

THE WEEKLY PRINT

New York Jewish leaders reckon with a potential Mamdani win • M² survey finds Jewish professionals lack hope, fear internal division, but believe in their work • Palantir's Alex Karp says Jews need to 'leave their comfort zone' to defend community • Musician, author and philanthropist Ethan Daniel Davidson adds rabbi to his many hats • Drawing on Jewish blessing, Shapiro offers 'words of healing' to a nation on edge • Jewish social workers warn of growing antisemitism in the field: 'Counter to everything that we learn in social work school' • 'I fear Israel will fall back in love with quiet': Yaakov Katz warns against complacency after Gaza war • Former Mossad chief Yossi Cohen talks covert missions, Oct. 7 failures in new book • Family of Raphael Lemkin, who coined term 'genocide,' fights to have his name removed from 'anti-Israel' institute

SEPTEMBER 18, 2025

New York Jewish leaders reckon with a potential Mamdani win

Several leaders in the community told JI they continue to have concerns about his record, while others are quietly engaging

By Matthew Kassel

As Jewish leaders reckon with the increasing likelihood that Zohran Mamdani will be the next mayor of New York City, many who have voiced anxiety over his avowedly anti-Israel policies are reacting with a mix of fear and resignation.

Their concerns have been mounting as Mamdani, the Democratic nominee, has continued to hold a comfortable lead in the race, where polling shows him handily prevailing over the divided field. The 33-year-old democratic socialist and Queens state assemblyman has recently claimed endorsements from prominent party leaders including New York Gov. Kathy Hochul,

who clarified she does not agree with him on Israel issues but said she appreciated his commitment to combating antisemitism as well as his efforts to meet with Jewish community members to address “their concerns directly.”

But multiple Jewish leaders said in interviews with *Jewish Insider* on Wednesday that they remain deeply skeptical of his campaign's outreach and pledges to confront rising antisemitism, citing a string of recent statements in which he has doubled down on his hostile approach to Israel — as well as an ongoing refusal to explicitly denounce extreme rhetoric espoused by his allies on the far left.

While Mamdani has, since winning the primary in June, walked back some of his polarizing views on key issues such as policing, he has otherwise made an exception for Israel, of which he has long been a fierce critic. In a series of interviews published last week, for instance, he reiterated a campaign vow to arrest Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu if elected, even as legal experts cautioned such a move could violate federal law.

A vocal supporter of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against Israel — which some critics deem antisemitic — he said he would end a program established by Mayor Eric Adams,

who is now running as an independent, to foster business partnerships between companies in Israel and New York City. He also said he would stop relying on the working definition of antisemitism promoted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance — which labels some criticism of Israel as antisemitic — as was adopted by Adams in a recent executive order.

And although he has said he would discourage activists from invoking the slogan “globalize the intifada,” which he himself has not used publicly, Jewish leaders have noted that Mamdani has still not condemned the phrase itself, fueling suspicion that he tacitly approves of the chant critics interpret as a call to antisemitic violence.

“I believe that he will genuinely work to drive a wedge between Jews and their neighbors as long as he serves in public office,” Sara Forman, executive director of New York Solidarity Network, a group that supports pro-Israel Democratic candidates for state and local office, told JI. “To this date,” she said of Mamdani, “his actions certainly have given us no indication they match his words.”

Andres Spokoyny, who leads the Jewish Funders Network but emphasized that he was speaking only in his personal capacity, said that he was “extremely concerned and extremely fearful” about what he regards as a likely Mamdani mayoralty. “His views make the majority of Jews unsafe and unwelcome,” he told JI.

More broadly, Spokoyny said his worries had less to do with particular policies than what he called “the breaking of a taboo” around anti-Zionist sentiment that did not ultimately serve as an “impediment” to Mamdani’s rise, even in a place that is home to the largest Jewish community of any city in the world. “That fact that it is in New York is highly symbolic,” he said. “It shows that our society doesn’t have the antibodies to reject somebody with a very divisive message.”

He also voiced regret about a lack of unity in the organized Jewish community to collectively oppose Mamdani and coalesce behind one candidate in the race, which includes former New York Gov. Andrew

Cuomo, running on an independent line, and Curtis Sliwa, the GOP nominee. “I think it asks for a deep rethinking in the Jewish community about how we face this challenge,” he said.

While Mamdani has won backing from some Jewish elected officials in New York, notably Rep. Jerry Nadler (D-NY), others have continued to keep the nominee at a safe distance with just weeks until November. Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) has withheld an endorsement of Mamdani despite meeting privately with him, as has Rep. Dan Goldman (D-NY), who said last month he is waiting for the nominee to take “concrete steps” to address antisemitic hate crimes.

“Typically during a general election you’ll see candidates moderate their positions either in a dishonest attempt to bridge the gap between themselves and uncomfortable voters or in a genuine extension of the olive branch,” said Sam Berger, an Orthodox Democrat who represents an Assembly district in Queens. “Indeed, we’ve seen Zohran do this with the business world as well as with the NYPD.”

Simone Kanter, a spokesperson for Goldman, said on Wednesday that the congressman had “nothing new to add yet beyond what he’s already said” about Mamdani.

During his campaign, Mamdani has more actively aligned with groups on the far left including Jewish Voice for Peace, which is anti-Zionist, and Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, which hosted a recent gala at which the nominee was celebrated alongside Brad Lander, the Jewish comptroller with whom he cross-endorsed in the primary.

Even as Mamdani has engaged in outreach to the Jewish community to address concerns about his platform, among other issues, some Jewish leaders indicated they did not anticipate there would be any common ground on which to develop a relationship with a potential Mamdani administration.

“Typically during a general election you’ll see candidates moderate their positions

either in a dishonest attempt to bridge the gap between themselves and uncomfortable voters or in a genuine extension of the olive branch,” said Sam Berger, an Orthodox Democrat who represents an Assembly district in Queens. “Indeed, we’ve seen Zohran do this with the business world as well as with the NYPD.”

By contrast, Berger argued of his colleague in the state legislature, Mamdani “hasn’t done the bare minimum with long-recognized Jewish institutions and leaders, instead relying on his support from the fringe of the fringe,” which he called “a major red flag.”

“Fixing potholes is typically apolitical,” he told JI, “but [when] the point of contention is the uplifting of baseless hatred against the Jewish people there is no common ground to be had.”

Kalman Yeger, an Orthodox assemblyman in Brooklyn who has been among Mamdani’s most outspoken critics, said the nominee’s “inability to get his brain around the notion that globalizing the intifada is a bad thing is terrifying.”

Simcha Eichenstein, a Democratic assemblyman from the Hasidic neighborhood of Borough Park in Brooklyn, was equally pessimistic about Mamdani.

“We can agree to disagree when it comes to policy matters, but as a visible Jew, I should be able to walk the streets of New York City safely, without fear of harassment,” he told JI on Wednesday.

“The inability and unwillingness of a candidate running to represent nearly a million Jews to denounce radical, extreme and antisemitic groups have many within the Jewish community wondering whether we have a future in New York at all,” Eichenstein added, citing as an example the radical pro-Palestinian group Within Our Lifetime, which has led at least one protest that was attended by Mamdani in 2021.

Kalman Yeger, an Orthodox assemblyman in Brooklyn who has been among Mamdani’s most outspoken critics, said the nominee’s “inability to get his brain around the notion that globalizing the intifada is a bad thing is terrifying.”

“His lunatic threat to arrest Netanyahu,

when he is surely not stupid enough to believe he has that power, is a sign to the Jew haters that he stands with them,” Yeger added, claiming Mamdani “will, by his words, his actions and his inactions, cause continued increasing antisemitism” in New York City.

Mamdani has forcefully rejected accusations he has fomented antisemitism, vowing to increase funding to counter hate crimes by 800%. A spokesperson for his campaign did not return a request for comment from JI on Wednesday.

Daniel Rosenthal, vice president of government relations at UJA-Federation of New York, said his organization, a nonprofit forbidden from making political endorsements, “will strongly oppose any actions that alienate or marginalize Jews, including attempts to delegitimize Israel and support BDS. As always, we will work to ensure that the needs and concerns of Jewish New Yorkers are heard and addressed.”

Leon Goldenberg, a Brooklyn real estate executive who is an executive board member of the Flatbush Jewish Community Coalition, said his group had no interest in meeting with Mamdani — despite that he expects him to win the election. “What I really have a problem with is ‘globalize the intifada,’” he told JI on Wednesday. “You can’t condemn it. ‘Globalize the intifada’ is murder Jews on the streets.”

Goldenberg, who endorsed Adams in the general election but now believes he has no chance, said he was considering moving his permanent residence to Florida, where he keeps an apartment, if Mamdani prevails

this fall. “He’s bright. I’m not going to take that away from him,” he said of the nominee. “But there’s very little that qualifies him to be mayor. If he had a different mindset, he’d be a great mayor.”

Despite their concerns about a potential Mamdani administration, few Jewish leaders were ready to speculate about working with him.

Daniel Rosenthal, vice president of government relations at UJA-Federation of New York, said his organization, a nonprofit forbidden from making political endorsements, “will strongly oppose any actions that alienate or marginalize Jews, including attempts to delegitimize Israel and support BDS.”

“As always, we will work to ensure that the needs and concerns of Jewish New Yorkers are heard and addressed,” Rosenthal told JI.

Other Jewish leaders pointed to ongoing voter registration efforts to boost Jewish turnout in the election. Josh Mehlman, who chairs the Flatbush Jewish Community Coalition, said his group had helped register more than 5,000 new Democratic voters in the Orthodox community in the last week alone. He did not respond when asked if he felt the increase in registrations would have any discernible impact on the outcome of the mayoral race.

Joel Rosenfeld, a representative of the influential Bobov Hasidic sect, also stressed his community “is fully focused on voter registration” in the lead-up to the election. Asked if he had anything else to add on the matter, Rosenfeld said, “A blessed new year,” ahead of the Jewish holiday of Rosh Hashanah.

Still, there are signs that some Hasidic groups may now be cautiously — and

quietly — warming up to a potential future Mamdani administration, even if it remains unlikely that any groups will endorse him, community members say.

“The Hasidim are a very practical bloc of voters, particularly the leadership,” said one Democratic consultant who has worked with the community.

“Results matter more than ideology for them. If they think Mamdani will win, that’s where they’ll go.”

One Jewish community activist familiar with the matter said that “there are some groups secretly talking to” Mamdani “or his top people,” though he added it was “hard to believe any groups will openly endorse him, especially if Adams is still in the race.”

“The feeling is that like it or not he is most likely going to be the next mayor so we might as well begin a dialogue now rather than after the election,” he told JI.

Another activist familiar with a Satmar faction in Williamsburg, which represents the largest Hasidic voting bloc in New York City, said that Mamdani’s team is “aggressively courting” the community and has been in dialogue with leadership. “They want to work with us and we want to work with them,” the activist said in summarizing the dynamic, speaking on the condition of anonymity to address a sensitive situation.

“The Hasidim are a very practical bloc of voters, particularly the leadership,” said one Democratic consultant who has worked with the community. “Results matter more than ideology for them. If they think Mamdani will win, that’s where they’ll go.” ♦

M² survey finds Jewish professionals lack hope, fear internal division, but believe in their work

In its first-ever 'Hope Study,' the education group expected to come away buoyed by the results, which were instead 'a reckoning'

By Jay Deitcher

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

M²: The Institute for Experiential Jewish Education wanted to give the Jewish world a gift for the new year. This summer, it surveyed 950 North American Jewish communal professionals about what gave them hope for the future, expecting the results to be inspirational, something positive to share with Rosh Hashanah less than one week away.

What they found was that many of these professionals don't have much hope at all. Instead of a sweet gift of apples and honey, the results were a wake-up call, a jarring shofar blast.

Today, M² provided the findings of its first-ever Hope Study, showing that a small minority of Jewish communal professionals — 24% — “often” or “very often” feel hopeful about the future. This is in stark contrast to 82% of the general U.S. population that felt hopeful about their future, according to a 2024 study performed by the Human Flourishing Labs.

The M² results were collected at a pivotal time: after June's Iran-Israel war but before the images of famine in Gaza flooded the news. If the data had been collected weeks later, the results probably would have been harsher, Shuki Taylor, founder and CEO of M², told eJewishPhilanthropy.

Though he hoped for more uplifting results, the findings about the lack of hope didn't completely surprise him, Taylor said. He knew the situation was dire post-Oct. 7, with Israel at war in Gaza and antisemitism skyrocketing, but didn't know it was this bad. The results were “a reckoning,” he said.

In an open-ended question, internal communal division was identified as the top professional challenge, followed by

leadership failures and then antisemitism. One respondent said they were “watching our community tear itself apart.” This division has been heightening as the war in Gaza drags on, according to Taylor.

The 10-question survey did not define hope, instead it surveyed respondents on what values were associated with hope, where they found hope and how often they felt it. “Hope is a very broad idea which is understood very differently by people,” Clare Goldwater, chief strategy officer at M², told eJP.

The top values associated with hope were community, compassion, responsibility, courage and peace. “If there's a sense of unity and we're all on the same page, then we can withstand anything,” Taylor said, reflecting on the results. “But if internally we are divided, that really gets in the way and impedes our ability to do our work.”

Although the results seemed grim, the survey showed that Jewish professionals believed their work had impact: 55% of respondents said they often feel energized by their work, and 85% said that their most important source of hope was knowing the impact of their work on others. Nearly 75% said they feel strongly connected to the Jewish People, and 73% found hope in support from peers.

Because employees lack hope but find meaning in their work, there is a paradox, Taylor said, which is something the Jewish world has dealt with in the past.

“What got us through... in the first few months after Oct. 7, it wasn't a sense of hope,” he said. “No one was feeling very good about the future. Everyone was grabbing onto ‘How can I make a difference?’... I don't think that in the middle of the Holocaust people turned around and felt hopeful, but they

were grabbing onto any act of humanity and kindness and decency and exercising their own humanity to help them move forward.”

But this paradox cannot last, he said. The study showed that 21% of respondents identified as being vulnerable at work and 10% said they were struggling.

When respondents said they struggled with internal communal division, they weren't asking for help building bridges with others on the other side of the political spectrum, Taylor said, but wanted to allow room for the pain and doubt people that they were feeling.

“Even if your leadership stance is unequivocal about support to Israel, you have to be able to make space for conversations about where our doubts are,” Taylor said. “Because when you're seeing certain types of reports [of the humanitarian crisis] versus an organizational line which seems to be ignoring that and putting that aside, it creates this dissonance.” Workplaces can hold their values, he said, while recognizing “how painful the moment is.”

The study offered recommendations, including building Jewish communal belonging through rituals and learning and helping staff recognize their impact. The report suggests, for instance, that organizations not simply provide reports of success to the board and funders, but also share results with the staff. “Your staff are as significant a stakeholder as your board and funders. You have to go to your staff and say, ‘Here is the return on your investment,’” Taylor said.

Another way to help staff members recognize their impact is to hold weekly meetings where employees share one thing they did to make a difference in the community, whether it be attaining funding

for an initiative or helping someone feel at home in a new temple.

The respondents of the survey mirrored the makeup of the Jewish professional world, with 78% of respondents identifying as women, but only 7% of respondents worked in day schools due to summer vacation falling at the same time as the study was conducted.

Of the respondents who felt the most

hope, executive-level professionals scored higher than their employees. Of the 17% of employees who identified themselves as thriving, the majority were men in executive roles. Even though they are in a better position emotionally, they are still struggling, Taylor said. "I don't want any leader to walk away feeling even heavier, like I didn't do enough [for my employees.] They are experiencing the same thing, and that

needs to be recognized just as much."

Even though the results of the survey weren't upbeat, they still offer hope for the year ahead, Goldwater said.

"The people told us what they need us to do, and we can do those things," she said. "Perhaps this is a way to offer some kind of pathway to sweetness." ♦

SEPTEMBER 17, 2025

Palantir's Alex Karp says Jews need to 'leave their comfort zone' to defend community

The Palantir CEO was honored at the American Friends of Lubavitch (Chabad) annual Lamplighter Awards in Washington, D.C.

By Marc Rod

Palantir CEO Alex Karp called for the Jewish community to step outside its "comfort zone" and look for new strategies to defend itself amid rising antisemitism, during a speech on Tuesday at the American Friends of Lubavitch (Chabad) annual Lamplighter Awards in Washington.

Karp, who was honored at the Chabad gala, also framed the battle against antisemitism as part of a broader fight for Western civilization and societies.

"Lessons that we've learned at Palantir ... might be valuable for defending the West, in this particular case a particular tribe of people that are equally associated with the West, the Jewish people," Karp said. "Palantir is a metaphor for working when there's no playbook, and currently there is no playbook because institutions that have historically effectively defended people who've been discriminated against, especially Jewish people, are kind of not working."

"If we're going to have a meaningful chance of fighting, everybody's going to have to leave their comfort zone a couple times a year," Karp said. "It's our job and my job to remind people [of] that, especially younger people here."

He said that he's "deeply, deeply grateful" for the Chabad award, "but I think we need a world where I don't win this award, and there's huge competition for it. ... Why are so few people speaking up? There are very, very few people speaking up."

"I should not be winning this award," Karp continued. "I'm the least likely person to win this award, and any award in the Jewish community, ever."

He said that he sees some who oppose the Jewish community as suffering from "Jewish derangement syndrome" and attacking Jews who are "a metaphor for agency and meritocracy" as part of a broader effort at "annihilating our societies."

"We have to fight for a rule of law, meritocratic, high-agency society, and everybody's going to have to help out, and that includes people who don't like to ever speak out — finance, Hollywood, all sorts of other people," the Palantir CEO continued.

He said that the Jewish community should focus on building alliances with people "who may not [already like you]" and that building alliances with non-Jews is crucial — "this is about higher values in our society."

Karp also suggested that some Jewish nonprofits are failing to work effectively.

"One of the things we have in corporate America, is when institutions fail, they disappear," Karp said. "We don't have that in nonprofits. We've got to recognize that what's [happening] now is not working."

Karp was introduced onstage by Rachel Goldberg-Polin, mother of Hersh Goldberg-Polin, an American citizen taken hostage by Hamas on Oct. 7, 2023, and killed by the terrorist group in Gaza.

Goldberg-Polin said that she and her husband Jon had connected with Karp during their efforts to free their son, and that he had worked with the couple to strategize on ways to free the hostages. She said Karp and the Palantir team had offered "access, ideas, contacts, advice [and] connections," as well as their support on a personal level.

"There were concepts that we had not heard anyone else suggest in the previous 95 days," Goldberg-Polin said, recounting their first meeting. "This was the beginning of my glimpse into the creative, fearless and independent workings of the exquisitely complex mind of Alex Karp."

Since Oct. 7, she continued, Karp had "showed up for Israel," and Goldberg-Polin offered her gratitude on behalf of all of the hostage families.

"You spoke and continue to speak an

unpopular truth and to chase justice. You are a righteous man. You are not afraid to jump,” she continued. “To all the people in this room with access to our decision-makers, history will remember all of us, and we will all be judged not based on equities, nor interests, nor politics, but on having the courage and integrity to do the right thing. To jump, even when it feels like there is no way forward.”

Karp, who has a doctorate in philosophy, was presented with a menorah and a signed first-edition copy of *Man's Search for Meaning*, a book by philosopher Viktor Frankl about his experience in Nazi concentration camps. Frankl inscribed the book to a fellow survivor of Dachau.

One of the freed hostages who was held with Hersch Goldberg-Polin recounted that Goldberg-Polin had quoted Frankl while urging him to keep fighting to stay alive, speakers said.

Karp and other honorees were also honored with letters inscribed in a Torah scroll that the Chabad movement has been writing in significant locations throughout Washington, D.C.

House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY) was honored at a pre-ceremony reception, and delivered remarks. White House Jewish liaison Martin Marks delivered a message on behalf of President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania Trump.

Attendees from Capitol Hill included Senate Majority Leader John Thune (R-SD), Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY), Senate Majority Whip John Barrasso (R-WY), House Majority Leader Steve Scalise (R-LA), Sens. Jack Reed (D-RI), John Hickenlooper (D-CO), Michael Bennet (D-CO) and John Cornyn (R-TX) and Reps. Mike Lawler (R-NY), Maggie Goodlander (D-NH), Rob Menendez (D-NJ), Glenn Ivey

(D-MD) and Greg Landsman (D-OH).

Antisemitism envoy-designate Yehuda Kaploun, FCC Chairman Brendan Carr, undersecretary of state-designate Jacob Helberg, former Sen. Kirsten Sinema (I-AZ), former Rep. Mike Gallagher (R-WI), who is now head of defense at Palantir, former Interior Secretary David Bernhardt and diplomats from close to 20 countries were also in the crowd.

John Fish, the chairman and CEO of Suffolk, served as the event chairman, and Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck founder and chairman Norm Brownstein, Real Estate Roundtable president and CEO Jeff DeBoer and Palantir Executive Vice President Josh Harris served as co-chairs.

Rocky Zislin, the president of Chabad at George Washington University, and Conference of Presidents CEO William Daroff also delivered remarks at the event. ♦

SEPTEMBER 17, 2025

Musician, author and philanthropist Ethan Daniel Davidson adds rabbi to his many hats

After his father, William Davidson, got him involved in his eponymous foundation, the folk singer decided he needed to be more Jewishly literate, a process that eventually led him to the rabbinate

By Jay Deitcher

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

Ethan Daniel Davidson wears many hats. He's a folk singer, an author, a philanthropist and now, after receiving ordination last month, a rabbi. As a cowboy hat aficionado, he also literally wears many hats.

“The worst thing is new cowboy hats,” Davidson told *eJewishPhilanthropy*. “You have to make them look old.” He calls his process of aging hats “engineered authenticity.” It involves ashes, olive oil, red wine, turmeric and chewing tobacco. Also: a blowtorch. He learned the technique from a Hollywood costume designer.

Once his hat is sufficiently distressed, his youngest son helps adorn the crown

with ribbons and feathers. For his interview earlier this month, Davidson's ensemble also included a Japanese scarf and a vintage Levi's T-shirt with *tzitzit* streaming out under the hem. It's only been a few weeks since he received *semicha*, rabbinical ordination, and he's still grasping what it means to carry the title “rabbi.”

Davidson's origin story is one out of a comic book. Superman came to Earth from his destroyed home planet Krypton, where he was adopted by Kansas farmers, and Davidson came to the Jewish world from the Weather Underground. Born in 1969 to a 17-year-old member of the Marxist militant organization that was designated as a domestic terrorist group by the FBI, he was adopted by Bill Davidson, the Michigan-

based businessman and owner of the NBA's Detroit Pistons and the NHL's Tampa Bay Lightning.

It was his adoptive mother, Lynne Saperstein, who first realized his predilection toward Torah and, he says, sought to prevent it. That's why she pulled him out of Detroit's Hillel Day School. (She denies this.)

Even though she grew up in Michigan, “her family were originally kind of stereotypical, Lower East Side Jews,” Davidson told eJP. “A tougher, street family,” they valued being Jewish, but also believed “we shouldn't be *too* religious.”

So his path took a detour, with him attempting to follow in his father's footsteps. “I don't think I've ever had a talent for making any kind of money,” he said on the

"The Avrum Rosensweig Show." In college, he failed economics three times. At different points, he worked for his father's basketball team and in an arena his father owned, but eventually, he needed to escape Detroit completely, feeling as if he was always seen as only his father's son.

"Nothing grows under the shade of a really big tree," he said, so he spent much of the '90s living in Alaska, where he penned his first songs. Then, he toured the world, releasing albums through the now-defunct Times Beach Records, which he co-owned.

"I never thought I'd come back here," he said, about moving back to Michigan. Before his father died in 2009, he asked him to take the helm of his eponymous foundation, which has a deep focus on Jewish education, funding initiatives such as Sefaria, the Shalom Hartman Institute and the Hadar Institute. "He hasn't been in the office in a long time. I guess mostly because he's dead, but his name's on the door, and we keep waiting for him to show up."

A line can be drawn directly from Davidson's work at the foundation, where he serves as treasurer and chair of the grants committee, and the payot now hanging down his temples. "I made a commitment to deepen my Jewish literacy, my Jewish knowledge in service of his philanthropy," Davidson said. "If I'm going to make these decisions around Jewish identity, Jewish education, then I need to be as Jewishly educated and as traditionally literate as I can be."

Over more than a decade and a half, he studied with leaders across the religious spectrum, including Rabbi Amichau Lau-Lavie, founder of LabShul; Lau-Lavie's brother, Rabbi Binyamin Lau, head of the 929 Bible Project; Rabbi Asher Lopatin, the leader of Kehillat Etz Chayim; and Rabbi Benay Lappe, the rosh yeshiva at Svava, which strives to empower queer and trans people through Torah study. Davidson also studied philosophy at the Jewish Theological Seminary for a year in New York and released two books based on his Torah studies. Over the years, the topic of receiving *semicha* arose numerous times, but it was Lappe, who was based in Chicago, whose

pitch landed.

"Well, I can't come all the time to Chicago and go through some kind of program," he remembered telling her.

"You don't have to do that," she said. "You're already 'doing rabbi.' You just have to tell me if you want *semicha*."

Realizing that others already looked to Davidson as a rabbi, she thought to herself, "This is exactly how Jewish leadership is meant to grow — organically," she told eJP. "Many of the early sages whom we call 'the rabbis' were never actually ordained and never held the title rabbi."

Davidson had studied. He had a "capacity to listen deeply, to guide with compassion, to model what it looks like to be a person shaped by the Jewish tradition," she said. He just lacked the title.

Even his Orthodox study partners were nudging him, with Lopatin sealing the deal when he asked Davidson, "What's wrong with you? Tell her yes!"

When the big day came, Davidson debated whom to invite. Many of the people he studied with held conflicting beliefs. "I don't want to make them uncomfortable," he remembered thinking. "I'm going to be getting *semichah* from a female rabbi and that might not be a thing for them. At the end, I was like, 'You know what? They'll come or they'll won't come.'"

They came. "Every corner of the Detroit Jewish community" came to the ceremony, Lappe recalled. "They all came to celebrate Ethan and, I think, this important moment in the life of the entire Jewish community."

Davidson still doesn't quite look the part of a traditional rabbi. He doesn't fit any stereotype of a philanthropist either. As someone born to a non-Jewish mom, he knows what it's like to be excluded, which is one of the reasons he connects with others on the fringes. He doesn't identify by sect. "I'm just Jewish," he said. "That's enough trouble."

When he received *semicha*, there was an acceptance not just of him, but of everything he represented, he said: a Judaism that respects women's leadership and LGBTQ spaces for learning. Less than a week later, he was called to the Torah for an *aliyah* at an

Orthodox synagogue. The *gabai* referred to him by the title rabbi, something he wasn't sure would happen.

"I'm still processing it and letting it sink in," Davidson said. "The fact that I had so much support from people of all different parts of the Jewish continuum really made me feel good."

His years of studies gave him a better appreciation for his philanthropy work, he said. "If you asked me, 15 or 20 years ago, what's important about being Jewish, I don't think I could answer that at all back then."

Today, he doesn't care if Jews are religious or not, but he wants to offer them the opportunity to study through day schools and camps. "I want to make Judaism unavoidable," he said, because through studying the Torah, Jews learn to bring light into the world.

"Through a serious engagement in enhancing our own Jewish literacy and through a Jewish practice, we learn how to be human beings," he said. "We learn how to treat other people as human beings. Not all Jews are successful at that."

Lau-Lavie served as the *av beit din*, literally the father of the court, at Davidson's *semicha* ceremony. To mark the occasion, Lau-Lavie gifted the new rabbi with an earring worn by Rebbetzin Hadassah Gross, his drag alter ego. The Jewish world needs creative minds like Davidson, he said. "At this time of such sorrow, existential threats and moral ruptures for our people and as growing gaps grow between people everywhere, we need all hands on deck with creative leadership to help us heal, navigate towards moral repair, bridge building, love-driven justice, pluralism and peace."

Today, Davidson's family is proud of his accomplishments, too, both at the foundation and as a rabbi. He even suspects that his stepmother, who works with him at the foundation, tipped off eJP about his ordination. (*Ed. note: She didn't.*) Now, his mom *kvels* at his accomplishment, denying that she pulled him from day school.

"We can revise history," he said, with a laugh. "I'll revise the history with you." ♦

Drawing on Jewish blessing, Shapiro offers ‘words of healing’ to a nation on edge

Speaking at the Eradicate Hate Global Summit on rising political violence, Shapiro called for ‘peaceful and respectful dialogue’

By Gabby Deutch

Amid an alarming rise in political violence, Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro said Tuesday that the way to combat extremism and division is by bringing people together and restoring their faith in the government — a civic-minded strategy that included some thinly veiled swipes at President Donald Trump and the hardline rhetoric he has adopted since conservative activist Charlie Kirk was killed in Utah last week.

Shapiro and his family survived an April arson attack that damaged the governor’s residence in Harrisburg while they slept, hours after hosting a Passover Seder there. The alleged arsonist acted to protest Shapiro’s stance toward the Palestinians, according to a police search warrant.

“I believe we have a responsibility to be clear and unequivocal in calling out all forms of political violence, making clear it is all wrong,” Shapiro said in a keynote address at the Eradicate Hate Global Summit, a Pittsburgh conference created in the aftermath of the 2018 mass shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue. “Unfortunately some, from the dark corners of the internet all the way to the Oval Office, want to cherry pick which instances of political violence they want to condemn.”

Shapiro called for dialogue and a rejection of the demands for revenge that have permeated social media since Kirk’s murder last week. The speech did not name Trump, although Shapiro called for Trump to act with “moral clarity” in a post on X on Monday.

Widely rumored to be considering a 2028 presidential run, the speech offered Shapiro a chance to deliver a wide-ranging speech to a national audience.

“We need to create more opportunities for peaceful and respectful dialogue, respecting each other’s fundamental rights

as Americans,” said Shapiro. “Prosecuting constitutionally protected speech will only further erode our freedoms, deepen the mistrust. That is un-American.” Attorney General Pam Bondi said on Monday that the U.S. would be “targeting” hate speech, which she said was different from free speech — a statement she attempted to walk back a day later after facing bipartisan pushback.

There is a better way, Shapiro added: “That better way is the Pennsylvania way.”

“Those who stoke division will want to have us believe words are important, but we also need action,” said Shapiro. “We need to make sure people are safe here in Pennsylvania and all across America, safe to exercise their fundamental rights and freedoms, whether they’re debating on a college campus, praying at a synagogue or church or spending time at home with loved ones.”

Americans should do more to address hate online, and to teach people to better distinguish “fact from fiction” on the internet, argued Shapiro. But more than that, he said, they need to see and trust that the government actually can make their lives better.

“There’s a deeper issue at the root of this dangerous rise of political violence. Too many people don’t believe that our institutions and the people in them can solve problems anymore. They feel alone, ignored, shut out by a government that isn’t working for them,” said Shapiro. “It leads to a belief among some that the only way they can address their problems is through violence.”

The ways to prove otherwise, Shapiro said, are simple — helping people get driver’s licenses quickly, giving kids free breakfast at school and “building a government that works for Pennsylvanians and gets stuff done.”

Shapiro leaned on Jewish teachings in his speech, referring as he often does to how his faith underpins his public service.

“My faith has taught me that no one is required to complete the task, but neither are we free to refrain from it. It means that each of us has a responsibility to get off the sidelines, get in the game and do our part,” Shapiro said.

After the attack on the governor’s mansion, Pennsylvanians “were united in speaking and acting with moral clarity, making clear that hatred and violence has no place here in Pennsylvania,” said Shapiro.

He shared the story of the 82-year-old Christian chaplain of a local fire department, who gave Shapiro and his family a letter signed by each member of their department. On the back, the chaplain had written by hand what he said was the most important blessing in his life, from the Book of Numbers.

May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord turn His face toward you and give you peace.

“I wept when I read that prayer that he wrote,” said Shapiro, who recalls then telling the chaplain that he recites that prayer — known as the Priestly Blessing in Judaism — to his children each night. He then proceeded to do so in Hebrew, and offered his own benediction about the power the prayer holds for a nation reeling from violence.

Yivarechecha Adonai v’yishmerecha. Ya’er Adonai panav eilecha v’chuneka. Yisa Adonai panav eilecha v’yasem l’cha shalom.

“Those are words of healing, words of hopefulness to me,” said Shapiro. “They are also words that again remind us of our shared humanity.” ♦

Jewish social workers warn of growing antisemitism in the field: ‘Counter to everything that we learn in social work school’

A new report details the ‘exclusion, isolation and public targeting’ that Jewish social workers have faced — particularly since Oct. 7

By Gabby Deutch

Like most social workers, Jennifer Kogan went into the field to help people. A therapist who works in Ontario, Canada, and Washington, she markets her private practice as “compassion-focused counseling.” *Everyone is welcome* here, a banner on her website states.

But Kogan’s understanding of her profession has radically shifted in the two years since the Oct. 7 attacks in Israel. Despite its focus on compassion, the field of social work has been engulfed by antisemitism, according to a new report authored by Kogan and Andrea Yudell, a licensed clinical social worker in Washington and Maryland.

“Since Oct. 7, Jewish social workers have experienced unprecedented silencing, gaslighting, exclusion, isolation and public targeting in professional spaces,” states the report, which was published on Monday by the Jewish Social Work Consortium, an organization founded shortly after Oct. 7.

Accusations of antisemitism have roiled the mental health field over the past two years. In April, the state of Illinois formally reprimanded a therapist who had created a list of “Zionist” therapists and encouraged colleagues not to refer clients to them. Rep. Ritchie Torres (D-NY) warned the American Psychological Association in May to respond to “persistent and pernicious” antisemitism among its members.

The report describes Jewish social workers being targeted on industry-wide email listservs, doxed and publicly called out during academic courses and lectures. Many of the allegations took place in academic settings related to diversity, like a panel on “whiteness” at Catholic University’s National Catholic School of Social Service that reportedly called Jewish students “racist” and “white supremacists.”

“While we are concerned with systemic oppression or bias against all other minorities, I believe the social work profession perpetrates it on the Jews,” said Judith Schagrin, the retired administrator of a municipal foster care agency in Maryland. “I never dreamt that there would be this level of hostility and ignorance. On the other hand, I have believed for many years that just like institutional racism against Black folks lingers right beneath the surface, I firmly believe that institutional antisemitism does as well.”

Social work is a massive field, referring broadly to a profession that can encompass therapists in private practice, people working in public sector social services organizations, school counselors, religious leaders, administrators, social justice advocates and more.

The report’s authors claim that antisemitic rhetoric — and, in particular, anti-Israel litmus tests foisted on Jewish practitioners — has become endemic in the field.

Jewish social workers view this discrimination and disrespect as anathema to a key guiding principle of social work: the idea that empathy, and understanding individuals’ personal stories, is critical to “address life challenges and enhance wellbeing,” according to a global definition of social work adopted by the International Federation of Social Workers. They see a double standard applied to Jews, who are often expected to disavow Israel’s actions in Gaza before their concerns are taken seriously. (In January, the IFSW issued a formal “censure” against the Israeli Union of Social Workers because of its members’ history of service in Israel’s military, prompting a rebuke signed by nearly 4,000

Jewish therapists.)

“You’re supposed to extend cultural humility to various different groups, and I saw it extended to so many other groups. There’s Black Lives Matter, and then Asians that were experiencing anti-Asian hate. We were left out of that conversation, even though there were growing statistics that Jewish people were facing antisemitism in many contexts,” said Jodi Taub, a New York-based clinical social worker.

“The whole purpose of the field is, we’re there to support other humans,” added Taub. “Our job is to be supportive individuals, and social justice is supposed to be social justice for all. No one should have to go into graduate school and experience harassment and discrimination.”

Many of the complaints in the report target the National Association of Social Workers, the field’s leading professional body, with 110,000 members.

“The silence and negligence of NASW has been especially egregious,” the report’s authors write, referencing the group’s two-month delay in publicly addressing the events of Oct. 7 and its alleged reticence to strongly denounce antisemitism in the nearly two years since. An NASW spokesperson did not respond to a request for comment.

Debates about the war in Gaza have caused turmoil in an NASW listserv, where rhetoric condemning Israel’s “genocide” in Gaza and calls for boycotts of Israel have become increasingly common. Jewish social workers who wrote in the listserv to raise awareness about the hostages in Gaza or to respond to inaccurate messages about Israel often faced harassment.

Taub said that after posting about the Israeli hostages in Gaza, she was targeted

by someone she did not know who shared a screenshot of Taub's business profile with the word "PROHIBITED" over it in red text, urging people to avoid her. (That social media post was quickly taken down.)

These experiences have colored the way Jewish social workers engage with their colleagues, casting an air of suspicion to interactions between them.

"It's hard to know who's safe, like who

is someone that basically hates you, or someone who just doesn't have an opinion whatsoever, or someone that is behind you," said Kogan. "It's very dehumanizing to read what people are writing."

Carole Cox, a professor at Fordham's Graduate School of Social Service, has worked in the field for decades, with a particular focus on Alzheimer's caregivers and on grandparents raising grandchildren.

Now, she'd think twice about telling a young Jewish person to enter the field.

"It's difficult to tell a Jewish person, 'Yes, go into social work, you will love it,'" Cox told JI. "There were so many Jewish pioneers in the profession, and now many social workers are actually hiding their Jewish identity." ♦

SEPTEMBER 16, 2025

'I fear Israel will fall back in love with quiet': Yaakov Katz warns against complacency after Gaza war

*The journalist talked to JI about his new book, *While Israel Slept*, describing the failures leading up to the Oct. 7 attacks and what Israel can do to ensure they don't happen again*

By **Lahav Harkov**

In the two years since the Oct. 7, 2023, attacks on Israel, there have been many books in multiple languages published on the topic — personal accounts, tales of heroism, a hostage memoir — but *While Israel Slept: How Hamas Surprised the Most Powerful Military in the Middle East* by Yaakov Katz and Amir Bohbot may be the most comprehensive.

In the book, Katz, the founder of the MEAD (Middle East-America Dialogue) and former editor-in-chief of *The Jerusalem Post*, and Bohbot, a veteran Israeli defense reporter, answer the biggest questions about that day, going through the events leading up to the attacks, including the fateful night before.

The book also dedicates chapters to stark warnings that an Oct. 7-style attack could happen again if Israel does not make necessary changes.

In an interview with *Jewish Insider's* Lahav Harkov and Asher Fredman, the executive director of the Misgav Institute for National Security and Zionist Strategy, on the "Misgav Mideast Horizons" podcast last week, Katz said that his "deepest fear is that this could happen again."

"Eventually, quiet will set in," Katz said. "And I fear that Israel will fall back in love

with the quiet and will neglect, to some extent, the vigilance that it will require to prevent Hamas from being able to ... reconstitute itself."

While Katz said he is skeptical Hamas could again launch attacks at the scale of Oct. 7, "to prevent them from rebuilding and reconstituting ... will require a major effort that Israel has never really done."

"Israel fought wars, we walked away and threw away the key, but we've never maintained the success ... [except] in the West Bank, after Operation Defensive Shield in 2002. ... Israel created operational freedom, and then it retained the operational freedom, so in the almost 24 years since, Israel goes in and out of the West Bank as it sees fit," he said.

Katz noted that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has talked about creating a similar situation in Gaza.

"The proof will be in the pudding ... If [the IDF] doesn't do that and just says, 'We'll jot down the target, we'll build up the target bank,' that's falling right back into the trap that led to Oct. 7," he stated.

The IDF has also made structural changes to how it gathers intelligence, Katz said, and there is more coordination between intelligence bodies than before and

a better flow of information to the decision-makers.

"I think there's more vigilance today by the IDF in the way it watches the borders along Israel," he said. "That preemptive policy, if you see just a rocket being moved or you see a bad guy driving in a car or you see a tunnel being dug — we're now applying it very much in Lebanon ... Israel continues to operate pretty freely in Lebanon. This is part of that new policy. I think that in the aftermath of however this war does end, that will be integral to keep Hamas from reconstituting itself in a way that it could pose another major strategic threat to Israel."

While Israel Slept is meant to provide "a look at the entirety of what happened," Katz said.

"What were the different alarm bells that we now know were sounding ... in IDF headquarters and Shin Bet headquarters? What were the earlier signs that we know about?" Katz said. "How did Israel fall into a state of complacency? ... How was the policy of containment created?"

Katz said both former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Netanyahu should have "refuse[d] to accept a reality that a genocidal terrorist group is living

alongside our border.”

“If you look at the way Israel approached Hamas and approached Gaza, it was as if we’re stuck,” he said. “We don’t have an alternative ... [to] this game of whack-a-mole every two years or so, where we hit them on the head.”

Israel viewed Hamas as “the bottom of the totem pole” of threats, far below Iran and Hezbollah, Katz said.

Another entrenched — and incorrect — belief in Israel’s political and military establishments was that helping Gaza economically would make Hamas less likely to attack Israel, Katz argued.

“When Naftali Bennett became prime minister in the summer of 2021, he was announcing to the whole world with great pride how he allowed in 10,000 [Gazan] workers” to Israel, said Katz, who was an advisor to Bennett from 2013-2016. “We now know that during his period as prime minister, they were preparing for this invasion and he just got lucky that it didn’t happen on his watch.”

In addition, Katz said that Israel’s general defense doctrine was not to launch preemptive wars in response to conventional military buildups, pointing to Hezbollah’s amassment of 150,000 missiles.

“That has changed,” he said. “The issue of preemption now seems like it’s setting in as the new policy for Israel, which is ... the only way forward.”

Katz is also the author of *Weapons Wizards*, about Israel’s defense industry, and had been working on a follow-up book before Oct. 7. He now views the Israeli military’s reliance on technology as part of what allowed it to remain complacent for so long.

One such kind of technology was defensive. With the Iron Dome, Israel “was able to swat missiles out of the sky like they were mosquitoes. It made it seem like the missile threat is nothing ... not a strategic threat.”

When Hamas fighters crossed into Israel via tunnels during 2014’s Operation Protective Edge, Israel sought to address that problem with technology as well, building a border fence with a deep underground element.

“They put these teams of the smartest soldiers and scientists together with sonar

experts, seismic experts, geologists ... They come up with a system that can detect where a tunnel is being dug, when it’s being dug. They’re so sensitive that they can tell what tool is being used to dig the tunnel: a jackhammer, a shovel, a bulldozer,” Katz said.

“How many people crossed into Israel on Oct. 7 in a tunnel? Zero,” he added. “They blew about 60 different points of entry in the border [fence] and that’s where they came in. ... The technology created a false sense of security that we are impenetrable.”

Israel was also overreliant on intelligence technology, Katz said.

“There were hundreds of Hamas [terrorists] in the initial wave [into Israel on Oct. 7] and there wasn’t a single one who could call up his Israeli handler and say, ‘We’re coming,’” Katz said. “We had no agents or informants on the ground in Gaza. We thought we knew everything by listening to them, by watching them. We had neglected the basics of intelligence collection, which is human intelligence.”

Katz said the IDF and Shin Bet have invested in building up greater resources on that front since Oct. 7.

“Contrast Gaza with Lebanon, with the amazing pager attack, with what Israel did in Iran, taking out nuclear scientists and the top military leadership. You see that when Israel allocates the resources, the attention and the focus, it can do incredible things,” he said.

Katz also spoke out against the “huge distraction” of the government’s planned judicial reform that consumed the country in 2023, as well as the outsized public protests against it.

“The right will say that the left and the protesters, and especially those who were the reservists who threatened to not follow orders ... weakened the military and the left, or the anti-judicial reform protesters would say the government, in its refusal to stop ... and be willing to understand that dividing ourselves made us vulnerable, made us exposed. However you look at it, in the end, the responsibility is upon the government,” he said.

When Israel Slept includes several stories of senior defense officials warning the government that the deep divisions in Israel posed a security threat and Israel’s enemies

would take advantage of the discord; though, Katz noted, no one specifically warned that Hamas was planning an invasion.

Katz said the weakening effect on Israel by the extremely tense political atmosphere should have been obvious to the country’s leaders: “We’re at each other’s throats. We’re ripping ourselves apart on the streets. ... If we saw this division on the streets of Tehran or Damascus, would we not try to fan the flames just a bit to achieve our objectives in those countries and among our adversaries? Why would we think they would not do the same to us?”

In addition, Katz said, Hamas chose to launch its attack in October 2023 because Israel-Saudi normalization talks seemed to be coming to fruition, and because Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar believed “the alliance between Israel and the U.S. had been weakened and that the Americans under then-President [Joe] Biden would not stand with Israel. ... He was wrong.”

In general, though, Katz pointed out, “they’re a genocidal terrorist group. They don’t need an excuse to want to kill us and attack us. It’s something they wake up to every single day. Terrorists like Hamas and Islamic Jihad seek our destruction.”

Hamas’ understanding of the Israeli psyche went beyond taking advantage of the divisions of early 2023, and was a part of its hostage-taking strategy.

“From day one ... I could have said, ‘We’re going to win this war, because we’re going to bring down Hamas ... but the hostages, we won’t get them back.’ And you would have looked at me and said ‘You’re crazy, that’s not a victory.’ And I could have said the opposite, we’ll win the war because we get the hostages back, but Hamas will remain in power, and you also would have said, legitimately, ‘What are you talking about? That’s not victory,’” Katz said.

“If there weren’t hostages, the war would have ended much earlier,” he said. “Part of this is because we the Israeli people — and I think this is something that the world does not recognize — are still very much hurting, are still very much in our trauma. And as long as the hostages remain in Gaza ... the Israeli people will not be able to recover, rehabilitate and heal, and this will make this conflict, unfortunately, continue.” ♦

Former Mossad chief Yossi Cohen talks covert missions, Oct. 7 failures in new book

Cohen told JI that he's considering getting into politics but it's 'definitely not the time' with Netanyahu still dominating the scene

By Lahav Harkov

Like any former Mossad chief, Yossi Cohen has long been a relatively elusive figure in Israeli public life. So his recent embrace of the spotlight has left Israeli politicians wondering whether he will run for prime minister in the next election.

While the name “Yossi Cohen” is so generic in Israel that one may think it’s an alias akin to “John Smith,” it is, in fact, the real name of the intelligence officer who was nicknamed “Callan” for his favorite British spy show, and “the model” for his dapper style and perfectly-gelled coif. He first received public attention as deputy Mossad chief known only as “Y,” and emerged from the shadows with his real name and face in 2013 when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appointed him national security advisor. Cohen was appointed head of the Mossad two years later, a job he retained for six years.

Cohen received attention for commanding ambitious Mossad operations, such as smuggling Iran’s nuclear archive to Israel, and for Netanyahu reportedly naming him as one of his possible heirs, but he rarely gave interviews — until now.

Cohen has been on a Hebrew media blitz ahead of Tuesday’s release of his new book, *The Sword of Freedom: Israel, Mossad and the Secret War*, in Hebrew and English.

The book is a mix of memoir, in which he discusses becoming the first kippah-wearing graduate of the Mossad cadets’ course and his undercover missions, recruiting spies within Hezbollah and the Iranian nuclear program, as well as his rise to head the organization and lead major operations. It also includes commentary on recent events, including the failures of the defense establishment — and less so of politicians, in his description — on Oct. 7, 2023, the ongoing war and hostage negotiations. Cohen laments that things

would have gone better if his advice in past years had been heeded.

It reads, in many ways, like the kind of book a politician would publish before a big run, to let potential voters get to know him — albeit with the much more exciting elements of spycraft.

Yet, in an interview with *Jewish Insider* last week at his office in a Tel Aviv high-rise, where Cohen’s day job is representing the Japanese investment holding company SoftBank in Israel, he dismissed the idea that his book was the first step in a political campaign.

“That was not the reason for me to write the book,” he said. “I started writing the book something like three years ago, much earlier. I decided to [publish the book] now, because I believe that now is the time ... Since I started the book we had the judicial reform, the seventh of October, a war against Hezbollah and the Iranian events. Each of those chapters had to be updated.”

Still, Cohen added, “I can’t say that one day it will not serve my political goals if I will decide to go into politics.”

Thus far, Cohen has kept politics as an “if.” In the past, it was a “no,” he said, but now, he’s thinking about it.

“I am not entering any politics right now,” he clarified. “I stay uninvolved in this kind of politics because nothing is happening. The entire Israeli political system is a little bit stuck. I’m not assessing that any kind of election will happen before the end of next year, November 2026 as planned,” when the next Israeli elections are scheduled to occur.

Cohen said he does not have a team ready for a political campaign, and that all he is doing currently is promoting his book.

The former Mossad chief said that “I was always a Likudnik,” identifying with ideas of the party’s ideological forebear Ze’ev Jabotinsky, but “all options are open” as to

whether he would join an existing party or start his own.

He would not join Likud in its current iteration unless it is “reshaped,” he said, in an apparent reference to the vocal populism from within the party’s ranks in the Knesset.

“I don’t want to criticize people personally ... but it’s a different party today. It’s not the party that I grew up on. It’s so totally different.”

As to whether he would wait for Netanyahu to leave the political scene, Cohen said, “Definitely this is not the time. ...Currently, I am staying in business, 100%.”

Cohen and Netanyahu have not spoken in over a year and a half, when several months into the war the former intelligence chief warned the prime minister that senior defense figures may try to manipulate investigations into the failure of Oct. 7 to exonerate themselves.

Despite the long disconnect, Cohen said that there is no rupture between them, because they had an excellent working relationship, but they were not personal friends. He noted that before the war they had not spoken for a long time; Netanyahu offered him the role of defense minister in late 2022, but Cohen could not legally take it because of a required cooling-off period between serving as a senior defense officer and entering politics.

Cohen has somewhat shielded Netanyahu from blame for the failures surrounding the Oct. 7 attacks, referring in his book to the security establishment’s failure and asserting that “there is no one else to blame.”

He clarified in his interview with JI that “the political leadership always has responsibility” for events such as Oct. 7 and called for a state commission of inquiry to be established, something that Netanyahu has sought to avoid.

"We must make sure to investigate what has to be investigated," Cohen said. "The intelligence level was poor. It was either not gathered properly or not interpreted properly, but the result was super poor. We didn't give the State of Israel any alerts about a major attack. ... We didn't have any workable defense lines operating correctly at our borders."

"There's the Shin Bet and IDF intelligence who have to know these things, and since they didn't, and they didn't push back the enemy when it entered the State of Israel or counter the enemy before it entered Israel, that's a failure. You don't need an investigation to know that. Then, of course, I think that the government was responsible for everything that happened under its auspices," he said.

Soon after Oct. 7, Netanyahu tasked Cohen with trying to find a way to get Palestinian civilians out of Gaza so Israel would be able to fight Hamas with fewer civilian casualties.

"The Mossad and I were trying to convince [Egypt] to let the Palestinians leave, even for a short time, only the civilians ... without anything, no cellular, no electronics, no armaments, no physical threats, to the Egyptian side," he recalled. "Take them into the Sinai Peninsula for six months, one year at a time, a million or a million and a half people. ... That was the plan. It didn't work because [Egyptian President Abdel Fattah] Sisi and his consultants said it will cause a kind of revolution in Egypt because of the hatred of Hamas...and their [affiliation] with the Muslim Brotherhood."

Nearly two years later, Cohen says "it's hard to explain why ... the world does not really embrace any Gazan immigrants. Indonesia, Malaysia, Qatar even, or Egypt and Libya — a long list of Muslim countries — could say 'I would take 50,000,' 'I would take 100,000,' 'Come live with us.' No one said that, not even Muslim countries. Even if ... they would all be sent back home."

Cohen said the story demonstrates the lengths to which Israel went to protect Gazan civilians from the war.

"Israel does not mean to harm civilians," he said. "We do not starve them, we do not fight a war against any of the civilians. We keep the international war laws very tightly. But now they're in [Gaza] and we can't do

much. We try to help them, but it's a war zone. What I was trying to do is send them away from a war zone."

As to how the war in Gaza should end, "the best case scenario should be connected to a hostage deal. If there is a hostage deal today, Israel should take it," he said, days before Israel attempted to strike Hamas leaders in Qatar, which has mediated the hostage and ceasefire talks.

While Cohen said he is not privy to the details of the talks, he said "if there is a deal that gets some of our hostages home and for this we have to pay a price of pausing our military action as we did in the past, I will be very much in favor."

At the same time, he said "the State of Israel cannot afford to not complete the defeat of Hamas."

Cohen said he did not have an answer as to who should administer Gaza after the war. He dismissed the control some Gazan families have of small areas, saying "it's two and a half people ... Someone has to take care of them, to supply them with ... social services, health services."

He was, however, certain that the Palestinian Authority should not be involved, because it is not capable of managing Gaza. "We tried that," he said, referring to Hamas deposing the PA in Gaza in 2006. He also noted that Israel has been protecting PA President Mahmoud Abbas: "We're fighting for him and with him against Hamas in his territories."

Cohen wrote in the book about his involvement in another element of the war in the past two years: the pager attack in which Israel detonated hundreds of beepers belonging to Hezbollah terrorist operatives in Lebanon.

"It started 25 or so years ago, when I was the head of a division in the Mossad," he recounted. "We understood ... there is something new that we can do, and that is selling to our enemies tampered, manipulated equipment. That is the family of the pagers and walkie-talkies."

One of the early operations in that vein was the sale of a special calibrated table sold to Iran for use in its nuclear program, which later exploded, but the pager operation was the largest in magnitude. Other tampered equipment was used for surveillance or for tracking locations.

"These are things we learned to do 20 years ago," he said. "Building up this kind of relationship with the buyers is something very hard to do because they check you ... they go into everything, so you have to be real. The concept was invented, and now you see the results."

Cohen said that the IDF and Mossad "did a beautiful job" in the 12-day war against Iran in June: "We prepared a lot of capabilities inside Iran to allow for that and it was operated correctly during the war."

Israel must always be prepared for the next round against Iran, he added.

"We're not sure that Iran will not go back and try to enrich uranium again," he said. "They claim that they can rebuild their sites ... They [the West] said the destruction was huge, and I believe the Western side on that. Nevertheless, if they [rebuild] and there is a threat coming from that direction, the only thing that I can suggest my government and the administration [do] is to attack it."

Cohen frequently lamented in his book that the Israeli defense establishment is insufficiently aggressive and overly cautious.

The former Mossad chief said he felt that his "responsibility was to counter our enemies brutally. If I see terrorism, I have to counter it. If I see Iranian nuclear sites, I have to counter them. If I see someone anywhere, anyhow trying to plan something against the State of Israel, I have to counter it. And I did not always feel that this was the methodology being practiced in other bodies."

By not nipping growing threats in the bud, Cohen argued, Israel allowed them to grow to a magnitude that it became too hesitant to act against.

The war in Iran, however, was an example of a positive change, Cohen said.

"I think that [Eyal] Zamir as [IDF] chief of staff is doing an amazing job," he said. "He's much more aggressive. He's telling the government ... 'Yeah, there will be some missiles coming back to our side, but we can deal with it.'"

"Now, on the Iranian side, they know we can do it and we may do it again," Cohen added.

Cohen has been deeply involved in Israel's unofficial relations with Arab states, and said he is still optimistic that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman will

seek normalization with Israel, but only after the war ends.

"They cannot make a peace treaty with a country at war. It doesn't work in the Muslim world. ... He would be very cautious entering these kinds of negotiations right now, because people are saying about Israelis, 'Look what they do to our brothers in Palestine.' But the minute the whole war will be over, I expect that he will sign an agreement with us," Cohen said.

As to the Saudi demand for concrete steps towards Palestinian statehood in exchange for establishing diplomatic relations with Israel, Cohen said "a Palestinian state is something that is not realistic anymore," again citing the PA's inability to govern Gaza.

At the same time, Cohen opposed Israeli annexation of parts or all of the West Bank and said he finds it unlikely that the government will do it.

"Countries that have an agreement with us don't want that to happen because it kills the idea of any future Palestinian negotiations and they can't live with that," he said.

Cohen posited that Israel will not annex parts of the West Bank because it "closes the door" on an eventual arrangement with the Palestinians.

"The reality is that since 1967, we haven't annexed anything in the West Bank, right?" he said. "And why is that? ... Because we want to leave a door open for negotiations with the Palestinians. That is why any government, even the right of [Menachem] Begin and Netanyahu, have not annexed anything in the West Bank."

Cohen predicted that will continue to be the case for decades.

"I'm not sure how long it will take to create something better with the Palestinians that we see today, that will transform them into a friendly country and territory. They're a deadly enemy, this is what we have, even in the West Bank. And on the other hand, this is territory that we cannot confiscate."

"I think the status quo should be kept," he added.

Early in the book, Cohen expressed his appreciation for Russian President Vladimir Putin, calling him "a deeply strategic thinker and natural leader," and in the interview last week, he stuck with that position, despite the ongoing war in Ukraine and Russia's turn away from Israel and alliance with its enemies in recent years.

Cohen said that "many things that the State of Israel has done with Putin are unknown to the public. When I stated that, I based it on things that we have done with the Russian administration for many years, and Syria is an example," referring to the deconfliction mechanism between Jerusalem and Moscow when the Russian Army was in Syria to prop up then-President Bashar al-Assad.

"The only mediators [between Israel and Syria] were the Russians, and what we saw happening was that the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah terrorists were coming down to our borders," Cohen recalled. "We didn't want that, and we couldn't speak to Hezbollah or to the IRGC. So the only one that was taking part in these negotiations was Putin, who eventually pushed [Iran-backed troops] back 40 kilometers. ... We needed him to be on our side, and he was."

Cohen also spoke of Russia finding and returning the body of IDF soldier Zachary Baumel, which had been missing in Syria since 1982.

"The operation that [Putin] conducted inside Syria... was amazing. I was there in the Russian Ministry of Defense in a ceremony where we got the body of an Israeli soldier to be brought back to a Jewish grave... I was in Moscow and Jerusalem on the same day. We had a ceremony late in the afternoon to bury him. I was involved in looking for his body my whole life, and here Russia did it for us. ... That's a big thing," Cohen said.

Cohen also mentioned the criticism

of Israel soon after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. "Israel cannot fight all wars. [The Biden administration] said we have to support Ukraine with more weapons. Come on. If you want to support Ukraine with more weapons, you're welcome to do that. I mean, Israel has other interests in the region, like with Russia. [Israel is] a small country at the end of the day ... and very vulnerable."

When confronted with the idea that American audiences may not appreciate his praise of Putin, Cohen said "you don't have to agree with everything Russia does, and they will conduct their own policies if you agree to it or not."

Israel needs to "negotiate, engage with leaders on the other side, to make sure that good things happen," Cohen said. "This is what I cherish, the way President [Donald] Trump conducts things with Russia, because disengagement with them will not make the war [in Ukraine] end just because you wish for it to end. ... You have to know how to conduct your international relationships, and somehow you have to conduct them with your enemies ... that are not in line with your values."

Asked why he first wrote his book, together with a team, in English and then had it translated into Hebrew, Cohen said that the American audience is important to him because "America is the only friend we have" in Israel.

The book, he said, "is not only about me, it's about the world and international relationships, and I thought America is the right place to [publish] that first."

In addition, Cohen said he wanted to communicate to the Jewish communities in the U.S. and other countries "to tell them what the State of Israel is and how important the relationship with Jewish communities is to me. They are very dear to me. ... I know there is a lot of work that's missing recently with the Jewish communities in the U.S. and I want to be a positive player." ♦

Family of Raphael Lemkin, who coined term ‘genocide,’ fights to have his name removed from ‘anti-Israel’ institute

In a letter to Penn. officials, the European Jewish Association, on behalf of the relatives, demands Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention change its name after it repeatedly accuses Israel of crimes against humanity

By Nira Dayanim

The article first appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.

Raphael Lemkin served as a columnist for the *Zionist World* journal. He decried the forsaking of Hebrew as a “sin we have committed against our linguistic patrimony.” And Lemkin declared in 1927 that the “task of the Jewish people is ... [to become] a permanent national majority in its own national home.”

And yet despite Lemkin’s Zionist bonafides, 10 days after the deadliest massacre of Jews since the Holocaust, on Oct. 17, 2023, the institute named for the Polish-born Jewish lawyer accused the State of Israel of carrying out a “genocide” against Palestinians — the very term that Lemkin coined in 1943 and helped draft into law with the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

Though it initially said that the Hamas atrocities had “genocidal dimensions,” the organization has since walked back this designation, referring to the massacres as an “unprecedented military operation” and denouncing those who say that Israel’s war against Hamas is a justified response to the Oct. 7 attacks.

Now, members of Lemkin’s family, with assistance from the European Jewish Association, are trying to get the Pennsylvania-based Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention to stop using his name, calling it deceptive and disparaging.

“The Lemkin Institute, through its very name, as well as its marketing and other materials, represents itself as an embodiment of Mr. Lemkin’s ideology. In reality, the Lemkin Institute’s policies, positions, activities and publications are anathema to Mr. Lemkin’s belief system,” the EJA legal team wrote in a letter to Gov. Josh Shapiro and the Pennsylvania Bureau of Corporations and Charitable Organizations.

“The Lemkin Institute is not authorized by Raphael Lemkin’s family, his estate, or any custodian of his legacy to rely upon his name for any purpose. The European Jewish Association and Mr. Lemkin’s family are outraged by the Lemkin Institute’s use of Mr. Lemkin’s name, especially in the context of the Lemkin Institute’s anti-Israel agenda,” the attorneys wrote.

James Loeffler, a Johns Hopkins University Jewish history professor and scholar of Lemkin, has even credited Lemkin’s Zionist beliefs with his work on genocide prevention. Though Lemkin distanced himself from the Zionist movement later in life, Loeffler says that this was more of a tactical maneuver as he sought to get nations around the world, including those hostile to Israel, to adopt the genocide convention, not the result of a change of heart on the subject.

Elisa von Joeden-Forgey, founder and executive director of the Lemkin Institute, told eJP that the institute was named after Lemkin to “bring his name back into public discourse.” According to von Joeden-Forgey “there was no clear person to contact” when naming the institute in 2021.

“We don’t want to cause unhappiness for anybody in the Lemkin family. We did ask to know what legal basis exists for the complaint, and we have not received any response to that specific question,” she told eJP.

According to Alan Milstein, the EJA’s counsel, the statements contradict Lemkin’s life’s work, and his “postmortem right to privacy.” In the letter, the legal team also claims that it falls afoul of the commonwealth’s Solicitation of Funds for Charitable Purposes Act, along with other prohibitions against identity theft, “unauthorized use of name or likeness, and violation of the ‘false endorsement’ and Anti

Cyber-Squatting Consumer Protection Act sections of the Lanham Act.”

“It’s important to separate the issue from whether or not Israel is subject to criticism for what’s going on in Gaza,” Milstein told eJP. “That’s not the issue that we are dealing with. Any organization has the right to criticize Israel for whatever it thinks is wrong, but they shouldn’t do it in the name of somebody for whom that would be contrary to his legacy.”

According to Joseph Lemkin, his father — Raphael Lemkin’s first cousin — had close ties to the famed lawyer, supporting Raphael after he immigrated to the United States after the Nazis invaded Poland. “[My dad] was one of the few close people with Raphael in this country when they came over. Raphael was struggling financially because he devoted his life to this cause of genocide. And he was often marginalized because of his focus on genocide. So my father really stood by him and supported him,” Joseph Lemkin said.

Lemkin told eJP that he first learned about the Lemkin Institute from his son, after its statements began circulating widely on social media. While it’s not atypical for the name to be used by a number of initiatives, upon looking into the institute’s public statements, Lemkin said that he felt they contradicted Raphael Lemkin’s values.

“Our family name has been used for quite a number of different scholarships and academic purposes. For the most part, we’re proud, we’re happy,” he told eJP. “But when we see that it’s being used [in a way that’s] contradictory to what we believe Rafael stood for, and, you know, directly opposed to what he stood for, candidly, we feel that... it really disparages the name.” ♦