amplified by the events of Oct. 7, or what happened after Oct. 7."

Martin and Diermeier see themselves and their institutions as the stewards of a forward-looking case for higher education at a time when the institution is under attack, both from Washington and from Americans, whose trust in higher education has plummeted. Nearly 6 in 10 Americans said in 2015 that they have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in U.S. higher education, according to Gallup. In 2024, that number was 36%. Among Republicans, the number dropped from 56% to 20% in nine years. Among Democrats, the decrease was milder — but still present, moving from 68% to 56%.

Oct. 7 only sharpened that distrust, Martin said. Regaining that confidence,

he argued, is imperative to saving the institution of higher education — and staving off federal funding threats from Trump.

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It's not just about values. It's a savvy political move. After all, both Vanderbilt and WashU would be in trouble if federal research dollars stopped flowing to the schools, or if Trump made the call that they could not admit international students, as is the case with Harvard.

When asked about his approach to the Trump administration, Diermeier repeatedly declined to answer questions about the matter on the record.

Martin acknowledged that he is concerned.

"I'm worried about everything coming out of Washington, whether that's legislative action or actions of the administration, around endowment excise tax, federal research funding, the ability to have federal financial aid, the ability to admit international students. All of those things are up for grabs," Martin said.

But what WashU and Vanderbilt are willing to do is acknowledge that there are big problems in American academia. In other words, they're saying that Trump's got a point.

"Here are two institutions that are willing to stand in the public square and say, American higher education has lost its way in some respects," said Martin. "We're great institutions, and we're committed to working to ensure that our institutions and higher education writ large will do better in the future." ♦